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# An exploratory investigation of family structure and adult attachment orientation

Alison Rossi

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**AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND  
ADULT ATTACHMENT ORIENTATION**

by  
Alison V. Rossi

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services, Administration, and Higher Education  
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Thesis Chair: Dr. John Klanderman and Dr. Roberta Dihoff

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## **Abstract**

Alison V. Rossi

### **AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ADULT ATTACHMENT ORIENTATION**

2010/11

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Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study was to examine the possible role family structure plays on adult attachment orientation. Eighty-six students enrolled in introductory level psychology courses at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, participated in this study. Indicated in previous studies as valid to measure experiences in romantic relationships, the personality traits of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance were analyzed by the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire (ECR-R). Independent t-Tests were used to determine if differences exist in young-adult participants of both the intact-families (n=66) or divorced-families (n=20) groups, as particularly measured by the attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance scales of the ECR-R. The researcher hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores between the participants of intact and divorced families in the areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance. Results indicated that there was no significant difference in scores on either scale between students whose parents were married and those whose parents were divorced, where students whose parents were married did not score significantly higher than students whose parents were divorced.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

*Need:*

Since the development of infant-caregiver attachment styles identified by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, adult attachment has become of growing interest in the perpetually developing field of psychology (Wei, 2006). Researchers became curious as to how infant attachment styles extended to adult attachment styles, especially regarding adult intimate relationships. According to research done at the University of Illinois by R. Chris Fraley (2004), “the same motivational system that gives rise to the close emotional bond between parents and their children is responsible for the bond that develops between adults in emotionally intimate relationships” (p. 1). Adult Attachment Theory has implied that adult “romantic relationships may be attachment relationships” so “the same kinds of individual differences in adult relationships that Ainsworth observed in infant-caregiver relationships” should be observable as well (Fraley, 2004, p.3). Additionally, the structure of adult relationships, and whether an adult is secure or insecure in his or her adult relationship, will be a reflection of his or her infant-caregiver relationships and experiences (Fraley, 2004).

Earliest research on adult attachment involved assessing the relationship that adults had with their parents, as well as memories from their childhood. Individual differences in adult relationships may have been related to infant-caregiver attachment patterns (Fraley, 2004). Attachment patterns can be linked to “social stressors or negative life events-such as illness, death, abuse, or divorce- that are associated with instability of attachment patterns from infancy to early adulthood, particularly from

secure to insecure” (Wikipedia, 2010, p.8). Furthermore, individuals who have a history of insecure relationships and mental representations, perhaps due to parental divorce in childhood, typically experience and express less positive and more negative emotions in their relationships (Simpson, 2007, p.364). Therefore, due to increasing theory and research in this particular area of attachment theory, researchers Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) developed a sound measure to assess adult attachment, the 36-item Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR). Following Brennan et al.’s first implementation of the ECR, two dimensions of adult attachment were identified – *Anxiety* and *Avoidance* (Wei, 2006, p. 188). In 2000, Fraley, Waller, and Brennan developed a revised version of the original ECR, the ECR-R (Fraley, 2004, p.5). The two dimensions of adult attachment, Anxiety and Avoidance, are still utilized to measure adult attachment today.

Over the years, studies have produced contradictory results as to the role parental divorce experiences have on the attachment styles of adult romantic couples. Some studies conducted with university students have demonstrated that coming from a divorced or intact family makes no difference in the adult romantic attachment styles; on the other hand, other studies contend that those adolescents coming from divorced families demonstrate less secure adult romantic attachment styles (Ozen, 2003, p. 142).

Researchers seek to understand factors that account for a person’s well-being, both relational and otherwise, and how that well-being can promote attachment security (Fraley, 2004). Additionally, researchers note the importance of “intergenerational transmission of attachment difficulties” wherein “the offspring of parents who are not available and responsive to their needs are likely to experience later difficulties in

developing stable couple relationships and in serving as a secure base for their own children” (Feeney, 2006, p. 19). Thus, although there is a considerable amount of research to support Adult Attachment Theory, a stronger understanding of the factors that can alter and maintain an individual’s attachment style, as well as the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission that may promote insecurity across generations, still needs to be understood.

In taking the above factors into consideration, it is clear that further research is needed in order to examine the relationship that infant attachment patterns and disparaging life events (specifically, parental divorce) have on young adult romantic relationships.

*Purpose:*

This exploratory study examines the possible role that a negative life event/stressor or significant emotional loss, such as parental divorce, play on young adult’s attitudes towards relationship commitment based on their general experiences in emotionally intimate relationships. It is hoped that this study will lend further support to the increasing idea that adult romantic relationships are a function of infant-caregiver relationships; that the influence of parental divorce continues from childhood through adulthood; and, give insight into attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance as it relates to adult attachment, which may be contributing to the overall attitudes towards maintaining a secure adult romantic relationship.

*Hypothesis:*

This study will use the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire (2000) to assess factors of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance. The researcher predicts that young adult offspring of intact families will score consistently with each other, specifically scoring lower in either or both areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance, demonstrating a secure adult attachment orientation. The researcher also predicts that young adult offspring of divorced families will score consistently with each other, specifically scoring higher in either or both areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance, demonstrating an insecure adult attachment orientation.

*Theory:*

*Attachment Theory:* Attachment theory is of psychological, ethological, and evolutionary importance. The theory of attachment was first developed by British psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, in 1907 through his research on infant separations from their parents and the distress that those infants experienced. He concluded that the behaviors the infants demonstrated might function in an evolutionary manner because infants cannot care for themselves, so those who maintained proximity to a primary caregiver would be more likely to survive, and thus, to reproduce (Fraley, 2004). Bowlby called this system the “attachment behavioral system, which was gradually ‘designed’ by natural selection to regulate proximity to an attachment figure” (Fraley, 2004, p.1).

The surmounting research on attachment reveals that individual differences in infant attachment patterns are relatable to adult attachment patterns. Although Bowlby

recognized that these differences did exist, it was not until developmental psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, developed the Strange Situation that these individual differences were formally understood (Fraley, 2004). Ainsworth and colleagues utilized this laboratory design to measure separation and reunion sessions between 12-month-old infants and their parents. In each session, the parent was separated from the child, and the child was left to explore the room, with only the presence of a stranger. Three attachment patterns in infants were developed: secure, avoidant, and anxious-resistant. Later, a fourth pattern, disorganized, was indentified (Wikipedia, 2010). Approximately 60% of the children were identified as having a secure attachment, 20% were identified as having an avoidant attachment, and 20% were identified as having an anxious-resistant attachment (Fraley, 2004, p. 2). Ainsworth and colleagues found that the individual differences in infant attachment were due to their interactions with their parents in the home in their first year of life. The difference existed between parents who stimulated their infants, responding to their needs (securely attached infants) and parents whose interactions were unstable, unpredictable, and even rejecting at times (insecurely attached infants) (Fraley, 2004).

Bowlby and Ainsworth's work continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with Bowlby believing that "attachment characterized human experience from 'the cradle to the grave'" (Fraley, 2004, p. 3). The fact that infant attachment processes could extend through adulthood led to researchers Hazan and Shaver (in 1987) to demonstrate that "the emotional bond that develops between adult romantic partners is partly a function of the same motivational system-the attachment behavioral system-that gives rise to the emotional bond between infants and their caregivers" (Fraley, 2004, p.3). They argued that the same motivational systems that allow for care giving and sexuality, similarly

allow for the property of romantic love (Fraley, 2004). Thus, if infant-caregiver relationships are attachments, so are adult romantic relationships.

This idea, that infant-caregiver relationships are attachments much like adult romantic relationships are attachments, influenced modern research on close relationships (Fraley, 2004). Adult attachment theory has implications which suggest that if adult romantic relationships are attachment relationships, then individual differences will exist in adults, too; adult relationships will function in the same manner in which infant-caregiver relationships function; and, experiences in early childhood will be reflected in an adult's security or insecurity in his or her adult relationship (Fraley, 2004).

Through Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) original development and implementation of the ECR, two dimensions of adult attachment patterns were identified to demonstrate that the individual differences observed in infants might be observable in adults (Fraley, 2004, p.4). An adult defined as having a secure adult attachment upon completion of the ECR will presumably have scored low on both dimensions of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance.

Regarding partner selection, research has demonstrated that "people end up in relationships with partners who confirm their existing beliefs about attachment relationships" (Fraley, 2004, p.6). Accordingly, secure adults are more content, have longer relationships, and have more trust and commitment than insecure adults do in their adult romantic relationships (Fraley, 2004).

The major concern of researchers today involves the implication that infant-caregiver attachment relationships and experiences influence adult romantic relationships. Individual differences in attachment are related to childhood experiences

with caregivers, and detrimental experiences, such as parental divorce, can affect the individual's subsequent quality of attachment experiences in adulthood. Consequently, "the existence of long-term stability of individual differences should be considered an empirical question rather than an assumption of the theory" (Fraley, 2004, p.7).

*Family Systems Theory:* This theory emerged from the General Systems Theory when researchers determined it had relevance to families and other social systems (Morgaine, 2001). It is defined as "a bounded set of interrelated elements exhibiting coherent behavior as a trait" and "an assemblage of objects related to each other by some regular interaction or interdependence" (Morgaine, 2001). There are six concepts related to family systems theory's structure: family systems have interrelated elements and structures; families interact in patterns that are usually predictable; families have boundaries that range from open to closed; families function as a whole, as opposed to just parts; families utilize messages and rules to shape their members' behavior; and, the smaller groups, or subsystems, within the larger whole, have identifiable rules (Morgaine, 2001). Regarding elements and structure that are interrelated in family systems, each member is an element, who has individual characteristics and individual relationships with other members (elements) that are interdependent from one another. The structure within a family system is the summation of each member's relationships with one another (Morgaine, 2001). The predictability and repetitiveness of interactions among family members is a positive feature of family systems as it preserves stability among its members (elements), and it allows its members to understand how they should behave within their system (Morgaine, 2001). No family system has boundaries that are entirely

open or closed; however, a system that is considered “open” allows outsiders (external elements and situations) to influence their decisions, policies, and overall function. A system that is considered “closed” does not allow for outside elemental or environmental influences (Morgaine, 2001). Each individual member (element) contributes to system, creating completeness and overall premises that operate within that system; essentially, the system functions by the Composition Law, which states that the sum of the parts is less than the whole (Morgaine, 2001). Because such a holistic quality is necessary to a system’s function, elemental individuality may be overlooked and merely generalized to the entire group. Like the repetitiveness of the system’s interactions, messages and rules that shape members are redundant as well. Limitations are agreed upon, and are usually unspoken and implied. This allows for the rules to exert power, generate guilt, and control behavior, while simply being stated in hardly any words (Morgaine, 2001). Finally, family systems contain subsystems that have a couple to a few members each, with membership constantly varying. These subsystems, while operating on the larger system, have particular rules, restrictions, and uniqueness (Morgaine, 2001).

“Families are considered systems because they are made up of interrelated elements or objectives, they exhibit coherent behaviors, they have regular interactions, and they are interdependent on one another” (Morgaine, 2001). Thus, each member of the system possess its own qualities, which inevitably contribute to the overall well-being of the group, and most importantly, members can depend on one another for support, solutions, and acceptability.



*Definitions:*

For purposes of this study, the below terms are defined as follows:

Attachment: Attachment, as a basic explanation, is defined as “the emotional bond developing between the parent and the child” (Bowlby, 1982; cited in Woodward, Fergusson & Belsky, 2000; reported in Ozen, 2003, p.130).

Attachment Anxiety: Attachment Anxiety, as it relates to adult attachment, is defined as “involving a fear of interpersonal rejection or abandonment, an excessive need for approval from others, and distress when one’s partner is unavailable or unresponsive” (Wei, 2006, p. 188).

Attachment Avoidance: Attachment Avoidance, as it relates to adult attachment, is defined as “involving fear of dependence and interpersonal intimacy, an excessive need for self-reliance, and reluctance to self-disclose” (Wei, 2006, p. 188).

Attachment Theory: a theory originally developed by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby that is defined as “a psychological, evolutionary, and ethological theory concerning relationships between humans” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 1). Within Attachment Theory, *attachment* “means an affectional bond or tie between an individual and an attachment figure (usually a caregiver)” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 3).

Internal Working Model: as it relates to Attachment Theory is the “early experiences with caregivers” that “gradually give rise to a system of thoughts, memories, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behaviors about the self and others. This system...continues to develop with time and experience” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 5).

Strange Situation: a laboratory procedure created by Mary Ainsworth which “assess separation and reunion behavior” of 12-month old infants and their parents in

eight different episodes of separation/reunion and with the “presence of an unfamiliar stranger”. The stress created by this procedure is “designed to activate attachment behavior...reveals how very young children use their caregiver as a source of security. Carer and child are placed in an unfamiliar playroom while a researcher records specific behaviors, observing through a one-way mirror” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 7).

Four attachment patterns were identified by Ainsworth and colleagues using the Strange Situation:

Secure: Secure, as it relates to the attachment pattern of the child, is the utilization of the “caregiver as a secure base for exploration”. The child “protests the caregiver’s departure and seeks proximity and is comforted on return, returning to exploration”. The child “may be comforted by the stranger but shows clear preference for the caregiver” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 7).

Avoidant: Avoidant, as it relates to the attachment pattern of the child, is when the child demonstrates “little affective sharing in play. Little or no distress on departure, little or no visible response to return, ignoring or turning away with no effort to maintain contact if picked up. Treats the stranger similarly to the caregiver” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 7).

Anxious/Resistant: Ambivalent/Resistant, as it relates to the attachment pattern of the child, is when the child is “unable to use caregiver as a secure base, seeking proximity before separation occurs. Distressed on separation with ambivalence, anger, reluctance to warm to caregiver and return to play on return. Preoccupied with caregiver’s availability, seeking contact but resisting angrily when it is achieved. Not easily calmed by stranger” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 7-8).

Disorganized: Disorganized, as it relates to the attachment pattern of the child, is when the child demonstrates “stereotypies on return such as freezing or rocking. Lack of coherent attachment strategy shown by contradictory, disoriented behaviors such as approaching but with the back turned” (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 8).

*Assumptions:*

The researcher is aware that this study is a random sample of college students and therefore, cannot be generalized to the general public. It is assumed, however, that the sample does not affect the validity of the study. Further, it is assumed that the participants in this study satisfied all elements provided to them to the best of their ability and with integrity. It is also assumed that written instructions for completing the questionnaire were clear and concise and that each participant wisely and accurately choose their responses.

*Limitations:*

The questionnaires were completed by undergraduate students at Rowan University in the South Jersey region of the country and cannot therefore be generalized to young adults in other geographical regions. Because a larger sample was not obtained, results may not accurately characterize a true random sample of young adults from intact and divorced families, perhaps affecting the reliability of the sample.

*Summary:*

Researchers agree that there is a need to explore the development of adult romantic relationships as they relate to infant-caregiver attachment styles. Further research is needed to determine how infant attachment patterns and the family system affect future generations' view regarding romantic relationships, and it is hoped that this study will contribute to the effort. Chapter Two will therefore discuss existing research efforts and results to allow for a more complete understanding of the nature of this research project. Chapter Three will discuss study design and methodology, and Chapter Five will conclude with a discussion of the results.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Part One of this chapter will discuss key research findings relevant to attachment in relationships. Specifically examined is attachment in childhood, attachment in adulthood, emotions in relationships, and avoidance and anxiety as it relates to attachment.

#### *Part One: Attachment in Relationships:*

##### *Attachment in childhood:*

In his original work on attachment theory, Bowlby stated that affectionate bonds develop between children and their caregivers and that the attachment bonds “reflect humans’ universal needs for comfort and a sense of security, and that they play a key role in promoting children’s social and emotional development” (Feeney, 2006, p. 19). Communication behavior plays an integral part in processes involved in parent-child attachment relationships because attachment theory suggests that communication between the caregiver and the child cause the formation of working models that are developed, maintained, and altered daily (Feeney, 2006). Research suggests that there is a link between the type of communication and attachment security that goes beyond infancy. In childhood, “behavioral differences between the different attachment styles are thought to emerge most strongly under conditions of stress and conflict”, and because individual differences in attachment behavior are most pronounced in these situations, similar conditions may cause relational conflict between romantic partners (Feeney, 2006, p. 20).

In addition to early attachment experiences with caregivers, early attachment experiences peers, and friends at different points of social development are systematically related to both the experience and the expression of emotions in future romantic relationships (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 364). According to this research, insecure attachment in infancy and early childhood is a predictor of other relationship outcomes, including the individual's social competence with school-aged peers and their degree of friendship security in adolescence (Simpson et al., 2007 p. 357). "Studies of associates between early attachment security and behavior in later romantic relationships also suggest that chronologically later measures of nonfamilial relationships often mediate connections between early infant-caregiver relationships and behavior in later romantic relationships" (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 357-58). Simpson et al. ultimately found that at twelve months of age, those who were securely attached demonstrated competence with their peers during elementary school years, which then further demonstrated secure representations of close friendships in teenage years (2007, p. 363).

*Attachment in adulthood:*

Adult romantic attachment, or pair-bond attachment, was originally formulated by Hazan and Shaver in 1987 and has continued to be the framework for the study of romantic relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Although attachment theory was originally intended to explain emotional bonds between infants and their caregivers, Bowlby believed attachment theory to be a life-span theory in which relationships continue to be important from infancy through adulthood. And therefore, adult relationship experiences are rooted in conditions of early care giving experiences. Thus,

there became a need for a theory that conceptualized romantic love as an attachment process, and consequently, in 1987, Hazan and Shaver developed a theory that follows the same sequence and formation, and that results in the same kinds of individual differences, as infant-parent attachment (Fraley & Shaver, 2000, p. 133). Hazan and Shaver observed that adult romantic relationships are characterized by the dynamics of safety, comfort, and security that are similar to infant-caregiver dynamics; adopted from Ainsworth, Hazan and Shaver developed three distinct types of romantic attachment (secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant); and, Hazan and Shaver theorized about the continuity in the way in which people relate to others across different relationships and how early care giving experiences partially influence how people behave in their adult romantic relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Research continues to focus on the continuity of attachment and how differences in early experience produce comparatively lasting differences in relationship styles; ultimately, infant attachment styles are manifested in adult romantic love (Feeney & Noller, 1990, p. 281). Once again, the continuity of attachment style can be explained in terms of internal working models of the self and of relationships based on early social interaction (Feeney & Noller, 1990, p. 281). In their research, Feeney and Noller (1990) found that secure individuals reported positive and trusting early family relationships while insecure subjects (both anxious-ambivalent and avoidant) reported a lack of support from parents, dependence and desire for commitment in relationships, mistrust of others, and distance from others (p. 286). Therefore, attachment style reflects and influences views about relationships with others. The researchers state that it is possible “that this influence may be especially salient in the context of intimate relationships;

Bowlby (1973) suggested that working models of the self and of relationship partners tend to be complementary and mutually confirming” (Feeney & Noller, 1990, p. 286-87). Thus, Feeney and Noller (1990) found that secure individuals were trusting and confident in their relationships; avoidant individuals steered away from intimacy; and, anxious-ambivalent individuals were dependent and strongly desired commitment in relationships (p. 289).

There exists a relationship between working models and adult attachment that is important because working models not only guide behavior, “they enable us to predict the actions of others in order to plan or prepare for particular outcomes, and to interpret and explain the behavior of others so that we can understand our social world” (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 661). Collins and Read (1990) also found that the same attachment systems present in infancy are manifested in adult relationships, and that security issues that are important implications for behavior in infancy are important to feelings of security in adulthood (p. 650).

Ultimately, the quality of attachment in relationships experienced early in life is meaningfully related to later adult romantic relationships (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 364). Individuals who had less favorable descriptions of childhood relationships with parents, and also experienced more negative experiences and beliefs about love, only further demonstrate support for Bowlby’s understanding that children internalize experiences with caretakers over time so as to form a model for later relationships outside the family (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227).



*Emotion in relationships:*

Research done by Simpson, et al. (2007) reveals how antecedent life experiences may indirectly shape events in current relationships (p. 355). Simpson et al. discusses the results of the study in terms of attachment theory; subjects who were securely attached at twelve months old, and who had positive early social development, exhibited more positive daily emotional experiences in their adult romantic relationships (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 355). Utilizing attachment theory, the researchers contribute to what is known about emotions in relationships, “especially how significant relationship experiences at critical stages of social development forecast the type and intensity of emotions experienced in adult attachment relationships” (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 355). Most of what is known about the impact of early attachment on later attachment relationships is related to the individual’s attachment history, and whether that history was secure or insecure. Emotions play a role in how individuals perceive and manage relationships, and that is dependent on the working model that has been formed as a result of their specific attachment history (Simpson et al., 2007). Bowlby has proposed that emotional events in childhood relationships with caregivers are transferrable to emotional events in romantic relationships, and therefore, internal working models of earlier relationships should affect later relationship experiences (Simpson et al., 2007). For that reason, securely attached individuals will encounter a problematic, stressful, or potentially threatening relationship situation with confidence that their partners will be attentive, responsive, and available; on the other hand, insecurely attached individuals will be uncertain that their partner will exhibit those responses (Simpson et al., 2007). Because much of what is known about the experience of emotions in relationships is understood from an attachment perspective,

individuals who are securely attached, as opposed to insecurely attached, are better prepared to handle their partner's negative behaviors. "Research has confirmed that the frequency and intensity of daily emotions experienced in relationships act as a good barometer of how close individuals feel to their partners. Experiencing strong and frequent emotions in a relationship can communicate that one truly cares about a partner and a relationship" (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 356). Ultimately, those individuals who were securely attached at twelve months of age were found to demonstrate security in their emotional experiences in later romantic relationships. This is consistent with Bowlby's belief that experiences in and representations of attachment-based relationships from earlier periods of social development affect attachment-based relationships later in life (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 363). It only seems to make sense then, that remnants of prior early relationships influence experiences and expression of emotions in future romantic relationships.

*Avoidance and anxiety:*

Attachment theory explains why certain people experience more marked uncertainty in their views of their romantic partners and relationships, and how these views affect the ways in which individuals perceive their partners and relationships daily (Campbell et al., 2005, p. 510). Because individual differences exist regarding adult attachment, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) developed two distinct dimensions: avoidance and anxiety. The first dimension of Avoidance (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) "reflects the degree to which individuals feel comfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy in relationships. People who score high on this dimension tend to be less

invested in their relationships and yearn to remain psychologically and emotionally independent of their partners” (reported in Campbell et al., 2005, p. 511). The second dimension of Anxiety “assesses the degree to which individuals worry and ruminate about being rejected or abandoned by their partners” (Campbell et al., 2005, p. 511). Contrarily, secure individuals demonstrate low levels of avoidance and anxiousness. Campbell et al. (2005) utilized an appraisal-monitoring system that gauged the degree to which individuals maintain sufficient physical, psychological, or emotional closeness with their attachment figures; and, this appraisal-monitoring system should be regulated with respect to the individual’s prior attachment experiences (Campbell et al., 2005, p. 526).

Since attachment theory is a theory of life span development of personality and social behavior, it consequently focuses on how experiences and views of experiences, from past relationships affect what occurs in current relationships (Campbell et al., 2005).

*Summary of Part One:*

Attachment begins in infancy and continues to persevere throughout the individual’s childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Specifically in childhood, that infant attachment orientation guides an individual’s interactions with peers, friends, siblings and teachers alike. In adulthood, that original attachment orientation guides emotional experiences in subsequent romantic relationships. Bowlby’s belief that experiences in early relationships that further social development and cognition are utilized to navigate attachment-based relationships later in life. Therefore, the type of attachment experienced

in infancy is meaningfully related to the attachment experienced in romantic relationships.

Ultimately, whether the individual possesses a secure or insecure attachment orientation as an adult is a reflection of infant-caregiver attachment bonds. Additionally, because differences exist in adult attachment, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) developed two distinct dimensions, Avoidance and Anxiety, to determine which individuals feel closeness and emotions in romantic relationships. Consequently, such feelings exhibited in current relationships are determined from experiences in past relationships.

### *Part Two: Family of Origin Influences*

Part Two of this chapter will examine how the family origin influences offspring's later relationship attachment. Specifically examined are family context, the influence of parents on romantic relationships, divorce and attachment styles, and the impact of divorce on adolescents and young adults.

#### *Family context:*

According to research done by Hare, Miga, & Allen (2009) family context plays an important role in the development of skills utilized in romantic relationships (p. 808). "The relationship between parents is often the first and most frequent interpersonal exchange between romantic partners that a child witnesses. Investigators have linked parents' marital relationships to various markers of adjustment during adolescence, such as emotional security (Davies & Cummings, 1994), attachment styles (Ozen, 2003), and

intimacy (Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998)” (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 808). The researchers have also found that parents’ marital relationships affect and guide their children’s social development. Essentially, parents shape their children’s behavior in peer relationships because children learn through observation of models as well as direct reinforcement of their behavior (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 808). Experiences based on family of origin are related to ways in which children later discuss intimate relationships because they develop representations of the self and of other relationships. Sometimes, this relation is developed through a more “direct repetition of dysfunctional emotional processes and dynamics from their family of origin (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowen, 1966)” (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 808).

Intergenerational transmission of relational attachment and qualities has been debated in research which links attachment styles of parents and the impact it has on their children. “When insecurely attached parents adopt destructive conflict behaviors in interactions with their children, they may send the implicit message that offspring’s needs and feelings are not important. This message is likely to promote negative working models of self and others” (Feeney, 2006, p. 20). Children in these families may adopt that type of behavior that is modeled by their parents and additionally may not learn necessary social skills. Conflict between parents is also linked to conflict between parent and child, and even further linked to negative patterns of interaction with romantic partners (Feeney, 2006). Findings by Feldman, Gowen, and Fisher (1998) have indicated that interparental relationships, specifically mothers’ marital satisfaction, plays a role in offspring relationship satisfaction and consequently, is a primary predictor of happiness in love relationships as a young adult (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 808).

Therefore, marital satisfaction can help to facilitate better emotional adjustment for offspring, which in turn, enables offspring to develop healthier and more satisfied intimate relationships in the future (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009).

Parents are models for their children and the way in which they respond to conflict with their children and with each other is a source of observational learning. Through observation, children learn the value of the self and others, they learn dependability of others, and they implicitly learn values of relational adjustment and satisfaction (Feeney, 2006). Parents are also models for adolescents, and consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), they will likely use their parents' marital relationships as models for their own romantic relationships (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009). "If adolescents utilize parents as models for their own future relationships, this may likely influence how adolescents respond to conflict in such relationships" (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). Lichter & McCloskey (2004) demonstrate this finding through an instance wherein adolescents are exposed to marital violence during childhood; consequently, adolescents are more likely to justify the use of violence in their own dating relationships (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). In addition, Dodge (1986) and Fite et al. (2008) have supported the notion that interparental relationship conflict and later young adult romantic relationship conflict may be mediated by adolescents' social information processing (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). To further this idea, Bryant and Conger (2002) created a model, the Development of Early Adult Romantic Relationships (DEARR), which suggests that children imitate the types of interaction styles that they witness between family members; so, the conflict tactics and behaviors that are most commonly used in the child's family of origin,

whether constructive or destructive, are likely to be replicated (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). In addition, previous research done by Amato (1996) supports the DEARR theory because those findings indicate that “parental divorce increases the likelihood of later offspring divorce through the impact it has on the offspring’s behaviors that interfere with the maintenance of successful intimate relationships, such as poor conflict resolution skills” (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809).

Moreover, because research as pointed toward parental treatment and conflict resolution as setting the overall tone for how children interpret conflict in the family system, a family systems perspective therefore indicates that “frequent marital conflict may serve as one symptom of intense emotionally ambivalent relationships and tension within the family environment, often referred to as ‘fusion’” (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). Intergenerational conflict can be transmitted across generations because certain patterns are maintained. “When the emotional equilibrium of families is maintained in such a way for years and years, this (dys)functional system is often recreated within other emotionally evocative contexts of the offspring, such as within their own romantic relationships” so therefore, the “development of aggression within one’s intimate relationship may in fact be a symptom or byproduct of dysfunctional emotional processes and compromises that have been occurring within the family system for generations and generations” (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809).

Once again, Bowlby’s development of the working model and individual’s representations about themselves and others is applicable to the research on intergenerational transmission of family systems. The working model is internalized and therefore, later affects the individual’s perceptions of others in future attachment

relationships (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009). In this context, attachment theory states “secure adolescents are likely to be able to more accurately label and perceive maladaptive marital interactions as such and may be less likely to automatically replicate them in their own future relationships than are insecure adolescents” (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 809). Even though some research indicates that adolescents model parental marital interaction qualities, Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer (2009) found that securely attached children of parental divorce are less likely to experience divorce in their own romantic relationship than those who are insecurely attached (reported in Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 810). Therefore, a state of mind that is secure, versus insecure, can protect against the family of origin’s negative relationship qualities that may be replicated in the offspring’s future relationship (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009). Because secure individuals are believed to have developed a positive working model, that representation allows them to effectively process and integrate emotionally suggestive information that is to be carried forward into their later romantic relationships (Hare, Miga, & Allen, 2009, p. 815).

Ultimately, children learn aspects of peer interaction and other types of relationships experienced in adolescence through observation of parental interaction and through parent-child interaction. Although offspring may exhibit conflict behavior in future romantic relationships due to family of origin experiences (early observational learning, parent/sibling socialization, and/or behavioral continuity of interactions with parents during adolescence), Hare, Miga, & Allen (2009) found that “processing a balanced, coherent, and objective view on parental experiences, even if these experiences were negative, is advantageous to one’s own relationship outcomes” (p. 816).



*Influence of parents on romantic relationships and attachment representations:*

Emerging from Bowlby's work on the study of attachment, two lines of research have progressed (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003): attachment relationship between child and parent (Allen & Land, 1999); and, attachment dynamics of adult romantic and marital relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007) (reported in Dinero et al., 2008). Attachment relationships that contain behavioral characteristics such as responsiveness, sensitivity, compassion, and availability elicit an attachment style that is secure rather than insecure (Dinero et al., 2008, p. 622).

Fraley and Davis's (1997) work demonstrated how primary attachment status transfers from parents to peers, beginning in late adolescence or early childhood (reported in Dinero et al., 2008, p. 624). "This mechanism suggests that as peers, and, eventually, romantic partners begin to assume the role of primary attachment figures, relationships with these individuals should influence attachment representations just as relationships with parents once did" (Dinero, et al., 2008, p. 624-25). Mikulincer and Shaver (2003, 2007) later found that relationships may change attachment style, moving it away from its original form; Feeney (2004) also found evidence for this transfer (reported in Dinero et al., 2008, p. 625). Utilizing a sample of young adults, Feeney (2004) found that greater romantic involvement was associated with stronger attachment to partners and therefore weaker attachment to mothers and friends; and, participant age and length and closeness of romantic relationship operated on the strength of attachment (reported in Dinero, et al., 2008, p. 625). Therefore, it can be assumed that romantic partners are likely to gradually become primary attachment figures (Dinero, et al., 2008).

Dinero et al.'s (2008) research found that ultimately, both the family of origin and later romantic relationships affect attachment representations, and as romantic relationships endure and become more serious, the direct influence of family origin decreases (and may even completely dissolve), as romantic relationships begin to influence attachment style (p. 630). This finding implies that “although there is an initial direct influence of family interactions on attachment security, this influence lessens over time and romantic partner interactions begin to have an influence of their own” and, importantly, “family interactions indirectly influence later attachment security through their earlier influence on romantic interaction and attachment security” (Dinero et al., 2008, p. 630). The association between family interactions and subsequent attachment security is mediated by security early in life and romantic interactions (Dinero et al., 2008, p. 630).

The attachment model proposed by Fraley (2002) was a prototypic model that suggested that a substantial influence of early childhood attachment patterns is continued over the years (reported in Dinero et al, 2008, p. 630). Contrarily, Dinero et al.'s (2008) study indicates that present-day romantic/marital relationships influence attachment style, when attachment style is not measured through memories of early child-parent relations (p. 630). However, Dinero et al. (2008) recognize that although romantic attachment style is related to childhood experiences, secure and insecure experiences in close relationships can cause attachment style to change along the way (p. 630). Ultimately, behavioral interactions in close relations are a good predictor of romantic attachment security (Dinero et al., 2008).

*Divorce and attachment styles:*

Compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown a dramatic change in family life. The divorce rate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was about five percent, and has increased to fifty percent in recent years (Amato, 2000; reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 128). In addition to fifty percent of all marriages ending in divorce, more than forty percent of all first marriages end in divorce (Zill & Nord, 1993; reported in Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 327). Thus, the concept and experience of parental divorce has become increasingly common to children and adolescents in the United States (Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 327). Every year, more than one million children experience the consequences of divorce (Ozen, 2005, p. 128). Because of the impact that divorce has on children, recently, many studies have focused on the short-term and long-term effects of divorce. A few of the impacts endured by children of divorced families, as compared to their counterparts from married families include: lower academic success; less psychological adaptability; lower self concepts; lower social abilities; a poorer level of health; and, their depression, drug use, and delinquent behavior is found to be relatively higher (reported in Ozen, 2003, p. 130)

Furthermore, recent studies confirm the previously held belief that the impacts of divorce affect children from childhood through adolescence and adulthood (Ozen, 2005, p. 129). Those who have experienced parental divorce in childhood are found to have a lower psychological adaptability, lower social-economical status, engage in marriage at an earlier age; and report more problems, conflicts, fluctuations and less security in their marriages (reported in Ozen, 2003, p. 130).

The increase in the rise of divorce has prompted many studies over the past two decades to debate and discuss the long- and short-term effects of divorce that can impact children throughout their lifespan.

For the reason that an emotional bond begins to develop between an infant and his/her primary caregiver almost immediately, such a bond influences and impacts upon the child's later close relationships. Therefore, those who establish a smooth, reliable, and autonomy-encouraging relationship with their primary caregiver will typically have a secure adult attachment style; contrarily, those who establish a cold, resistant, or compelling relationship with their primary caregivers will typically develop insecure adult attachment styles (Ozen, 2005, p. 136). Those who typically have secure adult attachment styles feel at ease when the degree of intimacy in their relationship fluctuates; those who typically have insecure adult attachment styles tend to avoid close relationships and harbor feelings of anxiety when leaving or being abandoned (Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000; reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 136).

Bowlby's original theory stated that the initial parent-child relationship is static throughout one's lifespan remaining stable in later close adult relationships, and can be impacted upon by painful life experiences or traumatic emotional events, such as divorce (Ozen, 2005). Therefore, divorce can alter the "internal schemata" that individuals possess regarding close relationships (Ozen, 2005, p. 136). While recognizing that differences do exist between parent-child attachment styles and later attachment styles in romantic relationships, the relationship between parental divorce and adult romantic attachment styles has inconsistent results throughout existent research. Certain studies conducted with university students that come from both divorced and intact families do

not show any significant differences in terms of adult romantic attachment styles (Lopez, Melendez, & rice, 2000; Brennen & Shaver, 1993; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 137). Other studies have found that children of married and intact parents develop different attachment styles (Ozen, 2005, p. 137). Specifically focusing on university girls, some studies demonstrate that those girls coming from divorced families develop less secure adult romantic attachment styles (reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 137). Additionally, Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver 's (1997) study with adults who experienced parental divorce yielded a negative correlation with secure adult romantic attachment styles and a positive correlation with anxious adult romantic attachment styles (reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 137). The results of Ozen's (2005) research revealed that the impacts of divorce on children indicate that divorce results in the development of negative attitudes towards marriage and other relationships (p. 144).

Furthermore, because researchers have demonstrated predictable links between adult attachment style and relationship quality in dating couples, divorce can be said to "activate attachment systems" and "reveal the strength of attachment style" (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005, p. 18). Ultimately, attachment styles shape personal experiences about love and lead to particular sorts of relationships (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; reported in Vareschi & Bursik, 2005, p. 18). Adult attachment style allows for individually different experiences of relationships, emotions, and coping styles, and is likely to "predict both adjustment to difficult life transitions and the ability to utilize and incorporate directives provided in an intervention" (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005, p. 18).

*Impact of divorce in adolescence and adulthood:*

Through the relational transmission of family of origin norms from parents to their offspring, children from divorced families “learn firsthand that marriages do not last a lifetime, that dissatisfying personal relationships should be ended, and that divorce allows pursuit of more satisfying relationships with other partners” (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; reported in Riggio, 2004, p. 100). Additional research done by Amato and Booth (1991) indicates “adult offspring of divorce are more pessimistic about experiencing life-long marriage and evaluate divorce less negatively than do young adults from intact families, attitudes reflective of low relationship commitment” (reported in Riggio, 2004, p. 100). This was found to be associated with the fact that parental divorce can be a demonstration to offspring of a lack of relationship commitment; therefore, children who learn that marriages do not necessarily last forever consequently feel less anxious about being in a relationship because they have already “survived relationship dissolution, and perhaps have even seen their parents become happier after divorce” (Riggio, 2004, p. 110). Additionally, young adults from divorced families who feel less anxious about being in a relationship, may also be highly willing to end a relationship and/or marriage they feel is not satisfying (Amato, 1996; Booth & Edwards, 1990; reported in Riggio, 2004, p. 110).

Interpersonal relationships, particularly romantic relationships, begin to gain importance during adolescence, and become even more important in young adulthood (Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 328). Parental divorce in childhood or adolescent years may have long-term effects on offspring’s later relationships, specifically the security of attachment to romantic partners. Summers,

Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum's (1998) research found that the affects of divorce on the security of attachment to romantic partners were not mediated by family process variables during adolescence such as: mother-adolescent relationship, father-adolescent relationship, interparental conflict, and maternal depressive symptoms (p. 331). This finding was not surprising to the researchers because the sampled adolescents "were exposed to parental divorce at a time in their lives when romantic relationships often begin to develop. Parental divorce symbolizes that romantic relationships are not always secure and can provide an adolescent with a template for her or his romantic relationships (Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 332). Additional prior data have supported this notion that young adults who come from divorced homes have a decreased satisfaction in dating relationships (Booth, Brikerhoof, & White, 1984; reported in Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 332).

Furthermore, in Ozen's (2003) study assessing adolescents coming from married and divorced families, it was found that ultimately, "adolescents coming from divorced families develop more fearful attachment styles from the viewpoint of orientations related to adult attachment styles in comparison with those coming from married families" but, "coming from married or divorced families made no significant difference with reference to two other orientations, namely insecure (dismissive-preoccupied) and secure" (p. 129).

Ross and Mirowsky (1999), expanded on the theory that the impacts of divorce extend from childhood through adulthood by claiming that children coming from intact and divorced families experience differences in their adulthood, too (reported in Ozen, 2005, p. 132). The most relevant difference found was that children coming from

divorced families are generally unhappy in their relationships and do not perceive others as being trustworthy (Ozen, 2005, p. 132).

*Summary of Part Two:*

A fundamental aspect of attachment theory states that the quality of the original emotional bond formed between an infant and his or her caregiver will subsequently impact upon later relationships in adulthood. Due to the nature of infant-caregiver relationships, some individuals will develop a secure adult attachment orientation and others will develop an insecure adult attachment orientation regarding intimate emotional adult relationships. Bowlby's work stresses the importance of the transmission of relationship orientation across the life span, but also recognizes that emotional losses and negative life events and stressors, such as divorce, may cause a change in the individual's internal working model of relationships.

As the divorce rate continues to rise, the number of children from divorced families is similarly rising. The outcomes for offspring of divorced families can be positive or negative, but regardless, the outcomes are usually an outgrowth of the family of origin. The family system ultimately serves as a model of personal relationships; parents serve as a source of observational learning and offspring adopt social interaction patterns, behaviors within relationships, and relationship expectations from parental interactions and relationships. Parental conflict and divorce can have a lifelong influence over the functioning, maintenance, social competence, and emotional regulation of offspring's personal relationships in young adulthood.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### *Sample:*

Participants in this study were eighty-six undergraduate students who attended Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. The undergraduate students were selected because they were enrolled introductory level psychology courses. The undergraduate students who participated in this study were 18 years of age or older. Participants were not discriminated against based on gender or socio-economic status.

#### *Measurement:*

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire served as the main source of measurement in this study and was completed by the undergraduate students of intact families and undergraduate students of divorced families. Thus, the independent variable was the undergraduate students of intact and divorced families and the two dependent variables were the relationship satisfaction scores obtained on both the Anxiety and Avoidance scales.

The ECR-R evaluates the construct of adult attachment. Participants rate each of the 36 statements concerning how they generally feel in, and experience, emotionally intimate relationships. Particularly of importance to this study are the Anxiety and Avoidance scales, which have previously been linked to an internal consistency reliability of 0.90 or higher for the two ECR-R scales (Fraley, 2005).

*Hypotheses:*

*Null Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be no significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Anxiety.

*Alternative Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be a significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Anxiety.

*Null Hypothesis for the Avoidance Scale:* There will be no significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Avoidance.

*Alternative Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be a significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Avoidance.

*Design of the Study:*

This study consisted of two independent samples: undergraduate students of intact families (N=66) and undergraduate students of divorced families (N=20). Participants were chosen from the undergraduate psychology pool at Rowan University. Once receiving permission from Rowan University's undergraduate pool supervisor, the researcher advised participants when and how the study would be administered. The researcher provided each participant with a letter explaining the nature of the study, instructions to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and finally, background questions and the ECR-R. Each of the 36 items was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale which

ranges from 1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree. Participants were given an unidentified length of time to complete the ECR-R, but were informed that participation in this study should not exceed 15 minutes.

*Analysis:*

This exploratory study examined attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance, as measured with the ECR-R, of undergraduate students of intact- and divorced-families groups that may contribute to the overall relationships satisfaction and attachment orientation of young adults.

An independent t-test was used to analyze the data. The discussion of results will review the ECR-R to give insight in to other factors that may contribute to relationship satisfaction and provide an avenue for further exploration.

*Summary:*

Utilizing the ECR-R, this study examines relationship satisfaction of undergraduate students enrolled at Rowan University to determine if a difference exists specifically regarding the areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance, which have been implemented in the literature to contribute to young adults' attachment orientation. An independent t-test was used to analyze the data. Chapter Four will an analysis and interpretation of the data and Chapter Five will discuss implications and further avenues of exploration in regards to this area.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the construct of adult attachment orientation as it pertains to family structure. Specifically, college freshman were asked to rate their experiences in romantic relationships in order to determine if differences exist due coming from an intact or divorced family, as particularly measured by the attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance scales of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire (ECR-R). Independent t-Tests were used to determine the effect of family structure (intact or divorced) on the score, or dependent variable.

#### *Restatement of Hypotheses:*

*Null Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be no significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Anxiety.

*Alternative Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be a significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Anxiety.

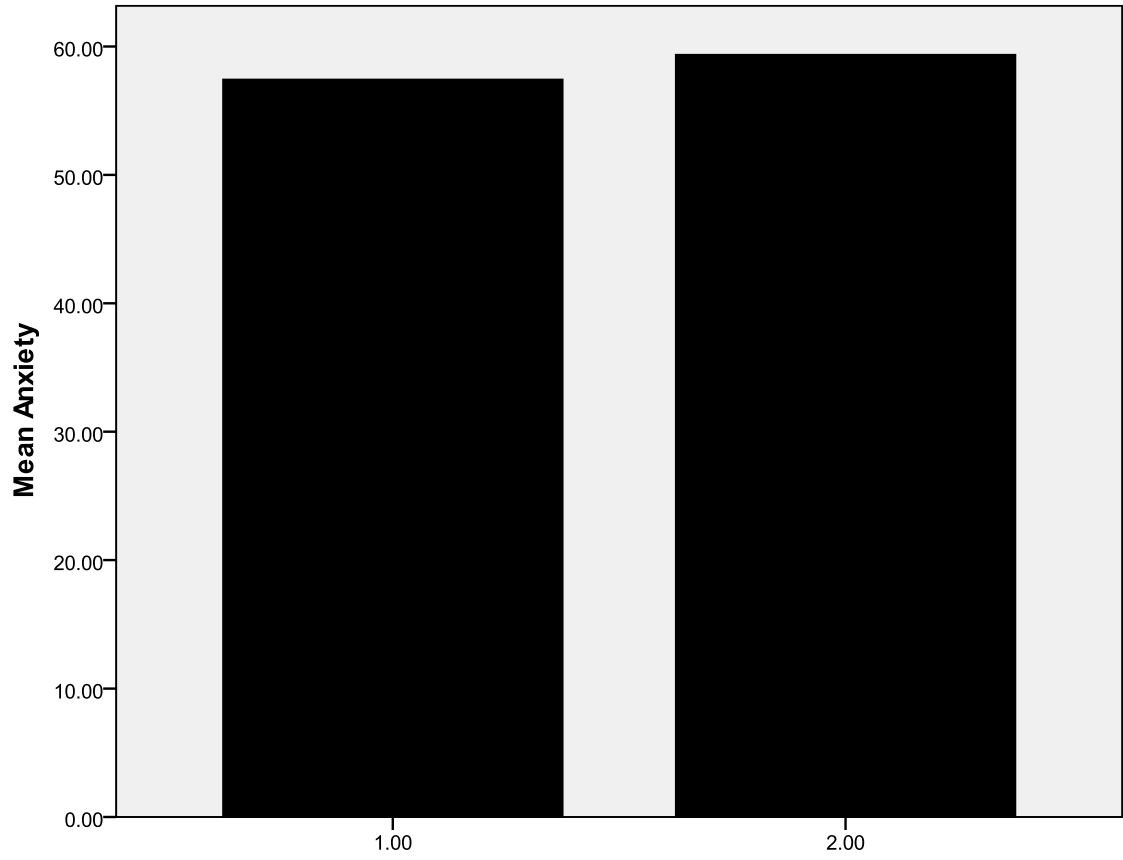
*Null Hypothesis for the Avoidance Scale:* There will be no significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Avoidance.

*Alternative Hypothesis for the Anxiety Scale:* There will be a significant difference in the relationship satisfaction scores of young adult offspring of intact or divorced families in the area of Avoidance.

*Results:*

In respect to the Anxiety hypothesis, data indicated that there was no significant difference in scores between students whose parents were married and those whose parents were divorced,  $t(86) = -.373$ ,  $p = .710$ ,  $<.05$ , where students whose parents were married ( $M = 57.4$ ) did not score significantly higher than students whose parents were divorced ( $M = 59.4$ ). (See Figure 1). Therefore, the researcher fails to reject the Null Hypothesis for the Anxiety scale.

In respect to the Avoidance hypothesis, data indicated that there was no significant difference in scores between students whose parents were married and those whose parents were divorced,  $t(86) = -.079$ ,  $p = .937$ ,  $<.05$ , where students whose parents were married ( $M = 52.8$ ) did not score significantly higher than students whose parents were divorced ( $M = 53.3$ ). (See Figure 2). Therefore, the researcher fails to reject the Null Hypothesis for the Avoidance scale.



Condition (1 = parents married; 2 = parents divorced)

Figure 1: Mean scores for intact-families and divorced-families groups for the attachment-related Anxiety scale.

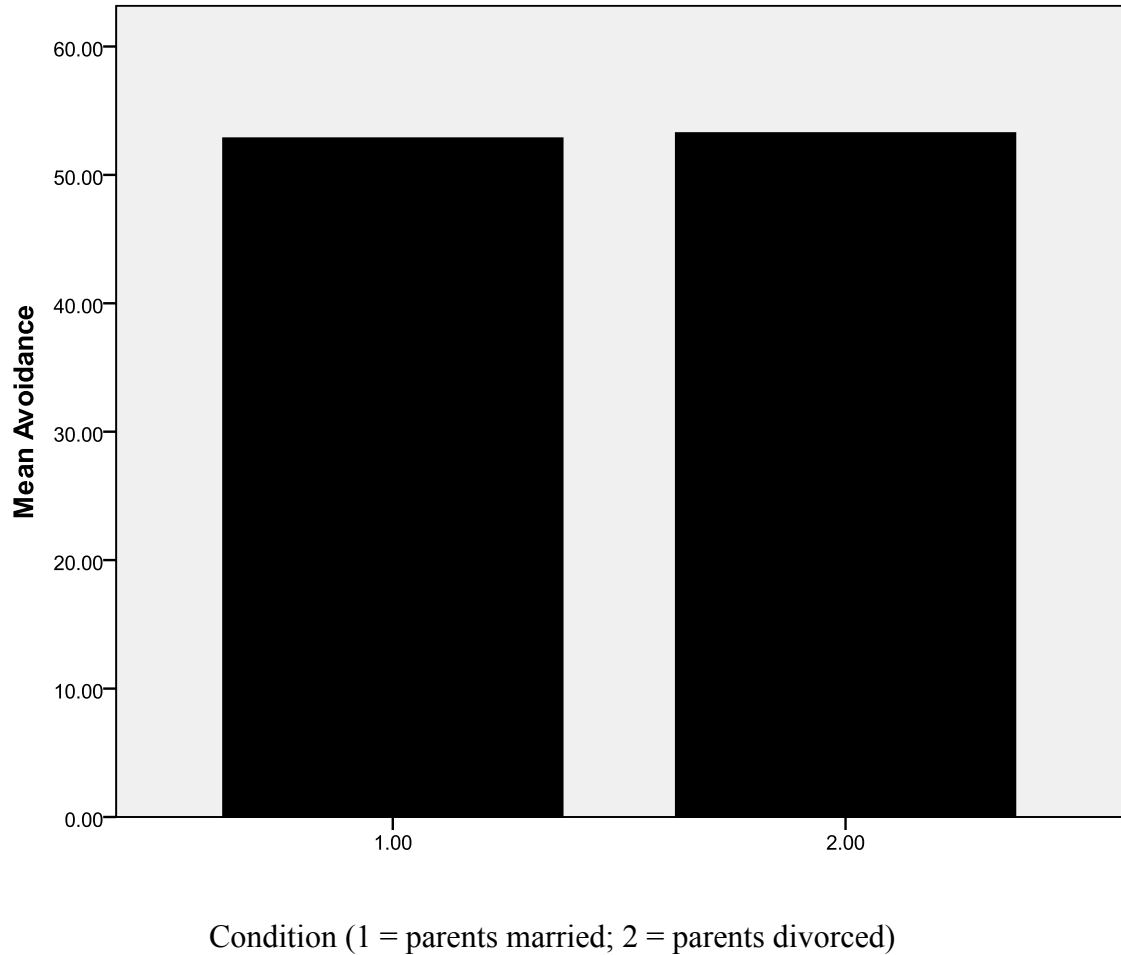


Figure 2: Mean scores for intact-families and divorced-families groups for the attachment-related Avoidance scale.

*Summary:*

Eighty-six students enrolled in introductory level psychology courses at Rowan University participated in this study. The attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance scales of the ECR-R questionnaire was analyzed via two independent t-Tests to determine if students whose parents were married and students whose parents were divorced scored significantly different from one another on these scales. These

scales were chosen because the ECR-R is designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety (the extent to which individuals are secure versus insecure about the availability and responsiveness of their partners in emotionally intimate relationships) and attachment-related avoidance (the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable being close to others versus securely dependent upon others in emotionally intimate relationships) (Fraley, 2005). The results indicated no significant difference in scores between groups on the Anxiety scale. The results also indicated no significant difference in scores between groups on the Avoidance scale. These findings will be described in full detail the Chapter Five.



## Chapter 5

### Summary, Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

#### *Summary of Chapters One through Four:*

Adult attachment has become of growing interest within the continuously developing field of psychology since Ainsworth and colleagues identified infant-caregiver attachment styles. Attachment begins in infancy and continues throughout the individual's lifespan. In adulthood, the original attachment orientation guides emotional experiences in subsequent romantic relationships. Research has demonstrated that the type of attachment experienced in infancy is meaningfully related to the attachment experienced in adult romantic relationships; specifically, Bowlby's work stresses the importance of the transmission of relationship orientation across the lifespan and the alteration that emotional losses and negative life events, such as parental divorce, can have on the individual's internal working model of relationships. Due to the fact that the family system serves as a model of personal relationships, and that parents serve as a source of observational learning, offspring therefore adopt social interaction patterns, behaviors within relationships, and relationship expectations from parental interactions and relationships. Thus, the family structure can have a lifelong influence on the offspring's personal relationships in adulthood.

Undergraduate students from Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, participated in this study. Participants were grouped based on their reporting that they were from either intact or divorced families. The researcher predicted that young adult offspring in either group would score consistently with each other; however, the intact-families group was expected to score lower in both the areas of attachment-related

Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance, and the young adult offspring of the divorced-families group would score higher in both the areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance. The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire was used to assess the factors of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance using two independent t-Tests.

Statistical analysis of the survey data found that there is no statistically significant difference between the young-adult participants of either the intact-families or divorced-families groups in the areas of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance.

*Discussion:*

Specific predictions were made regarding the scales of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance.

In respect to the attachment-related Anxiety scale, data indicated that there was no significant difference in scores between students whose parents were married (M= 57.4) and those whose parents were divorced (M= 59.4). Findings were similar on the attachment-related Avoidance scale, wherein students whose parents were married (M= 52.8) did not score significantly different from those whose parents were divorced (M= 53.3).

These findings were surprising, as previous literature has linked family structure with attachment orientation. Most research indicates that differences in adult attachment may be related to infant-caregiver attachment patterns, and those attachment patterns can be further related to social stressors or negative life events, such as parental divorce.

Researchers developed the ECR-R to assess adult attachment on two dimensions of attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance in order to better understand the factors that account for an individual's well being, and how that well-being can promote attachment security. Although further research is needed to understand the factors that can alter and maintain an individual's attachment style in adulthood, mechanisms of intergenerational transmission have been evidenced to play a role. Researchers who have studied the intergenerational transmission of difficult life events, like parental divorce, have found that adult children will likely experience this life course. Ultimately, children of parents who have dissolved their marriage tend to replicate such patterns of marital instability. Further, the experience of parental relationship transitions, such as divorce, is likely to be replicated by adult children. Thus, the researcher predicted that the undergraduate participants in this study, whose parents are divorced, would score consistently with each other, specifically scoring higher on the attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance scales; however, it should be taken in to consideration that some participants, at the age of at least 18 years, have not yet experienced romantic relationships for themselves, and therefore, have not yet had the opportunity to reproduce the feelings and behaviors of their parent's life course.

*Conclusion:*

The literature on family structure and adult attachment orientation is not supported by this study. The attachment-related Anxiety and attachment-related Avoidance scale findings, measured by the ECR-R, did not find young-adult participants of intact- or divorced-families groups to score significantly different from one another.

Although the researcher attempted to make the rating scale for answering each questionnaire item as descriptive as possible, it is important to consider the limitations of using a Likert scale in surveys. For one, participants may not have been completely honest, which may be intentional or unintentional. Also, participants may answer according to what they feel is expected of them. Due to there being a scale that ranged from 1 to 7, the scale required a great deal of decision-making.

Further, the research was limited to Rowan University undergraduate students, all of whom are Psychology majors. The study was also limited to a sample size of eighty-six students, with the majority (seventy-seven percent) indicating they came from an intact family and the minority (twenty-three percent) indicating they came from a divorced family; therefore, it is difficult to make generalizations regarding this study's current findings compared to previous studies. In addition, only the aspect of whether the students' parents were married or divorced at the time of the survey was examined; however, it may have been advantageous to examine other types of family structure- single, cohabitating, separated, or widowed- in order to fully understand the impact family structure has on attachment orientation. Other variables such as gender, parenting style, sibling relationships, and the individual's personal romantic relationship experience(s)- number of romantic relationships engaged in thus far in lifetime and duration of those romantic relationship(s)- were not examined, and may have better explained the results as they relate to the family system overall.

*Implications for Future Research:*

While this particular study has provided some insight into the influence of family structure on adult attachment orientation, much more research is needed in this area. A thesis conducted similar to this one should be conducted with a larger sample size in order to provide a more significant difference between those students whose parents are married and those whose parents are divorced. A focus on, gender, parenting style, sibling relationships, and the individual's personal romantic relationship experience(s) may yield not only interesting, but significant results as well. An additional focus on other forms of family structure aside from merely married or divorced, could add an alternative angle to this study. Finally, this study could be conducted as a longitudinal study in order to allow for participants to experience their own romantic relationships while in college, and post-18 years of age. Results from such a study may provide more insight in to the affects of intergenerational transmission of parental life courses on adult children's emotional stability in romantic relationships.

As this exploratory study has indicated, the issue of adult attachment orientation as it is affected by infant-caregiver relationships and intergenerational transmission is extremely important and complex, and therefore, no drastic conclusions can be made without thoroughly exploring the subject from all angles.

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## **Appendix A Consent Letter**

### CONSENT

The purpose of this survey is to evaluate the attachment and experiences in romantic relationships with both current and former partners. If, however, you have never been in a romantic relationship, you are encouraged to participate, as your opinions on this topic are valued. Alison Rossi of the Psychology Department, Rowan University, is conducting this research, entitled “An Exploratory Investigation of Family Structure and Adult Attachment Orientation,” in partial fulfillment of her M.A. degree in School Psychology. For this study you will be asked to answer 36 items to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. Your participation in this study should not exceed 15 minutes. You must be 18 years or older to participate. If you are not 18 years or older, you should not participate. There are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

The data collected in this study will be combined with data from previous studies and will be submitted for publication in a research journal. Your responses will be anonymous and the data gathered will be kept confidential.

By taking this survey you agree that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that you are in no way identified and your name is not used. Participation does not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any project facilitator.

If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact Alison Rossi at (732) 881-1136, or her faculty advisor, Dr. Roberta Dihoff, [dihoff@rowan.edu](mailto:dihoff@rowan.edu).

## Appendix B Survey

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) Questionnaire

Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000)

Instructions: The statements below concern how you feel in emotionally intimate relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship. Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it. Mark your answer next to each “Attachment in Past and Present Relationships” question using the following rating scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Background:

Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever been in a romantic relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you and your partner been together? \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months

Are you married to your partner? \_\_\_\_\_

Are your parents currently married or divorced? \_\_\_\_\_

If your parents are divorced, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months

Attachment in Past and Present Relationships:

1. I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love.
2. I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.

3. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me.
4. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
5. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.
6. I worry a lot about my relationships.
7. When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else.
8. When I show my feelings for romantic partners, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
9. I rarely worry about my partner leaving me.
10. My romantic partner makes me doubt myself.
11. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
12. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
13. Sometimes romantic partners change their feelings about me for no apparent reason.
14. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
15. I'm afraid that once a romantic partner gets to know me, he or she won't like who I really am.
16. It makes me mad that I don't get the affection and support I need from my partner.
17. I worry that I won't measure up to other people.
18. My partner only seems to notice me when I'm angry.
19. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
20. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.

22. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
23. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
24. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
25. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
26. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.
27. It's not difficult for me to get close to my partner.
28. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
29. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
30. I tell my partner just about everything.
31. I talk things over with my partner.
32. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
33. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
34. I find it easy to depend on romantic partners.
35. It's easy for me to be affectionate with my partner.
36. My partner really understands me and my needs.