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Young Adults' Relations with Parents and Partners

Abstract

Although research has demonstrated the importance of early parental interactions to the development of later adult romantic relationships, the influence of young adults' relations with their parents has yet to be determined. This paper examined how the relationship of young men and women with their own parents affects the quality of their later adult romantic relationships. Males and females (ages 17-34 years old) who participated in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – Young Adult Survey 2004 and were either cohabiting with a partner or married were included in the current study (N = 1,002). Results indicated that, for all males and for Black but not White females, closeness with one's parents predicted positive relationship quality. Research and clinical implications of these findings for young adult relationships are discussed.

Key words: young adults, couple relationships, parental closeness, relationship adjustment, African American

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Promoting marriage and fostering healthy couple relationships has become of increasing importance to federal and state officials, as reflected in the financial investment of significant public dollars in demonstration projects and research on couples and marriage education, with the goal of fostering and strengthening “healthy marriages” (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004). Recent governmental efforts towards promoting marriage stem from research demonstrating that dissolution of relationships is associated with negative mental health outcomes for individuals, couples, and families, including depression and alcohol abuse (Jacobson, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Schmaling, 1989), and a number of children’s problems, including conduct disorders (McCord, 1993). Policymakers aim to strengthen relationships among those populations at greatest risk for dissolution, specifically, those couples in which both partners are of low socioeconomic status and/or make the transition to parenthood earlier than expected, in order to increase parental involvement and father involvement with children.

Research that has focused on relationship functioning and stability among middle-class heterosexual couples has demonstrated how socioeconomic stressors and related demographic factors may augment risk for relationship distress. Economic hardships such as indebtedness, income loss, and unstable work have been shown to have a detrimental impact on couple satisfaction and stability by creating economic pressures that increase partners’ emotional distress and relationship conflict (Cohan & Bradbury 1997; Conger & Conger 2002; Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Conger, Simons, Whitbeck, Huck, & Memby, 1990; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Cutrona, Russell, Abraham, Gardner, Melby, Bryant, & Conger, 2003). In addition to economic resources and the lack thereof, partners’ age and education may affect relationship satisfaction and stability. Research shows that marrying at a young age increases the risk for

divorce (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991), perhaps due to lack of psychological readiness and commitment needed to establish and maintain a healthy marriage. As age reflects maturity as well as life experience, those who marry at a young age may also not have the communication and problem-solving skills needed to resolve the inevitable disagreements that occur during the course of their relationship. Additionally, rates of marital distress and instability are higher among women with less than a high school education (Fein, Burstein, Fein, & Lindberg, 2003), indicating that better educated partners are likely to have better relationship adjustment and less conflict because of the resources and economic opportunities education provides.

African American couples appear to be at greater risk for relationship distress than White couples. Rates of separation and divorce among African American couples have increased nearly five-fold in the last 30 years and are double the rate of the majority population (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). The higher divorce rate has been attributed to the social and economic marginalization of African Americans, as reflected in economic instability, joblessness, poverty, and continued experiences of discrimination. The few studies that have examined Hispanic couple relationships have found that Hispanic couples, as compared to other ethnic minority and to White couples, place a high value on marriage and are more likely to be in stable relationships. This may be due to supportive family and cultural influences that place high value on relationship commitment (Oropesa, 1996). However, as growing numbers of Hispanic couples have assimilated and adopted mainstream cultural values and behaviors, rates of divorce among this population have increased (Bean, Berg, & Van Hook, 1995).

Although policy goals are to strengthen marriage among at-risk populations, the majority of couple and marriage education programs has been developed for and are based on research conducted with Caucasian middle-class couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). To date, little is

known about what factors, beyond demographic indicators, contribute to relationship quality among those young adults that appear to be at greatest risk for relational distress and disengagement.

Familial Relationships and Relationship Quality

In addition to economic and demographic factors, research has also examined how the quality of one's familial relationships during the formative years predicts the quality of one's later adult romantic relationships. Family relationships and dynamics between partners as well as their extended families are key processes by which young adults negotiate their new roles as partners and parents (Anderson, 1993; Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Coley, 2005; Kaplan, 1997).

Theorists have drawn upon social learning perspectives to explain the influences of experiences in one's family of origin on later relationships in adulthood. According to the parental socialization hypothesis, parenting behaviors (e.g., parental monitoring of child behavior, discipline practices, positive and negative expressions of parental affect) are predictive of the quality of future adult romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Effective parents monitor, interact, and discipline their children in ways that promote their children's positive interactions with others, and inhibit negative behaviors. Acquisition of these emotion regulation and communication skills during childhood and adolescence is expected to result in continued use of these skills in their adult romantic relationships, and predict relationship satisfaction and stability. In short, parenting behaviors are central to their children's social development and development of satisfactory adult romantic relationships.

According to attachment theorists, individual differences in closeness and attachment behavior in romantic relationships reflect attachment histories with their parents and/or caregivers due to a working model of attachment that is formed in infancy/childhood and

remains relatively stable throughout adulthood (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Consistent with the parental socialization hypothesis, attachment theory emphasizes the centrality of the parent-child relationship in social development and adult relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

Longitudinal, prospective research conducted by Conger and associates (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Kim, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 2001) found that the quality of parent-child interactions in early and mid-adolescence predicted behaviors demonstrated by young adults in their later romantic relationships. Specifically, high positive and low negative affect expressed by parents to adolescents longitudinally predicted interactions of the young adult with his/her partner 5 years later that were warm, supportive, and low in hostility. In addition, consistent with research on married couples, these positive behaviors were predictive of concurrent relationship satisfaction in young adults' couple relationship. The authors concluded that their results support the belief that the socialization practices of parents, rather than the observation of parent's marital interactions, affect the quality of interpersonal behaviors in young adult romantic relationships.

Similarly, one might expect the concurrent quality of relationship with parents to also affect adult relationships, either as a cumulative effect of previous relationships over time or as current social support. When partners choose each other for a committed relationship, they also adopt each other's familial networks. In turn, family members may perceive, define, and support both partners in the couple relationship (Julien, Tremblay, Bélanger, Dubé, Bégin, & Bouthillier, 2000). Theories suggest that social networks, such as familial systems, influence social behavior because they create constraints and opportunities for accessing resources such as information, and emotional and/or instrumental support (Wellmann, 1983). As such, familial networks can also function as social capital (Coleman, 1988) for young adults making the transition to

marriage, by affecting the couple's ability to accrue rewards and resources from their positive familial relationships. In describing the mechanisms by which outsiders can affect the quality of couple relationships, Milardo and Lewis (1985) proposed that family members can serve as a source of support for the relationship by helping partners to construct and perceive the relationship as satisfying. For example, favorable reactions on the part of family members are likely to strengthen the bonds of a couple by providing approval for the relationship, or providing comfort and encouragement when the couple may be facing difficulties or distress, thereby helping partners focus on the positive aspects of their relationship, reinforcing partners' beliefs that they can "work things out together", and that the relationship is worth preserving.

However, few studies have examined the extent to which the quality of interactions with one's family of origin in adulthood has a similar, concurrent influence on young adults' romantic relationships, and no research has compared ethnic majority and minority couples. Research has demonstrated that parental support for premarital relationships was positively associated with young couples' commitment and stability over time, whereas parental interference and/or the absence of support was positively associated with couples' dissatisfaction and deterioration (e.g., Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Kearns & Leonard, 2004; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Research examining supportive networks and relationship satisfaction among White couples found that parental support for premarital relationships, as reported by partners at the beginning of their relationships, was positively associated with young couples' commitment and stability over time, whereas parental interference was positively associated with couples' deterioration (e.g., Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). However, White couples do not encounter the same pressures often faced by ethnic minority couples. Among ethnic minority couples, continued positive relationships with

extended families and non-blood kin may be more important, functioning as sources of support by virtue of ethnic minority couples' greater vulnerability to social and economic stress, including experiences of discrimination (La Taillade, 2006).

The influence of familial and other support networks may also vary by gender of the partner. Compared to their male counterparts, females are less reluctant to disclose their personal problems (Kessler, Brown, & Broman, 1981) and to discuss concerns about their relationships to outside support networks (Crane, Newfield, & Armstrong, 1984), often in attempt to find solutions to difficulties in order to improve their relationship (Julien & Markman, 1991). Females are likely to have supportive nonfamilial networks. Consequently, males may be more dependent than females upon close and supportive relationships with their parents in adulthood in order to maintain high quality adult romantic relationships.

Goals of the Current Study

The goal of this paper is to examine how, in the transition to adulthood, the relationship of young men and women with their own parents affects the quality of their current romantic heterosexual relationships and how this varies by ethnicity. We hypothesized that having a close relationship with one's own parents as a young adult would be concurrently predictive of positive relationship quality in their own romantic relationships. Although we expect that more years of education, more income, and non-ethnic-minority status will be predictive of higher relationship quality for young adults, we hypothesized that the quality of one's relationship with one's parents will predict relationship quality above and beyond these economic and demographic factors. As the quality of relationships with family and non-blood kin is tied to relationship satisfaction for ethnic minority couples, we also hypothesized that ethnic minority status would interact with parental closeness to affect relationship quality. More specifically,

ethnic minority status was expected to moderate the relationship between parental closeness and relationship quality, such that parental closeness would predict increased relationship quality among ethnic minority young adults. We also predict a more important role of parental closeness in relationship quality for men than for women. Rather than focus on dating relationships, which tend to be short in duration and transitional, we chose instead to focus on predictors of relationship quality in established, committed relationships, as represented by those involving either cohabitation with or marriage to one's partner.

Method

Data

The data come from the adult children of women who participated in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of 14-22 year-olds first surveyed in 1979 on a variety of demographic, employment, socioeconomic, marital and family variables. Biennially since 1994, children of the original NLSY79 female cohort age 15 and over were given the NLSY79 – Young Adult Survey. This survey provides longitudinal data on residential status, relationship with household members, father involvement, changes in family and household composition, closeness to parents and relationship with partners and socioeconomic characteristics of the children of the original youth cohort from childhood into young adulthood. Data collected from the 2004 survey were used for the present study.

As this study examined predictors of relationship quality among young adults in heterosexual committed relationships, the sample was restricted to those young adults who indicated that they were in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, and reported that they were either married or cohabiting with an opposite sex partner. Based on this criterion, from the main sample of 11,428, the resulting sample for the present study included 454 male

and 548 female young adults ($N = 1,002$), ranging in age from 17 to 33 years old. Of the male young adults, 57.0% were cohabitating and 43% were married. Among the female young adults, 46.2% and 53.8% were cohabitating and married, respectively.

Missing data on closeness to father, respondent income, and partner income for these 1,002 young adults were imputed using the SPSS/PC Version 13.0 program for series mean value replacement. Among male young adults, 10.4% were missing respondent income and 21.8% were missing partner income. Among female young adults, 12.4% were missing respondent income and 24.3% were missing partner income. Respondent and partner income were imputed only for those who reported that they or their partner was employed at the time of the survey. If the respondent reported that he/she and his/her partner were not employed, zero was the assigned value for income. Ratings for closeness to father, which included reports of how close one felt to either their biological father or their stepfather, were obtained for male and female young adults. Closeness to father ratings were missing for 9.0% and 7.7% of males and females, respectively. Missing closeness-to-father ratings were imputed using mean substitution. In addition, 29.8% of males and 38.7% of females included ratings of closeness for both their father and stepfather. For those respondents who provided ratings for both their father and stepfather, only the ratings for closeness to father were used. Because young adults who lived in mother-stepfather households were more likely to report being close to their biological father than to their stepfather (Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillcrest, 2006), we selected only the rating for closeness to the biological father. If the respondent included a rating *only* for closeness to the stepfather, those ratings were used for the closeness to father variable; no imputations were made. Analyses reported are based on both actual and imputed data within the sample of 1,002 young cohabitating or married adults.

Measures

Demographic information. Respondent and partner income were based on individual self-reports of their own and their spouse/partner's yearly wages. Respondents indicated their age and total years of education at the date of the interview. Age of mother at first birth was based on self-report of the mothers of the young adults.

Two dummy variables were used to indicate non-Hispanic African American (1, 0) and Hispanic (1, 0) race/ethnicity, with the omitted category being White, not of Hispanic origin. In order to control for marital status, a dummy variable indicating whether or not the respondent was married (1, 0) was created for the present study.

Relationship quality. Factor analyses were used to create three composite variables measuring relationship quality: relationship adjustment (relationship satisfaction, constructive communication), general conflict (e.g., conflict regarding childcare, household tasks), and conflict with relatives. Cronbach alphas for the relationship quality measures ranged from .71 to .74, indicating a good level of reliability.

Relationship adjustment was composed of the following items: "Would you consider your relationship to be..." (1 = not too happy, 2 = fairly happy, 3 = very happy); "How often do you and your partner/spouse calmly discuss something?" (1 = less than once a month, 2 = once or twice a month, 3 = once or twice a week, 4 = almost every day); "How often do you and your partner/spouse laugh together?" (1 = less than once a month, 2 = once or twice a month, 3 = once or twice a week, 4 = almost every day); "How often do you and your partner/spouse tell each other about your day?" (1 = less than once a month, 2 = once or twice a month, 3 = once or twice a week, 4 = almost every day). A mean score of the 4 items was used to create the relationship adjustment score, with higher scores indicative of greater adjustment.

The general conflict measure was composed of five items: “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about chores/responsibilities?”; “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about your children, if you have any?”; “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about money?”; “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about showing affection towards each other?”; and “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about leisure or free time?”. Conflict with relatives included two items: “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about [his/her] relatives?”, and “How frequently do you and your partner/spouse have arguments about your relatives?”. All items for both conflict measures were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often), with higher ratings indicative of greater conflict. A mean score of the items was used to create the total score for both measures of relationship conflict.

Parental closeness was measured by asking respondents how close they feel to their mother, father, and stepfather, respectively. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, with higher ratings indicative of greater closeness to one’s parent. Closeness to father included ratings of closeness to either one’s biological father or stepfather, as well as imputed data for missing responses. A dummy variable indicating whether or not closeness to father was imputed (1, 0) was created and included in the analyses.

Analysis Plan

Hierarchical linear regression analyses were used to determine the extent to which the quality of the relationship with one’s parents predicts the quality of one’s adult romantic relationships, above and beyond demographic factors that have been associated with relationship quality in young adults (ethnic minority status, marital status, age, education, income). In order

to control for the effects of demographic variables on relationship quality, all demographic variables were entered on separate blocks from the parental closeness variables. Closeness is entered first to examine its unadjusted association with relationship quality. Economic and demographic variables are entered in the second block to examine the adjusted association of closeness with relationship quality. When interactions with race/ethnicity are examined, they are entered in a second block, followed by economic and demographic factors in the third block. Separate regression analyses were conducted for male and female young adults.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and percentages for demographic, parental closeness, and relationship quality variables are listed in Table 1. Two-tailed t-tests were used to compare male and female young adults on demographic characteristics. Females were younger than males ($t(1000) = 2.83, p < .01$), and reported having significantly more years of education ($t(1000) = -3.33, p < .001$). Males and the male partners of female young adults also reported having significantly greater yearly income than their female counterparts ($t(1000) = 7.10, p < .001$, and $t(1000) = -9.53, p < .001$, respectively). Females reported a trend toward having more conflict with their partners over relatives, as compared to males ($t(995) = -1.79, p < .10$). Males reported significantly greater closeness with their fathers than did females ($t(917) = 2.53, p < .05$). There were no differences in closeness to mothers or age of mother at first birth. Chi-square analyses were used to compare males and females on the dichotomous data of ethnic group membership. Results revealed a significant relationship between ethnic group membership and gender ($\chi^2(2, N = 1002) = 7.66, p < .05$), with more males identifying as Black than females.

(Table 1 about here)

Predictors of Relationship Quality

Results of regression analyses for predicting relationship adjustment, conflict over relatives, and general conflict are listed in Tables 2 and 3. The results for males are presented in Table 2 and for females in Table 3.

(Tables 2 and 3 about here)

Parental Closeness

We hypothesized that having a close relationship with one's parents would be predictive of increased relationship adjustment, decreased general conflict, and decreased conflict with relatives. As our hypotheses for the impact of parental closeness on relationship quality for young adults were directional, one-tailed tests of significance were used. Consistent with our predictions, closeness with one's father was associated with positive relationship adjustment ($t = 2.21, p < .05$) and decreased general conflict with one's partner ($t = -1.81, p < .05$) for young adult males. Closeness with one's mother was also associated with positive adjustment among males ($t = 1.78, p < .05$), decreased conflict with relatives ($t = -1.65, p < .05$), and decreased general conflict with one's partner ($t = -2.16, p < .05$).

For female young adults, closeness with one's mother was significantly predictive of increased relationship adjustment before controlling for demographic variables ($t = 2.12, p < .05$), and was marginally predictive of increased relationship adjustment after controlling for demographic variables ($t = 1.40, p < .10$). Contrary to expectations, young women's closeness to their parents was predictive neither of decreased general conflict with one's partner nor of decreased conflict with relatives. Neither mother nor father closeness was a significant predictor of relationship conflict for young women.

Income, Education, Age, Race/ethnicity

Among males, older age was associated with decreased relationship adjustment ($t = -4.10, p < .001$), increased conflict over relatives ($t = 2.20, p < .05$), and marginally associated with increased general conflict with one's partner ($t = 1.79, p < .10$). Years of education were associated with both decreased conflict over relatives ($t = 2.33, p < .05$) and decreased general conflict ($t = -1.98, p < .05$), and marginally with better relationship adjustment ($t = 1.90, p < .10$). Although the man's own income was not significantly related to relationship adjustment, conflict over relatives, or general conflict, his partner's income was marginally associated with increased relationship adjustment ($t = 1.86, p < .10$). Being an African American male was significantly associated with decreased conflict over relatives ($t = -4.17, p < .001$), relative to White males, but not with other aspects of relationship quality. There were no significant associations for Hispanic males.

For females as for males, older age was predictive of increased general conflict ($t = -3.95, p < .001$). Similarly, more years of education were significantly predictive of increased relationship adjustment ($t = 3.19, p < .01$), decreased conflict over relatives ($t = -2.69, p < .01$) and decreased general conflict ($t = -3.76, p < .001$). Neither own income nor one's partner's income was associated with relationship quality for females. There were two surprising findings for females. Being African American was associated with decreased relationship adjustment ($t = -2.66, p < .01$) and being married was significantly predictive of both increased general conflict ($t = 3.23, p = .001$) and increased conflict over relatives ($t = 2.58, p < .01$).

Ethnic Minority Status and Parental Closeness

Interaction terms were created to determine whether ethnic minority status moderated the relationship between parental closeness and current partner relationship quality. Since being Hispanic was not predictive of relationship quality for males or females, this interaction was not

tested. The interaction term for being African American and parental closeness was created by multiplying the dummy variable for African American (1, 0) and the ratings for closeness to mother and father, respectively.

Hierarchical linear regression analyses were used to determine the extent to which ethnic minority status interacts with parental closeness to predict increased relationship quality among ethnic minority young adults. Closeness variables were entered on the first block, ethnic minority status and interaction terms on the second block, and all remaining demographic variables (age, education, respondent and partner income) were entered on the third block. Separate regression analyses were conducted for African American male and female young adults.

Contrary to our predictions, neither the interaction between being African American and closeness with one's father nor the interaction with closeness with one's mother was predictive of relationship quality for males (not shown). Males who were close to their parents had better relationship adjustment and results were similar for Blacks and Whites. For females, the interaction between being African American and closeness with one's mother was marginally predictive of increased relationship adjustment ($t = 1.89, p < .10$), indicating that the positive effect on relationship quality of being close to one's mother is much stronger for Black than White females (Table 4). Post-hoc analyses revealed that African American females who reported greater closeness with their mom were significantly more adjusted in their relationships than those females who reported less closeness ($t(129) = -2.58, p < .01$). However, contrary to predictions, neither the interaction between being African American and closeness with one's father nor the interaction with closeness with one's mother was predictive of general conflict or conflict over relatives for females.

(Table 4 about here)

Discussion

This research is the first to show that young adults' and, in particular, young men's personal relationships are influenced by the quality of their relationships with their own parents in adulthood. The results of this study underscore the importance of one's family of origin for the maintenance of satisfactory, committed relationships. By focusing on cohabitating and married couples, this study was able to examine the link between relations with one's family of origin and behavior and outcomes central to couple relationships, relationship satisfaction and adjustment, and conflict resolution. In viewing perceived closeness with one's parents as reflective of positive parent-child interactions as well (Furman & Flanagan, 1997), our findings provide some support for intergenerational transmission and parental socialization hypotheses.

Consistent with our expectations, the quality of a young man's relationship with his parents was predictive of the quality of the adult romantic relationships. This is consistent with previous research examining the links between adults' perceptions of their parents and their perceptions of their romantic relationships that found males who perceived their relationships with their parents as secure and close were more likely to report loving and secure relationships with their partners (Treboux, Crowell, Owens, & Pan, 1994) and less conflictual couple interactions (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992). For males compared with females, closeness to one's parents may be more central in learning those skills necessary for establishing and maintaining satisfactory and stable couple relationships. For males, not only has the quality of their parental interactions in adolescence been shown in other research to be longitudinally predictive of the quality of their later adult romantic relationships, but the present

study shows that close interactions with their parents in adulthood appear to positively influence their adult relationships as well.

Although closeness to one's mother was predictive of relationship adjustment for female young adults, contrary to our expectations, closeness with one's parents was not predictive of the degree of conflict experienced in their relationships. Perhaps because women tend to be more relationally oriented than men (Jordan, 1997), they have multiple opportunities through the context of their close friendships with female peers to learn and develop the interpersonal skills necessary for establishing and maintaining collaborative, positive, and close romantic relationships in adulthood (Furman & Flanagan, 1997). Although parent-child relationships may lay the foundation for the development of successful and *satisfactory or well-adjusted* romantic relationships, for females peer relationships may play a more substantial role in acquiring the *communication and problem-solving skills* necessary to have intimate and positive exchanges with one's partner, and thus avoid destructive forms of conflict (Furman & Flanagan, 1997).

The different findings for male and female partners may also be reflective of a gender difference in the influence of parents on the development of their children's romantic relationships. Parents and family members are more likely to monitor and exercise control or regulate the romantic choices of female children, rather than their male children (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). As women bear children and are responsible for the continuation of the family and production of new members, it is not surprising that female members' choice of partners for a committed relationship may be subject to scrutiny by family members.

The results of our study also underscore the influence of ethnic minority status on relationship quality among young adults. For the young adults in this study, being African American was significantly predictive of poorer relationship quality. However, the influence of

ethnicity on relationship quality varied by gender. For males, being African American was predictive of decreased conflict with one's partner over relatives; for females, being African American was predictive of decreased relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, for Black females, closeness with one's mother *reduced* the negative effects of ethnicity on their satisfaction with the relationship. Although African American extended families are commonly viewed as supportive, longitudinal research has shown that these networks can function both as sources of support and sources of intrafamilial conflict and stress. Prospective interview data collected by Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan (1995) found that wives in African-American couples who reported an absence of contact with extended family members were those who were more likely to be in unstable marriages. In addition, Black husbands who perceived wives' involvement with their friendship and kin networks as detracting from their partners' availability to provide support and validation reported dissatisfaction in their relationships. Hatchett et al.'s (1995) findings may be reflective of both a gender effect, with wives exhibiting closer ties to their own networks, and of ethnicity, as close kin involvement is more normative for Blacks (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Neighbors & Jackson, 1984).

It may be that the African American females in our study sacrificed close relationships with their parents in order to appease their male partners, resulting in less satisfactory relationships for Black females. However, if Black females continue to maintain close ties with their mothers, they may be more likely to have a better chance of maintaining a satisfying relationship. Contrary to our expectations, for Hispanics ethnic minority status was not predictive relationship quality. Perhaps the lack of significant findings for Hispanics may be due to a lack of statistical power, given the comparatively small number of those in committed couple relationships in our sample.

Our findings are consistent with research conducted by Rand Conger and associates (Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Conger, Simons, Whitbeck, Huck, & Memby, 1990; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Cutrona, Russell, Abraham, Gardner, Melby, Bryant, & Conger, 2003), which found that socioeconomic factors were important in predicting relationship quality. As this research examines factors associated with relationship in a sample of young men and women who were children of relatively young mothers with limited economic means, the results regarding the influence of socioeconomic factors on relationship quality should not be surprising. Literature has consistently shown that the financial contribution of the male partner is a major factor in explaining the transition of women into marriage. However, the present study is of relationship quality, not the transition to marriage. Even though females earned significantly less than males, the fact that the influence of the female partner's earnings were important to men's relationship quality (and the male partner's were not to women) suggests that men's relationships are more influenced by their partner's economic circumstances than most believe. Women's economic contributions appear to be critical to men's evaluations of their relationship quality. Women may not enter or remain in such relationships without economic stability; therefore, income would not necessarily further influence relationship quality.

The study had the advantage of using a nationally representative data set that included cohabiting and married couples of varying ethnicities and socioeconomic status. Despite the contributions of the present study, several limitations must be mentioned. First, although the goal of the study was to examine predictors of the quality of young adult relationships, the survey data were limited to individual reports of relationship quality. We were not able to obtain data from both individuals and their partners. The absence of data from both members of the couple presents a significant limitation to the generalizability of our findings. For example,

research on predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability in couple relationships has demonstrated that one's own behavior and perceptions of the relationship, as well as those of one's partner, are predictive of relationship functioning (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bradbury & Karney, 2004). Future studies that recruit young adults and their partners will allow for confirmation and extension of the current findings.

Second, although we employed composite measures of relationship quality, each measure was composed of a total of four or five items. In addition, our measure of closeness to parent was limited to a single-item measure. Therefore, another limitation of our study is our reliance on small-item measures as both predictors and outcome variables. However, it should be noted that the items selected were consistent with items included in current measures of relationship quality in the couple and family relationship literature and the reliabilities were acceptable. Future research on the quality of young adults' relationships with their partners and parents should include self-report measures with demonstrated reliability in the couple and family relationship literature that assess degree of closeness to partners and parents.

Third, we chose to include both cohabitation and marital status as our markers of committed young adult relationships. Research has demonstrated that cohabitation prior to marriage has been consistently associated with poorer communication behaviors, decreased relationship satisfaction, higher levels of intimate partner violence, and increased likelihood of divorce (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). However, this was not the case in our study; rather, being married was predictive of both increased general conflict and conflict over relatives for female young adults. Although our analyses found that marital status was not a significant predictor of relationship quality for males, future studies on young adult relationships might include larger

samples of cohabiting and married couples to assess for the effect of marital status on relationship quality and how these effects may vary by partners' gender.

Implications for Research and Policy

As our study was cross-sectional in nature, we were not able to determine the causal mechanism by which the degree of closeness with one's parents is predictive of relationship quality. It may be that parental closeness is reflective of positive and supportive interactions with one's parents. Observational and longitudinal research on parental interactions in adulthood is needed to evaluate whether the parental socialization hypothesis also explains the positive influence of parental closeness on the development of satisfying and committed young adult relationships. Perhaps positive and nurturing parent-child interactions in childhood and adolescence may not only predict successful adult romantic relationships, but also continued positive parental relationships into adulthood. Structural equation modeling techniques would be able to statistically determine the relative influence of past and current parent-child interactions on the quality of young adult relationships. Such designs may also be helpful in clarifying how the quality and influence of parental closeness may vary by gender and ethnic minority status.

Research on familial predictors of paternal involvement among young, unmarried fathers indicates that not only is father involvement tied to the quality of the mother-father relationship, but also to the involvement of the father's family (Kalil et al., 2005). The results from the current study add to these findings, by noting that the involvement of the father's family is important to the quality of his relationship with his partner. As noted earlier, recent initiatives of the Department of Health and Human Services promote healthy relationships among low-income and ethnic minority parents in order to increase father involvement. Rather than focus initiatives on either the father-child relationship or the couple/coparent relationship, a family systems

perspective suggests integrating the provision of services to fathers, couples/parents, and extended family members in order to support father involvement and promote adaptive family relationships.

Implications for Family Practice

In addition to the research and policy issues raised by the results of the study, there are a number of clinical implications for mental health service providers who work with young adults and their romantic partners. A survey of marriage and family therapists found that in working with couples a vast majority of practitioners employ cognitive-behavioral approaches (Northey, 2002), which traditionally tend to be ahistorical in their assessment of the couple's presenting concerns, and focus their assessment and interventions on interactions exclusive to the couple relationship. Rather than limiting treatment to the couple's immediate environment, the results of this study strongly suggest employing a broader systemic perspective that addresses multiple levels of the young couple's environment, including past and current interactions with parents and other family members. The partners' family and kin relationships need to be considered, given their potential influence on relationship satisfaction and conflict in the couple relationship.

Because young adults appear to be at risk for relationships dissatisfaction and instability, it is essential that research, policy, and mental health professionals design interventions that address relations with both parents and partners in order to promote satisfactory and stable couple, coparent, and family relationships.

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Table 1

Young Adults' Reports of Demographic Variables, Relationship Quality Variables, and Parental Closeness: Descriptive Statistics (N = 1002).

Variables	Males		Females		Range	α
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Age	23.74	2.83	23.22	2.92	17-33	
Age of Mother at First Birth	19.58	2.66	19.82	2.80	11-28	
Years of Education	12.00	1.82	12.41	1.99	4-20	
Respondent Income ^a	22.09	18.59	14.01	17.35		
Partner Income ^a	15.18	13.77	24.06	15.39		
Relationship Adjustment	3.76	0.37	3.76	0.39	1 – 4	.74
Conflict over Relatives	1.83	0.87	1.93	0.92	1 – 4	.73
General Conflict	2.13	0.63	2.13	0.67	1 – 4	.71
Closeness to Mother	3.20	0.91	3.22	0.96	1 – 4	
Closeness to Father ^b	2.47	1.16	2.28	1.18	1 – 4	
Ethnicity						
African American	31.7%		23.9%			
Hispanic	25.1%		27.4%			
White	43.2%		48.7%			

Note. For males, n = 454; for females, n = 548. ^aRespondent and partner yearly income in thousands of dollars. ^b"Closeness to father" a composite of ratings of respondent's closeness to biological father and stepfather.

Table 2
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Males' Relationship Adjustment, Conflict Over Relatives, and General Conflict

Variable	Relationship Adjustment				Conflict over Relatives				General Conflict			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Closeness to Mother	0.03*	0.02	0.04*	0.02	-0.13**	0.05	-0.08*	0.05	-0.08*	0.03	-0.08*	0.04
Closeness to Father	0.04*	0.02	0.04*	0.02	-0.01	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.05*	0.03	-0.05*	0.03
Closeness Imputed ^a	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.09	-0.00	0.09	-0.01	0.06	0.03	0.04
Black ^b			-0.03	0.04			-0.42***	0.10			0.06	0.07
Hispanic ^c			-0.02	0.04			-0.15	0.10			-0.07	0.08
Marital Status ^d			0.05	0.04			0.01	0.10			0.07	0.07
Age			-0.03***	0.01			0.04*	0.02			0.02†	0.01
Education			0.02†	0.01			-0.06*	0.03			-0.04*	0.02
Respondent Income			0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00
Partner Income			0.00†	0.00			-0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00
<i>R</i> ²	.03		.05		.02		.03		.02		.03	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	3.68*		4.64***		2.79*		2.60*		3.59*		2.33*	

Note. For males, *n* = 454; for females, *n* = 548. ^aCloseness Imputed: 0 = Closeness to Father not imputed, 1 = Closeness to Father imputed. ^bBlack: 0 = not Black/African American, 1 = Black/African American. ^cHispanic: 0 = not of Hispanic origin, 1 = Hispanic. ^dMarital status: 0 = cohabiting, 1 = married.

† *p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Females' Relationship Adjustment, Conflict Over Relatives, and General Conflict

Variable	Relationship Adjustment				Conflict over Relatives				General Conflict			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Closeness to Mother	0.04*	0.02	0.02†	0.02	-0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.00	0.03
Closeness to Father	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03
Closeness Imputed ^a	-0.05	0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.05	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.06
Black ^b			-0.11**	0.04			-0.12	0.10			0.03	0.07
Hispanic ^c			-0.04	0.04			-0.08	0.10			0.02	0.07
Marital Status ^d			-0.02	0.03			0.21*	0.08			0.19***	0.06
Age			-0.00	0.01			0.02	0.02			0.04***	0.01
Education			0.03**	0.01			-0.06**	0.02			-0.06***	0.02
Respondent Income			0.00	0.00			0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00
Partner Income			0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00			-0.00	0.00
<i>R</i> ²	.01		.03		.00		.03		.01		.07	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	2.20†		3.31**		0.76		3.36**		0.81		8.16***	

Note. For males, *n* = 454; for females, *n* = 548. ^aCloseness Imputed: 0 = Closeness to Father not imputed, 1 = Closeness to Father imputed. ^bBlack: 0 = not

Black/African American, 1 = Black/African American. ^cHispanic: 0 = not of Hispanic origin, 1 = Hispanic. ^dMarital status: 0 = cohabiting, 1 = married.

† *p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 4
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables and Black Ethnicity-Parental Closeness Interactions Predicting Females' Relationship Adjustment, Conflict Over Relatives, and General Conflict

Variable	Relationship Adjustment						Conflict over Relatives						General Conflict					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Closeness to Mother	0.04*	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02	-0.04	0.04	-0.05	0.05	-0.04	0.05	-0.02	0.03	-0.02	0.04	-0.00	0.04
Closeness to Father	-0.00	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.03	0.04	-0.06	0.04	-0.06	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03
Closeness Imputed ^a	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.05	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.06
Black ^b			-0.43**	0.14	-0.42**	0.14			-0.41	0.34	-0.44	0.34			0.01	0.25	0.01	0.24
Hispanic ^c			-0.06	0.04	-0.05	0.04			-0.07	0.10	-0.08	0.10			0.04	0.07	0.02	0.07
Black & Closeness to Mother			0.07†	0.04	0.07†	0.04			0.02	0.10	0.03	0.10			-0.01	0.07	-0.01	0.07
Black & Closeness to Father			0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04			0.12	0.09	0.11	0.09			0.04	0.07	0.03	0.06
Marital Status ^d					-0.02	0.04					0.21*	0.08					0.19***	0.06
Age					-0.00	0.01					0.02	0.02					0.04***	0.01
Education					0.03***	0.01					-0.06**	0.02					-0.06***	0.02
Respondent Income					0.00	0.00					0.00	0.00					0.00	0.00
Partner Income					0.00	0.00					-0.00	0.00					-0.00	0.00
<i>R</i> ²		0.01		0.03		0.03		0.00		0.01		0.03		0.01		0.00		0.07
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²		2.20†		3.71**		3.42**		0.76		0.77		3.31**		0.81		0.35		8.10***

Table 4

Continued.

Note. For males, $n = 454$; for females, $n = 548$. ^aCloseness Imputed: 0 = *Closeness to Father not imputed*, 1 = *Closeness to Father imputed*. ^bBlack: 0 = *not Black/African American*, 1 = *Black/African American*. ^cHispanic: 0 = *not of Hispanic origin*, 1 = *Hispanic*. ^dMarital status: 0 = *cohabiting*, 1 = *married*.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.