

THESIS

TASKS AND PROCESSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FORMATION OF ROMANTIC  
ATTACHMENTS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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## ABSTRACT

### TASKS AND PROCESSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FORMATION OF ROMANTIC ATTACHMENTS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Current literature on romantic attachments using attachment theory is lacking in emerging adulthood since research has been focused mostly on adolescence and adulthood. Few researchers have used qualitative methods to expand the knowledge of romantic attachments, especially in the context of the formation process. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments. The data collected contains the experiences of emerging adults with varying attachment styles in romantic attachment development. Participants completed the ECR-S and were identified into one of four attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized, before being invited to participate. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with 14 college students (ages 18-22 years) at Colorado State University.

Thematic analysis occurred by peer examination and collaborative coding to condense salient categories and themes. The thematic analysis resulted in nine coding categories that include: (a) relationship beginnings, (b) milestones, turning points, and firsts in relationships, (c) partner attributes, (d) expressions of affection in relationships, (e) development/knowledge about self and relationships, (f) communication within relationships, (g) support and comfort within relationships, (h) relationship conflict and strains, (i) contextual factors and outside influences on relationship. Experiences in the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood were found to be aligned with how the existing literature suggests that adults form attachments with a

few differences in technology use and the development of emerging adults' self-concepts. Findings support and extend literature on attachment theory in the context of romantic relationships.

*Key words: romantic attachment, formation, attachment theory, emerging adulthood*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Literature Review.....	1
Rationale and Purpose of the Study .....	1
Attachment Theory in Childhood and Adult Romantic Relationships .....	2
History of Attachment Theory .....	2
Attachment Behaviors.....	4
Individual Differences in Attachment.....	6
Attachment Formation .....	11
Tasks in Early Romantic Attachment Formation.....	16
Romantic Attachments in Emerging Adulthood.....	19
Research Questions .....	23
Methodology .....	24
Design and Rationale .....	24
Procedures.....	25
Data Analysis.....	30
Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	32
Results.....	36
Relationship Beginnings .....	37
Milestones, Turning Points, and Firsts in Relationships.....	44
Partner Attributes .....	47
Expressions of Affection in Relationships.....	49
Development/Knowledge About Self and Relationships.....	50

Communication Within Relationships .....	55
Support and Comfort Within Relationships .....	58
Relationship Conflict and Strains .....	62
Contextual Factors and Outside Influences on Relationship .....	65
Experiences Based on Attachment Style.....	70
Discussion .....	72
Overview of the Results.....	72
Implications for Current Theory .....	75
Limitations of the Study.....	84
Recommendations for Future Research .....	85
Implications for Professional Practice .....	86
Conclusion .....	87
References.....	90
Appendix A.....	99
Appendix B.....	102
Appendix C.....	103
Appendix D.....	104
Appendix E.....	105
Appendix F.....	108

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A normative process for human beings is to need and rely on others for safety, security, and support. Researchers like John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and Harry Harlow increased awareness of this innate need for relationships with others in their studies of the formation of attachment bonds. Attachment theory has been expanded upon from the initial parent-child bonding interactions to romantic and platonic relationship formation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, within the adult attachment research, little is known about *how* individuals form romantic attachments in emerging adulthood or later in the lifespan.

### **Rationale and Purpose of the Study**

The phenomenon of the formation of romantic attachment bonds requires exploration in order to understand further the associated tasks and processes. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) stated that partners in romantic relationships are presumed to serve as the primary attachment figure in adulthood, which extends great support to the necessity of determining how these attachment bonds are formed. Bowlby (1973) argued that early attachment representations act as a “prototype” for later relationships; however, more recent research has claimed that these prototypes are not entirely deterministic (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). He also proposed that children are born in a state of helplessness and are evolutionarily predisposed to develop enduring attachments to caregivers in order to survive. The exploration of whether romantic attachments form similarly or differently in emerging adults will give insight to how mental health professionals can assess and treat couples based on where they are in the formation of their romantic attachment bond.

The intent of this study is to explore the experiences in forming romantic attachments between partners, specifically in the context of emerging adulthood. The four defining features of attachment systems: proximity maintenance, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base identified by Bowlby (1973) are typically conceptualized with romantic partners in adulthood but can be seen in attachments with friends and family as well (Hazan & Diamond, 2000).

Themes that emerge from these defining features are a sense of safety and security that is met by caregivers that are warm, responsive, and competent. Hazan and Diamond (2000) go on to indicate that individuals look for attachment figures that provide security, a sense of reassurance of one's worth, and someone who can be depended upon in times of need both emotionally and physically. This seems to be the case in both childhood and in romantic partnership formation in emerging adulthood. Research up to this point has not pinpointed what tasks and processes influence the formation of attachment bonds in romantic relationships. Therefore the purpose of this study is to add to the discovery of this phenomenon.

## **Attachment Theory in Childhood and Adult Romantic Relationships**

### **History of Attachment Theory**

The theoretical framework applied to this study is Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980, 1982) theory of attachment. The main purpose of this theory is to explain how children form attachment bonds with their primary caregivers and to describe the emotional distress that comes about when children are separated from those caregivers. John Bowlby formulated his theory of attachment from observing children who were separated from their primary caregiver(s). He noticed a similar series of emotional reactions in the children who experienced distress. The reactions from the separation were triggered as a means to keep children from danger, which can be interpreted as a survival mechanism (Bowlby, 1973). Young children can do little else other



than cry, smile, and make eye contact to communicate individual needs to the caregiver. Without attachment bonds, children will simply not survive. When a caregiver is responsive to the needs of the child, the child is able to explore the surrounding environment while feeling safe and secure.

The work of Ainsworth et al. (1978) contributed to the growing knowledge about attachment theory with naturalistic observations of infant-caregiver interactions that led to the development of different attachment styles. Mothers' sensitivity and responsiveness to signals of distress from the infant during first year of life became important markers of these different attachment styles (Bretherton, 1992). When mothers were slow or inconsistent in responding to their infant, the infant developed an *anxious attachment*, as he or she could not count on the caregiver for constant and dependable care. Other mothers would reject their infant's attempts for physical closeness or not respond to the needs of her infant and as a result the infant learned to not seek her for support and established an *avoidant attachment*. If the mother was responsive and consistent in her interactions with her infant, the infant would then form a *secure attachment*, as he or she would know that their needs would be met when exhibiting behaviors to bring about physical contact.

As a child and caregiver form an attachment, a mental representation of the caregiver is formed in the child's mind (Bowlby, 1973). This internal working model involves memories of the interactions between the child and their caregiver. Schwartz et al. (2007) described the internal working model as establishing "enduring and stable templates that impact and guide later adult relationships" (p. 254). There are two different internal working models: of self and of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This internal working model of self comes from the experiences (whether positive or negative) with caregivers and is a mental representation of self

as worthwhile, loveable, and valuable (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The mental representation of the primary attachment relationship partner is a part of the internal working model of others as available and trustworthy. The mental representation may change over time in reaction to different experiences and can be called upon in later years to bring comfort and support during times of distress.

Attachment theory has mainly been used to look at parent-child interactions but recent research has shifted focus to romantic relationships as well as attachment bonds in adulthood. Although this shift has occurred, little is known about what tasks and processes are associated with the formation of attachment bonds in the context of romantic relationships. In the next part of this review of the literature are examples of some of the presumed contextual factors and variables seen in the literature around this topic that may have implications for the current study.

### **Attachment Behaviors**

**Attachment behaviors in childhood.** Attachment figures serve important functions and purposes in order to offer support and protection to the child. Bowlby (1973) identified four defining features of attachment systems: proximity maintenance, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base. The attachment system is also said to regulate fear and distress throughout the lifespan (Bell, 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This regulation of fear and distress is represented by the first three defining features mentioned above, with the fourth being more about exploration and autonomy of the child. The first of these is *proximity maintenance*, which occurs when a child would like to explore his or her world and still stay close to the caregiver for comfort and support. This feature can also be thought of as the child keeping tabs on the caregiver. The second feature, *safe haven*, refers to the reliability of the caregiver to provide protection, support, comfort, and relief when necessary. The third defining feature, *separation*

*distress*, describes the reaction of unwanted separations from the attachment figure even when there are other adult caregivers available to give relief. Last of these is *secure base*, which facilitates exploration of the surrounding environments and engagement in nonattachment goals for the child and can be viewed as increased independence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). All of these defining features incorporate the caregiver's responsiveness and sensitivity to the child, which is necessary for the child's survival.

Using the defining features of attachment bonds, Bell (2009) describes the difference in distress-based attachments and a non-distress form of attachment in his research around fear in attachment. The secure base is the feature of attachment that does not involve any type of fear or distress in order to promote bonding between child and caregiver. In this defining feature, the caregiver acts as a support person while the child is free to explore the surrounding environment. It may seem as though the safe haven component of attachment theory would also be focused on non-distress attachment, however, the underlying idea of safe haven is to relieve the stress that the child is currently experiencing (Bell, 2009). The stress-relieving component is what encourages the attachment bond formation in these children while the trust between child and caregiver increases. These concepts may have implications for romantic relationship formation in distressing as well as non-distressing times.

**Attachment behaviors in romantic relationships.** Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) described the four defining features of the attachment system (proximity maintenance, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base), which are also known as attachment behaviors, in terms of romantic attachments. Proximity maintenance in romantic relationships in adulthood may manifest itself in the form of texting or calling the romantic partner. Since the main premise of this attachment behavior is to keep tabs on the attachment figure, reaching out to the romantic

partner to make sure that they can easily be contacted is salient. The second of these behaviors is safe haven and can be experienced by the individual when he or she turns to their partner in times of distress and is met with support. The reliability of the romantic partner is essential to the continuation of the formation of the romantic attachment.

Separation distress will look different for varying individuals but will be experienced by anxiety at the absence of the attachment figure. The anxiety that occurs may manifest itself through tears, turning to various positive or negative coping strategies, etc. and can be seen for any length of time that the individual is away from the attachment figure (Johnson, 2004). Johnson has also suggested that separation distress can be the result of the loss of emotional connection. The last of these attachment behaviors is secure base. During this attachment behavior the individual feels support from their romantic partner and is able to explore surrounding environments freely. Individuals may choose to travel to another country or to find a new job as ways to explore their environment. All of these behaviors play an important role in the formation of romantic attachments.

### **Individual Differences in Attachment**

As previously discussed, different attachment styles are formed through patterns of care and protection responses provided by caregivers during childhood. These attachment styles are formed in adulthood as well through different relationships and the perceived sense of support from partners. Individuals can be classified into one of four categories: secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized. The last of these is a category added by Main and Solomon (1990), which can be characterized by unusual patterns and fluctuations between the anxious and avoidant attachments styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In adulthood, rather than categories, attachment styles are more often measured continuously on two dimensions of insecurity: anxiety and

avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Bartholomew (1990) constructed a quadrant including these two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance in which an individual can be high or low on one or both of these dimensions, with these quadrants then corresponding to the four attachment categories.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) characterize anxious attachment as a strong need for acquiring support, attention, and affection. Anxiously attached individuals experience a fear of rejection from their romantic partner due to their history of attachment figures offering inconsistent support and love. These individuals desire closeness and intimacy from their partner and compulsively reach out for support and love to ensure their needs will continually be met. Characteristics of avoidant attachment include distancing from intimacy and emotional closeness in relationships due to the emphasis they place on their own independence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These individuals experience a fear of vulnerability with their partners and tend to participate in behaviors to keep others at a safe distance. Both anxiously and avoidantly attached individuals encounter fear in their relationships with others that drive their attachment behaviors.

Insecurely (anxious and avoidant) attached individuals often draw upon experiences of attachment behaviors with their primary caregiver in childhood to decide to how they should interact with other attachment figures past childhood (Pascuzzo et al., 2013). Avoidant individuals have a history of distant or rejecting interactions with their primary attachment figures and have learned to suppress negative emotions and rarely seek the support of others. Avoidant attachment is also defined in terms of internal working models by either a positive view of self and negative view of others or negative views of self and others (Schwartz, Lindley, & Buboltz Jr., 2007). Anxious attachment can be defined as negative view of self and positive

view of others compared to secure attachment, which is characterized by a positive view of self and others. (Schwartz et al., 2007).

Each insecurely attached individual uses attachment strategies based on their specific attachment style that fall into two categories: hyperactivating strategies and deactivating strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxiously attached individuals use hyperactivating strategies in order to draw the attachment figure to them and maintain proximity for support and protection. These strategies include clinging and controlling behavior, excessive demands for attention, and over-dependence on the partner for comfort (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Deactivating strategies are used by avoidantly attached individuals as a way to continue the self-reliance that they have learned from the lack of support from their primary attachment figure. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) describe deactivating strategies as “compulsive self-reliance,” (p.41), and ignoring and denying attachment needs such as closeness and intimacy. Hyperactivating and deactivating strategies tend to have a negative impact on romantic attachments (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Existing studies that have found gender and sex differences in attachment styles (Feeney, 2008). Connections have been made between avoidant attachment and males as well as connections between anxious attachment and females. This relationship seems to be consistent with traditional gender socialization although other factors can be influencing these differences, such as personality traits.

**Measurement of attachment styles in adulthood.** There are numerous measures of attachment in adulthood. A number of researchers have measured the attachment quality of emerging adults’ current romantic relationships (e.g., levels of anxiety and avoidance) by using a continuous measure such as the Experiences of Close Relationships Scale-Revised (ECRS-R).

This scale measures attachment behaviors and working models through questions about an individual's current romantic relationship and the scores represent the degree of attachment related anxiety or avoidance with romantic partners that may not be the same as the individual's attachment with his or her primary caregiver in childhood (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Another form of measurement that is used more infrequently with the emerging adult population to measure attachment is the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), in which individuals are interviewed about their history with primary attachment figures and then categorized into one of the four attachment styles. (George, Kaplan & Main, 1985). These two types of measurements of attachment are used to understand an individual's attachment style but take different approaches to do so.

**Internal working models in adulthood.** Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) state that adults, more so than young children, activate mental representations in their internal working model of relationships during times of distress, which generally provides safety and security and gives support to the idea that they do not normally require proximity-seeking behaviors of their primary attachment figure. This mental representation that is used in adulthood is also known as "symbolic proximity" to others that provide care and protection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Dinero et al. (2008) proposed that since the internal working model is flexible and experience-dependent, the longer emerging adults are involved in romantic relationships the less they utilize earlier attachment experiences with his or her family of origin.

Some researchers believe that this mental model adds to the notion that attachment history affects later attachments to romantic partners because of the comparison to their mental representation of one's early caregiver (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001). Mohr, Cook-Lyon, and Kolchakian (2010) highlighted the importance of the

connection between attachment styles and internal working models on emerging adults' view of future romantic relationships. For example, insecurely attached emerging adults were more likely to have an insecure internal working model of self, which manifested itself in conceptualizing relationships in terms of anxiety and abandonment or distance and dissatisfaction.

**Continuity and discontinuity in attachment styles.** Research by Simpson et al. (2007), Dinero et al. (2008), Mohr et al. (2010), and Pascuzzo et al. (2013) as well as others has given support to the continuity of attachment styles. The idea of continuity in how an individual experiences romantic attachment bonds can be regarded as more of a *trait* of attachment and is characterized by stability, whereas discontinuity in romantic attachment experiences functions as more of a *state* and is characterized by instability (Fraley, 2002). Continuous attachment styles are ones in which attachment bonds with primary caregivers are predictive of the attachment style an individual experiences in other relationships, including peer and romantic relationships. Romantic attachment styles and behaviors identified as discontinuous are due to the interactions in different romantic attachment bonds and the felt security in that relationship at the time (Fraley, 2002).

The quality of the romantic attachment relationship is the main factor that drives whether the attachment bond will be similar or different to the bond with the primary caregiver or previous romantic partners. The discontinuous nature of the attachment styles and behaviors influences the internal working model as it updates with new information about how an individual should interact with the attachment figure (Fraley, 2002). If an individual who previously experience insecure romantic attachments begins to feel more comfortable and safe in his or her romantic relationship, the internal working model changes, reflecting a more secure relationship between the individual and his or her partner. This can also occur when individuals



do not feel safe or secure in the relationship and the internal working model retains information and memories of insecurity, which may impact the individual's attachment style with this partner and provides support for discontinuity in romantic attachment.

Waters and Waters (2006) provide the claim that early parent-child attachment relationships inevitably leave traces of mental representations that affect relationships later in life, although these traces do not determine attachment relationships to be stable across the lifespan. These researchers also identify past experiences in attachment relationships as supplying a secure base script in which individuals can call upon in later attachment relationships. For those that had a consistent and supportive caregiver, the secure base script will be ready to access in secure base interactions with romantic partners. The individuals that did not have consistent and supportive secure base interactions will have different expectations in future interactions in relationships (Waters & Waters, 2006). The internal working model and secure base expectations contribute to the knowledge of continuous and discontinuous romantic attachment styles. Typically, the research surrounding continuity and discontinuity in attachment styles has been focused on parent-child attachments, not within romantic attachments.

### **Attachment Formation**

Current research has attempted to identify the important aspects of attachment formation and the implications associated with romantic relationship development. For example, Beckes and Coan (2011) determined that attachment bonds seem to be formed in what they call the distress-relief dynamic. This model outlines the development of attachment bonds and security through interpersonal responsiveness. The premise of the distress-relief dynamic is that when individuals are distressed they seek support from another person. If that person is responsive to

the individual's condition, a sense of relief takes place, which in turn promotes the development of security.

The continuation of this dynamic and the repeated responsiveness to the individual's distress nurtures and cultivates the attachment bond between the individuals. This is seen in the previous discussion of attachment formation in childhood when the child cries and reaches out for the caregiver when they are distressed. When the caregiver responds with love and support, the child is able to form a more secure attachment. On the other hand, if the caregiver does not respond or is inconsistent in the response the child will develop an insecure attachment and will not feel relieved of distress by their caregiver. This concept of the distress-relief dynamic may have further implications for attachment theory as well as the formation of romantic attachment bonds.

**Phases of attachment formation in childhood and adulthood.** Hazan and Shaver (2007) discuss Bowlby's four stages or phases in the formation of attachments in childhood. These phases include pre-attachment, attachment-in-the-making, clear-cut attachment, and goal-corrected partnership. In the *pre-attachment* phase (0-2 months), children are interested in any type of social interaction with anyone that will provide care. The second phase, *attachment-in-the-making* (2-6 months), consists of children showing preference of caregivers and accepting care from that caregiver. This is shown in the form of being more easily soothed by one person or reaching out for one specific caregiver. The next phase, *clear-cut attachment* (6-8 months), involves increased mobility of the child. Since the child is able to move about more freely, he or she uses signs of separation distress and uses caution in interactions with strangers. The last of the attachment phases, *goal-corrected partnership* (about 2 years of age), in which the child

experiences less need for proximity maintenance and is able to derive comfort from mental representations of the primary attachment figure.

Further research around attachment development has surfaced in the form of stages or phases for romantic attachments (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). Tasks and processes associated with each stage illustrate the way safety and security can be formed and how important each of the tasks and processes are in the development of the attachment bond in romantic relationships. *Pre-attachment* represents the initial interaction and attraction that takes place between two people. For romantic partnerships, this phase is flirtatious and physiologically arousing and requires mutual interest to move onto the next phase (Marazziti & Baroni, 2012; Zayas & Hazan, 2015). Individuals seek proximity to romantic partners; however, the attachment behaviors are not directed to one partner exclusively (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). This stage brings about many potential partners as individuals get to know one another in a more surface-level manner. The *attachment-in-the-making* stage gives way for more intimate interactions through attachment behaviors in different contexts. In this stage, individuals seek proximity to one partner in particular and engage in behaviors encouraging the formation of an attachment bond (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). Zayas and Hazan (2015) state that behaviors during this stage may include mutual self-disclosure, physical contact, mutual gazing, kissing, and sex. Mental representations of the potential partner change during this phase and turning points including time spent together and stress relief are emphasized (Zayas & Hazan, 2015).

For romantic attachment bond formation purposes, the last two stages *clear-cut attachment* and *goal-corrected partnership* are combined into one stage as they are more difficult to tease apart for adults due to the lack of apparent cognitive development that is more noticeable in childhood. During this stage of attachment formation, the specific partner alleviates

stress even when they are not physically present and all attachment behaviors are centered around this romantic partner (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). Full-fledged attachment bonds are formed in this stage with serious commitment by both partners. A salient aspect during this part of the bond formation is the mental representation that is solidified of the romantic partner to be called upon in times of distress or physical separation (Zayas & Hazan, 2015).

Throughout these proposed stages, there are salient processes that take place called *turning points* that are associated with the increase or decrease in commitment levels in romantic attachments (Bolton, 1961). Key turning points in the formation of romantic attachments include specific cues and interactions that bring about changes psychologically, physically, and behaviorally (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). These turning points can include first meeting, a first kiss, exclusivity in the relationship, first sexual experience, quality time, physical separation, and serious commitment. During each turning point couples experience opposing goals (i.e. connectedness versus independence) and depending on how the couple resolves the conflict, the results profoundly impact the attachment bond formation. In turn, this will increase or decrease support and security felt in the attachment bond (Zayas, Gunaydin, & Shoda, 2015). Turning points can be a singular event or recurring events and, over time, turning points provide partners with the opportunity to do significant learning about one another in order to alter mental representations of others and self (Zayas et al., 2015).

**Gender, sexual orientation, and adult attachment.** Research has revealed differences in attachment processes and styles between males and females although, “gender difference” does not appear in the index of several major handbooks on attachment (see for example, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Zayas & Hazan, 2015). It has been theorized that males will show more of an avoidant attachment style and females show more of an anxious attachment style. A

large meta-analysis that looked at male and female differences based on attachment in community and college samples found that sex differences do appear at the extremes of anxiety and avoidance (Del Giudice, 2011). Del Giudice found a pattern of higher avoidance in males while no sex differences in anxiety appeared. These sex differences may have larger implications on the formation of romantic attachments based on the varying attachment styles.

With regard to sexual orientation, research has shown that there seem to be more similarities than differences in same-sex romantic attachments as compared to heterosexual romantic attachments (Mohr et al., 2013). Research by Peplau and Spalding (2003) indicates that no gender differences were found when comparing same-sex couples and heterosexual couples. Opposing perspectives have offered that same-sex couples are not exempt from gender differences in attachment styles although research up to this point has not found any gender differences in heterosexual couples either (Mohr & Fassinger, 2007; Ridge & Feeney, 1998).

Researchers such as Kurdek (2005) and Macapagal, Greene, Rivera, and Mustanski (2015) state that there are no considerable differences in same-sex couples attachment when compared to the tasks and processes associated with formation romantic attachments in heterosexual couples. Macapagal and colleagues did discuss other difficulties that same-sex couples can encounter during this period of identity formation in the emerging adulthood period of the lifespan due to their sexual orientation. This did not seem to hinder the formation of romantic attachments in same-sex couples however. Ridge and Feeney (1998) compared gay, lesbian, and bisexual to heterosexual college students to look at whether sexual orientation plays a role in attachment. The results of the study contained no differences in attachment styles or attachment experiences when comparing the two groups (Ridge & Feeney, 1998). Literature in

this area is continuing to grow yet more research is needed in order to draw conclusions of same-sex romantic attachment formation and potential gender differences and similarities.

### **Tasks in Early Romantic Attachment Formation**

In the early stages of dating and forming a romantic attachment, different tasks may stand out as important to developing a committed partnership. These important tasks are yet to be concretely determined, however, researchers have some ideas as to what tasks may present themselves across individual experiences. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) mention *self-presentation* and *self-disclosure* as playing an important role in the initial romantic relationship stages.

**Self-presentation.** These researchers describe self-presentation as tactical choices in revealing one's self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The choice of how to present one's self may influence the interest of the potential partner. Self-presentation can manifest itself differently for individuals with insecure attachments styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxiously attached individuals desire closeness and support from their partner, which may lead them to present themselves as clingy or overeager. For avoidantly attached individuals, independence and maintaining distance is a priority so these individuals may downplay or deny their sense of intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Self-presentation may be a salient task in the beginning stages of the romantic attachment formation between partners.

**Self-disclosure.** The second task is self-disclosure, which consists of revealing personal and intimate details of one's life. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) discuss the shift that takes place in the type of self-disclosure presented as the formation of the relationship progresses. At first, self-disclosure consists of superficial public information and leads to divulging more intimate information and concerns from both partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). It is noted by these

researchers that reciprocal self-disclosure may indicate trust and increase desire for commitment in the budding relationship. The revealing nature of self-disclosure may mimic the distress-relief model (Beckes & Coan, 2011) described above in the way that divulging more intimate details of one's self is comparable to reaching out for support. The individual self-disclosing essentially puts their heart on the line to be rejected or supported and the resulting response from the partner either reinforces the growing attachment or prevents the attachment bond from progressing.

Disclosure of personal information during the formation of romantic attachments varies depending on attachment behaviors as previously mentioned. Bradford, Feeney, and Campbell (2002) describe self-disclosure as a salient functional role in the formation, maintenance, and deterioration of relationships and that it is at the “very heart of interpersonal communication” (p. 492) that is critical for relationship success. Other researchers such as Harvey and Omarzu (1997) explain that self-disclosure influences motives, intentions, and actions of self and relationship partner and that it defines the intensity of the relationship. According to attachment theory principles, securely attached individuals tend to engage in more appropriate levels of self-disclosure, while insecurely attached individuals may not be able to regulate self-disclosure as productively. Bradford et al. found that insecurely attached individuals were low on disclosure of self and the relationship due to the emphasis on fearful orientation (either avoidance or anxiety). These researchers propose the reason for low disclosure among these individuals is that disclosing personal information puts them in a vulnerable position and leaves room for the partner to reject or exploit them (Bradford et al., 2002).

**Intimacy.** Reis and Shaver (1988) proposed that intimacy is developed when a partner's response to an individual's self-disclosure is perceived to be understanding and validating. Intimacy formation thus occurs when individuals feel that they can turn to their partner and be

met with responsiveness and support as discussed in the distress-relief model (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Reis, Clark, and Holmes (2004) identified that this development of intimacy fosters security in the relationship as well as a mutual sense of worth for partners. These researchers identify perceived partner responsiveness to the self as a key factor in the formation of intimacy and closeness between partners. This responsiveness also includes support of important goals, needs, and values to create an intimate relationship (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Reis and colleagues identified the development of intimacy as impacting the internal working model of self and others. They explain that when individuals perceive partners to be responsive, he or she may feel more secure with their partner, and thus feel more of a sense of self-worth.

Individuals experience intimacy differently based on the influence of attachment security. Securely attached individuals tend to have fewer sexual partners, sexual experiences within the context of a committed partnership, and a more positive outlook on past sexual experiences compared to insecurely attached individuals (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003). For example, avoidant individuals tend to be more inclined to engage in “one-night stands” or “hookups” than secure or anxious individuals due to the casual nature of the sexual experiences that limits intimacy in romantic relationships (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Paul et al. 2000). Likewise, anxious individuals struggle with maintaining intimacy, although differently than avoidant individuals. The disconnect between desiring closeness in romantic relationships and struggling with preserving those relationships causes anxious individuals to increase in anxiety, which may lead to a decrease in safe sex behaviors or to resist unwanted but consensual sex (Feeney, Peterson, Gallois, & Terry, 2000).



## **Romantic Attachments in Emerging Adulthood**

The current study aspires to look at attachment bond development in romantic relationships in the context of emerging adulthood. It is important to know that emerging adulthood is defined as a time of exploration and change in the domains of love, work, and worldviews for individuals 18-25 years of age (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period is filled with transitions and opportunities for identity formation and occurs during the most volitional years of life. Emerging adults are perceived to be navigating their identity exploration as well as possible relationships with romantic and intimate partners (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009). With this definition in mind, the formation of romantic attachments may look differently in this period of the lifespan than in later adulthood.

**Developmental influences of emerging adulthood.** Researchers of attachment view romantic relationships as a normative developmental expectation in emerging adulthood as these relationships, as well as friendships and family relationships, become more central to their own world (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Mayseless & Keren, 2014). Erikson (1968) discussed love as one of the domains in the transition to adulthood in terms of the formation of identity and establishment of intimacy. He also stated that the focus of development in emerging adulthood, following one's identity formation, is establishing intimacy in committed romantic partnerships. The focus of these romantic relationships in emerging adulthood is to explore the potential for emotional and physical intimacy to hopefully form a committed relationship with a romantic partner (Arnett, 2000; Mayseless & Keren, 2014). Furthermore, the establishment of intimacy is directly related to the formation of an independent identity and one's conception of self (Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001). This idea of an independent identity driving the desire to

merge with partner in a romantic relationship gives way to the process of development of a more mature relationship found in emerging adulthood.

Arnett (2000) has done numerous studies on emerging adulthood and has discovered that emerging adults move from casual and superficial relationships toward more intimate relationships, yet the process is not found to be linear or straightforward. Due to the ambiguity of the tasks and processes associated in the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood, one perspective taken is the notion that romantic relationships build on prior relationship experiences as previously discussed (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001).

**Attachment styles in emerging adulthood.** Bartz and Lydon (2004) found that attachment in close relationships, including romantic relationships, is salient to the development of emerging adults' self-concept. Attachment styles in these close relationships were especially important to the development of one's self-concept due to the differing self-perceptions and attachment behaviors that can be triggered when anxiety and avoidance are present in the relationship (Bartz & Lydon, 2004). Mohr et al. (2010) also note that emerging adults' expectations for romantic relationships may be shaped by attachment styles. This provides evidence for the notion that not only are current romantic attachments shaped by attachment style, but future romantic attachments are also influenced by differences in attachment security.

Research on romantic attachments in emerging adulthood is varied and somewhat lacking. This area of research is continuing to grow and expand, although topics within the attachment research during this period of the lifespan are discrepant. Carnelley and Rowe (2007) looked at attachment security and the effects on relationship expectations, self-concept, and attachment dimensions on undergraduate students. These researchers found that attachment security was positively related to all three of these components due to the supportive nature of

the relationship. It appears that attachment style in emerging adulthood has a potentially influential effect on relationship quality and satisfaction. Kane et al. (2007) found that insecurely attached emerging adults were more likely to report that they felt less supported and care for in their relationship by measuring attachment using the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR). This was largely due to perceptions that may be altered based on attachment style (Kane et al., 2007).

Brumbaugh, Baren, and Agishtein (2014) also mentioned attachment security in their study on emerging adults and partner attraction and measured attachment security by using the Experiences of Close Relationships Scale—Revised (ECR—R). These researchers state that people high in attachment security (securely attached individuals) were more highly desirable due to the supportive and positive nature of these emerging adults. Brumbaugh and colleagues defined attachment security as people that are supportive and loving in close relationships. Although emerging adults desire securely attached partners, insecurely attached partners were higher on use of flattery and were more likely to let attractiveness trump attachment security (Brumbaugh et al., 2014). Gender differences were also found in this study in terms of choosing attractiveness over attachment security. Brumbaugh et al. observed male preference for attractiveness over attachment security and vice versa for female preference. Possible explanations for this phenomenon were based on gender differences in attachment styles as well as socialization and evolutionary perspectives.

**Technology use.** Another salient part of romantic attachments during emerging adulthood is the growing use of technology as a part of the formation and maintenance of romantic attachments (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). Emerging adults tend to use social media as a way to announce romantic feelings to the partner or to groups of people and communicate

with the romantic partner. Securely and insecurely attached individuals seem to experience technology (i.e. texting, social media, or other forms of technology) differently and use technology for varying purposes (Reed et al., 2015). Reed and colleagues noted that anxiously attached individuals tend to use social media and other technology more frequently due to the desire to feel close to others and increase intimacy. The opposite is said about avoidantly attached individuals due to the fear of closeness and intimacy.

Technology is also said to enhance mutual self-disclosure and emotional intimacy (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). Greater technology use among emerging adults with their romantic partner was also linked to increased commitment and decreased uncertainty. In the study by Morey and colleagues, they found that frequent communication through different avenues of technology for emerging adults and positive perceptions of the romantic relationship. Cell phones were found to be most important to college students for communicating to their romantic partners (Morey et al., 2013). Overall this study found that different forms of technology use for communication are associated with the romantic attachment and relationship functioning and that the frequency of communication technology use can be dependent upon attachment styles (Morey et al., 2013).

In this review of the literature, it seems that there is little to no existing literature that states that emerging adults experience the formation of romantic attachments differently than those in adulthood. The difference appears to be the experience of technology in romantic relationships and potential influences of identity formation as well as other influential domains that occur during the period of emerging adulthood. Attachment styles appear to have a similar effect on the development of romantic attachments as they do in adulthood. This study will

provide necessary information on experiences of emerging adults in this romantic attachment formation phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

The current literature on the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood is lacking and this study aims to start the journey of exploration into these gaps by answering this main research question: What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments? Literature currently suggests that romantic attachment formation is very diverse in other periods of the lifespan and that individual differences, such as attachment style, can have a major impact on how individuals experience the romantic attachment formation. As a result, it is also important to ask: What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments with varying attachment styles? The current study not only aims at exploring what tasks and processes are associated with the formation of romantic attachments, but also if these tasks and processes are generalizable across individuals.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the experiences of participants in this research study, I employed attachment theory as my theoretical framework to guide each step in this qualitative study. Attachment theory seeks to explain what drives the development of attachments with caregivers in childhood as well as bonds with romantic partners in adolescence, emerging adulthood, and into adulthood (Bowlby, 1969; Zayas & Hazan, 2015). The two research questions for this study are: (a) what are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments? and (b) what are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments with varying attachment styles? Face-to-face interviews with emerging adults were used for this qualitative study. Data analysis included thematic analysis and interpretation to extract the themes that arose in the formation of romantic attachments and understanding of the overall experiences of participants in either heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

### **Design and Rationale**

For this qualitative research study, I investigated the tasks and processes associated in the formation of romantic attachments and explored the experiences of varying attachment styles and genders during emerging adulthood. The methodology for this study included basic qualitative inquiry, which Creswell (1994) defines as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of information, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 1-2). This method produces findings that increase the wealth of knowledge and understanding of a particular topic under study by using the researcher as the instrument (Patton, 2002). In qualitative research, the

researcher is considered the instrument because I developed an interview guide, led the interviews, and led the data analysis portion in the study (Patton, 2002).

## **Procedures**

In an effort to answer the research questions for this study, I conducted face-to-face interviews with emerging adults (targeting those 18-25 years old) and explored how they experience romantic attachment formation. Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the participants, as well as the researcher, to be flexible with the direction of the responses (Siedman, 1998). An interview guide (see Appendix A) was used during the semi-structured interview to assist in gathering salient information for the research study. In addition to following protocols for semi-structured interviews, Hill et al. (2005) suggests creating between 8-10 questions to ensure that there is ample opportunity for prompting and probing during interviews when necessary and so that participants can dive deeper into their experiences for richer data. The semi-structured nature of the interview guide allowed for prompts and probes for further depth of answers to the questions (Siedman, 1998). For example, when a participant referred to a topic that was related to the initial question or my research questions, I asked prompting questions in order to gather more information about this participant's experience in forming romantic attachments with his or her partner. This was beneficial as I uncovered other important tasks and processes involved in the formation of romantic attachments, which may not have been discovered in a structured interview.

The interviews lasted between 25-60 minutes depending on the length of participant responses. The interviews did not last longer than 60 minutes as fatigue for the participants, as well as the researcher, may have led to loss of interest and focus in the study (Seidman, 1998).

Before I began each interview, I informed participants that the approximate length would be 30-90 minutes, and let them know that they may go over or under the estimated time as desired.

**Participant Recruitment.** Participant recruitment occurred in Fort Collins, Colorado at Colorado State University between February and April of 2016. Recruitment took place in Dr. Ashley Harvey's Human Development and Family Studies 100-level course. I made an announcement (Appendix B) in Dr. Harvey's course and then all willing students completed my screening protocol (Appendix C) as an online Qualtrics survey consisting of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) and demographic information about age and gender. A total of 106 students filled out the screening online Qualtrics survey.

This screening protocol was used to identify emerging adults (ages 18-25) and to assess for attachment styles. In order to participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) ages 18-25, (b) attending Colorado State University and, (c) able to read, speak, and write in English. The ECR-S was used for descriptive purposes only, as a way to better understand the sample for this research project and included twelve items measuring attachment anxiety and avoidance in relationships. The ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007) included items surrounding turning to a partner for comfort, getting close to partners, fears about being abandoned or unlovable, and discussing problems with a partner. I reworded the survey in order to capture individuals that may not be in a relationship currently. Students would rate each statement on a scale of 1-7 ranging from 1 being strongly disagree to 7 being strongly agree. To decide the attachment styles, I followed the scoring protocol provided by Wei et al. and identified attachment styles by one standard deviation above or below the mean score. I scored the ECR-S without looking at the student's age, name, and gender. I then made two excel spreadsheets: one



that had Qualtrics ID numbers and ECR-S scores and one that had Qualtrics ID numbers and names of the students in the class. Out of 106 students, 57 were identified as secure, 20 as anxious, 18 as avoidant, six as disorganized, and five students submitted incomplete surveys and could not be scored accurately.

In order to be blind to the attachment styles of the students, I had an undergraduate research assistant pull five random students from the course that fit into the four different attachment styles determined by the ECR-S and I invited these individuals to participate in the study. The research assistant viewed the spreadsheet with Qualtrics ID numbers and ECR-S scores and provided the Qualtrics ID numbers to me and I looked at the spreadsheet with Qualtrics ID numbers and student names. When I had the list of names of students to invite, I looked each one of the students up on the CSU online directory and send them an email with an invitation for participation (Appendix D) and details of my research study. Once I had heard from the students that wanted to participate, I then had the undergraduate research assistant go back through and randomly select six more students from each attachment style to invite to participate and I went through the same process. This sample is a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002), because I selected participants from each attachment style.

**Participants.** Participants for this study included 14 emerging adults ranging in age from 18 – 22 years old. Three emerging adults identified as male and eleven identified as female. Of the 14 participants, half regarded themselves as single and the other half regarded themselves in a relationship. Of those participants in relationships, the length of those relationships ranged from one month to slightly over two years. Eleven emerging adults identified themselves as Caucasian, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as Native American, and one identified as multicultural (African American, Caucasian, and Native American). All fourteen emerging

adults were enrolled in Human Development and Family Studies 101 at Colorado State University and ranged from freshman to seniors with varying majors. When asked about sexual orientation, twelve identified themselves as heterosexuals, one identified as bisexual, and one identified as demisexual (defined by participant as an orientation that requires that he have an emotional bond before he pursues a romantic relationship with a partner). Each participant chose a pseudonym to be used in place of his or her name for confidential purposes in this study. From the ECR-S survey scores, of the 14 participants, eight were identified as secure, four as anxious, one as avoidant, and one as disorganized.

**Face-to-face Interviews.** Interviews were conducted individually on Colorado State University's campus. Participants were given a choice of places to interview (e.g., the Center for Family and Couple Therapy, library, coffee shop, etc.) but all participants chose a private room in the Center for Family and Couple Therapy as the interview site.

Prior to beginning the face-to-face interview, I informed the participant that Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this study. Next, I went over the IRB consent form (Appendix E) with the participant and inform him/her that his/her participation was voluntary and he/she could withdraw from the study at any time. The participant was then able to ask any questions he/she had about the study. Each participant signed the IRB consent form prior to beginning the interview.

After consent, the demographic information was gathered from each participant by answering questions about his/her race and ethnicity, age, year at Colorado State University, gender, relationship status, and sexual orientation, which was a part of the interview guide (see Appendix A). Throughout the beginning of the interviews, I began to establish rapport and trust between the participant and myself during the discussion of the IRB consent form, the

explanation of the study itself, and the collection of demographic information. This, in turn, helped to elicit open and honest responses from the participants (Seidman, 1998).

During each interview I conveyed my listening skills by letting the participant know when I did not understand something that they have said. For example, I said something to the degree of, “Can you tell me again what your experience was like?” (Seidman, 1998). When I wanted to hear the participant elaborate on a certain topic or question I asked, “Could you tell me more about that?” in order to find richer data. In accordance with Seidman, I asked open-ended questions, avoided leading questions, allowed for silence, and spoke minimally. I followed up after participants answered a question instead of interrupting him/her to ask about the information given. At times, I asked for specific and concrete examples or stories to keep the participant focused on the interview process (Seidman, 1998). Seidman also suggests avoiding reinforcing the participants’ answers so that there is no distortion of answers that can possibly take place. I gave responses that indicated that I was listening without affirming that his or her answers were positive or negative to the study. These skills allowed participants to feel comfortable expanding upon their answers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed (by me) and pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions and findings of this research study.

One aspect of validity and reliability, or in qualitative terms- trustworthiness and credibility (Merriam, 1998), is that the research study must reach saturation. I established saturation by determining how long to remain collecting data (i.e., interviewing new participants) to ensure that salient themes and categories were established (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As I interviewed participants, I was keenly aware of the responses from participants and looked for redundancy, or when no new information was generated. At this point, when I had completed 11 interviews and was not hearing new information, I then consulted with my advisors. We had

collaboratively decided for me to continue with the three other scheduled interviews and if I were to find new information, then I would continue with more interviews. After those three interviews, no new information was generated and I stopped collecting data and did not schedule any new interviews, with a final total of 14 interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis portion of the study is grounded in the attachment theoretical framework previously discussed. I consulted the literature before, during, and after data collection. Throughout the data collection and data analysis stages of the current qualitative study, I collaborated with my advisors, Drs. Ashley Harvey and Christine Fruhauf, on forming research questions, participant recruitment, data analysis and coding. Simultaneous data collection and analysis began during the interview process since I was a part of each of the stages of data collection and analysis and these processes are concurrent (Merriam, 1998).

To aid in data analysis I transcribed all interviews shortly after interviews were conducted, as a way to ensure a more accurate transcription of the data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and included nonverbal communication by participants and myself. After transcription was finished, I verified accuracy by listening to the recordings and reading over the transcripts.

After some interviews were conducted and some transcriptions were complete, I began to code the data for prominent themes, tasks, and processes (Merriam, 1998). Saldaña (2009) defines a code as a word or phrase that is given to a “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” (p. 3) that symbolically represents a section of the data. Coding and recoding was done multiple times to ensure that the themes are condensed and carefully coded. These codes link and categorize the data together based on a similar idea or pattern (Saldaña,

2009). Themes are the outcomes that appear after the coding process has occurred and all of the data have been categorized and reflected upon analytically (Saldaña, 2009). Using peer examination (Merriam, 1998) I worked with my advisors to collaboratively code and develop themes from data. After the data analysis was conducted and themes and codes were identified, all transcriptions were kept in a locked file cabinet.

In order to condense the data collected into themes and major tasks and processes, my advisors and I initially read through three randomly selected transcripts while pre-coding or writing down any words, patterns, events, or phrases that arise and seemed to be important (Saldaña, 2009). I began highlighting significant statements or sentences that provided understanding of these phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007) and prepared my first draft of coding categories and themes. This consisted of condensing the statements and sentences deemed important and collapsing them into elements of meaning and broad themes (Creswell et al., 2007).

Intercoder agreement is an important part of peer examination and collaborative coding with my two advisors and myself, which can be defined as the percentage of agreement and consistency in assigning codes to data (Saldaña, 2009). In an effort to establish 100% intercoder agreement, we discussed the coded transcripts until we all agreed on what the data was suggesting. We discussed five transcripts and came to 100% intercoder agreement, so the three of us felt comfortable with me moving forward and coding the rest on my own. I brought questions to my advisors as I coded to ensure intercoder agreement throughout the transcripts. If we could not agree, we would have brought the question to another peer (i.e. either Drs. Rachel Lucas-Thompson or Jennifer Harman) for further scrutiny. At all times, I kept my research questions in mind as well as the theoretical lens for this study.

When my advisors and I agreed upon the first draft of important themes, we then read through the two more randomly chosen transcripts to code the interviews based on the themes indicated on the coding scheme created. This seemed to help in identifying contexts or specific situations where these themes seemed to arise. I continued to make additions and edits from the list of coding categories when new themes arose or existing themes failed to appropriately explain the tasks and processes. This is completed in order to reduce the overlap between codes and to increase the validity and reliability of the final themes, a process known as searching for disconfirming evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I discussed each addition and subtraction from the list with both of my advisors, which resulted in another draft of themes. Saldaña (2009) states that collaborative coding not only makes certain that the study is valid and reliable; it also eliminates areas of potential overlap among themes.

I then coded the remaining interviews using the new coding scheme we had established. This continued until my advisors and I felt confident that we had created a coding scheme that could not be further condensed or expanded upon. When I had a final list of salient themes, I read through all of the transcripts and coded based upon our final coding scheme. Finally, I incorporated the findings of the varied experiences of the participants and reflected on how current literature and theories contribute or contradict the essence discovered (Creswell et al., 2007).

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In order to ensure that this qualitative study is trustworthy and credible, specific measures were used which differed greatly from measures used in quantitative studies. Rather than using scores and other instruments for credibility, this study took careful consideration of views of the people conducting, participating, and reading and reviewing the interviews (Creswell & Miller,

2000). For saturation to occur and for confidence to be reached in the themes that were extracted during data analysis, based on Hill et al. (1997) recommendation, sample sizes of about 8-15 participants are appropriate. Other procedures in place to ensure trustworthiness and credibility in this study were peer examination and intercoder agreement, as previously discussed.

Furthermore, it is also important that I recognize my researcher lens or bias.

**The Role of the Researcher.** It is important for researchers to examine and explain any beliefs or biases they may have in order to allow others to understand their position on a particular study (Hill et al., 2005; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Creswell and Miller go on to explain that when researchers are clear to the reader about any values that may shape their inquiry, the study gains validity. For that reason I discuss my interests, values, and biases that relate to the current study.

In the past year I have been increasingly interested in how people attach to one another as well as how strongly humans need to be supported and cared for in attachment relationships. The more I have learned about childhood attachment formation, the more I want to know about how emerging adults continue to form attachments, especially in the context of romantic relationships. There is evidence to support the notion that a romantic partner takes over the role as primary caregiver as one ages, which makes the partner relationship and bond extremely important to research (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). I started to notice patterns in attachment formation in others and myself and I wondered what has prevented some romantic attachments from strengthening and lasting longer than others.

I recognize that one of my biases that may shape how I perceive attachment formation in emerging adults is the importance I place on monogamous relationships. This bias can potentially influence how I see these individuals forming romantic attachments as I believe, in

order to create a secure attachment in a romantic relationship that the relationship should be between two people. I recognize that I have this bias and how it may impact each aspect of this research study.

As I have researched the formation of romantic attachments, I found that there were gaps in the literature and decided that more knowledge is needed in strengthening the understanding of attachment theory as it applies to emerging adulthood. Literature is lacking specifically in how emerging adults experience the formation of romantic attachments. Since this period of development is a time of transition and exploration, developments in attachments outside of the primary caregiver relationship and peers are open to further discovery (Arnett, 2000). Past experiences and previous knowledge have shaped my own thoughts about how attachment styles may or may not have a role in this formation phenomenon. I believe it is a topic worthwhile to explore for the potential clinical implications important when working with couples in differing stages of romantic attachment formation. As a researcher, I have been as objective as possible during the qualitative research process of exploring romantic attachment formation as a phenomenon. I not only collected data and coded for salient themes, I interpreted the descriptions provided by the participants in order to mediate between different meanings that arose in similar lived experiences (Creswell et al., 2007).

Due to my status as a student in the Marriage and Family Program at Colorado State University, I have learned many therapeutic skills that I consciously had to keep in check during the interviews in my study. I utilized some knowledge from my training in graduate school to my advantage in order to portray that I was actively listening and engaged in the interview. I often struggled with wanting to ask further questions inquiring about the individual's feelings on a certain response as well as normalizing or validating an individual's experience. At times, the



questions during the interviews led to answers that contained sensitive information and it was somewhat difficult to keep a neutral stance. It seemed that my therapeutic presence of non-judgment and active listening skills offered a space for the participants to feel comfortable answering the interview questions. Striking the balance of researcher and therapist was challenging although effective in producing results that will further the research field of romantic attachment formation.

## RESULTS

The current study is based on 14 face-to-face interviews with emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 22 years. The study was designed to implore information about how emerging adults form romantic attachments and provide insight into how emerging adults with varying attachment styles experience this romantic attachment formation as well. As I interviewed, transcribed, coded, and discussed the data, I collaborated with my two advisors Drs. Ashley Harvey and Christine Fruhauf. During this process of data collection and analysis, nine overarching themes were identified to capture the experiences of these emerging adults in romantic attachment formation: (a) relationship beginnings, (b) milestones, turning points, and firsts in relationships, (c) partner attributes, (d) expressions of affection in relationships, (e) development/knowledge about self and relationships, (f) communication within relationships, (g) support and comfort within relationships, (h) relationship conflict and strains, and (i) contextual factors and outside influences on the relationship.

These results are structured in the format of the coding scheme (Appendix F) and allow the reader to understand the tasks and processes in the formation of romantic attachments for emerging adults from each participant's perspective. Each section includes quotations from the interviews in order to increase the reader's knowledge and understanding of each theme and the codes within those themes. To make these quotations easier to read, each "like" or "um" has been removed. Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym in the beginning of the interview in order to protect his or her confidentiality. All of the demographic information collected from the participants is located in Table 1 (Appendix G) for reference during the results section. These results were written without knowledge of each participant's attachment style to

provide unbiased results. Following these initial results, interviews were sorted by attachment style, and I went through the transcripts once again to find the experiences of participants in each theme and coding category to make observations surrounding individual differences in attachment style.

### **Relationship Beginnings**

The interview guide was designed to ascertain the beginning of romantic attachment formation for each participant. This section includes six coding categories that capture the beginning of romantic attachment formation: (a) relationship initiation, (b) types of attraction, (c) speed, (d) views and attitudes, (e) getting to know each other, and (f) relationship boundaries.

**Relationship initiation.** Each of the participants described the initiation of various relationships in a multitude of ways. Seven of the participants acknowledged that he or she had established a friendship before the romantic relationship was initiated. Tom stated, "...we started off as friends," while Terese also mentioned, "And so we became instant friends...we just naturally, about a couple weeks later, we decided we'd start dating." Matthew described the impact of his sexual orientation on his relationship formation. Matthew identified as a demisexual and explained this orientation as the halfway point between sexual and asexual, in which a person must experience a strong emotional connection with someone before entering a relationship. The emotional bond that Matthew requires before entering a romantic relationship is similar to that of a friendship that other participants reported as important in the relationship beginning.

Other participants (n = 4) stated that the initiation of the relationship took place by meeting his or her partner through a mutual friend. Ben said, "Met her through a friend..." and Nicole also said, "...we would meet through mutual friends..." when she was describing

relationships that she had had in the past. Similarly, Elizabeth talked about how she was, "...friends with one of his friends..." and how she "...talked to him [the mutual friend] about who he was as a person..." before initiating the relationship. Meeting through mutual friends seemed to be a similar experience as having a friendship before the relationship began due to the friendship that was present with the mutual friend. This allowed information about the potential romantic partner to be shared before relationship initiation was established.

Other varying relationship initiations that were mentioned by participants were online connections, meeting in person and asking or being asked for a person's phone number, and friends encouraging a romantic relationship. Several participants noted that in the initiation of the relationship, there was an initial feeling of being comfortable with the person. Danielle described the first time that she met her partner as, "...we were just comfortable with each other, we were just talking." Terese said a similar comment about that comfort she felt when she said they just "...went straight into just being so comfortable with each other." The relationship initiation seemed to be an important aspect of the relationship as each participant was able to recall the initiation easily for each relationship in which they were involved.

**Types of attraction.** The interview guide did not specifically ask about attraction to partners, although reasons for attraction naturally came up when participants discussed the beginning portion of the relationship. Six of the participants discussed common interests and/or goals as being a reason for attraction and relationship initiation. Ben describes this type of attraction when he said, "...she had a lot of common interests... she was into working out kinda like I was so that helped a lot." Elizabeth mentioned, "...we started going ice skating together a lot cause he played hockey and I'm a figure skater. So we just found that in common and went a lot and bonded through that." Valerie suggested that this type of attraction was important to her

when she stated, “we both wanna go to college, we both wanna succeed, and we’d help each other...” And Elsa shared, “...I was really interested in that he danced cause I like to dance too.” Terese stated, “we both love outdoor stuff” and talked about how that common interest shaped the things she did with her partner. Sharing a commonality with a partner seemed to be something of importance in the beginning part of some relationships.

Other types of attraction included physical and personality attributes of the partner. A few participants discussed finding their partners “cute” or “pretty” when establishing a connection. Other than those smaller comments about how attractive one’s partner was participants did not often mention physical attraction as a main indicator of relationship formation (n = 9). Personality attributes that were mentioned by participants included humor, intelligence, and intentionality. Participants described their partners in different ways and reasons for attraction varied from relationship to relationship.

**Speed.** When discussing the beginning portion of relationships, participants would sometimes refer to the speed of the formation itself. Ten of the participants that referred to the speed of the relationship made remarks about how they did not rush into the relationship, although others mentioned how quickly the relationship formed. In reference to a past relationship, Tom said that they took the time to get to know one another, “...rather than just rush into something...” Anna expressed the speed of her relationship when she said, “...he told me he loved me like 2 days in...so it all happened pretty quickly.” Elsa also discussed a slower speed to her relationship when she stated, “...we kind of took things slower.” When Nicole talked about a previous relationship, she stated, “I definitely feel like taking it slow is important and not just jumping right in.”

When participants described the speed of past or current relationships, going slower had a more positive connotation. For example, Terese referred positively to the slow speed when she said, “And so we took it really, really, slow which was good.” Similarly, when Elizabeth was asked what she learned from her past relationships, she said, “...take it slow, get to know the person before you actually commit and get attached.” When participants described the relationship as moving quickly, there seemed to be a more negative connotation to the statement overall.

**Views and attitudes.** When discussing the formation of the beginning of a relationship, all 14 participants shared views on what the beginning part of the relationship was like for them and attitudes toward the initiation and development of the first part of the relationship. Many of the attitudes and reactions to relationship formations seemed to be indifferent or apathetic. Valerie expressed her attitude when she said, “...someone asked me out and I was like why not...” Anna described her attitude toward her past relationship when she said:

I wouldn't say forced upon me but my friend was like 'Oh he likes you' and I was like 'Oh that's neat' and then she's like 'He's gonna ask you out' and I was like 'Oh, ok' and he was cute enough so I was like 'Sure, let's do it.'

When other participants would describe the relationship in a more positive light, they viewed the relationship as the “honeymoon phase” or the “puppy love stage” where the beginning is exciting, easy, and fun. Tom stated, “Looking over the whole relationship, the beginning was the best part.” Terese described the beginning as the “initial phase of excitement” that was “exciting and easy.” She continued to talk about the beginning when she said “...you're just so excited just to be with each other even just staring at each other...just a fun time of just captivation by each other...” Ben said, “I enjoy the beginning cause it was just very relaxed...” Overall, participants

recalled fond memories of the beginning of their relationships no matter how they may have ended.

**Getting to know each other.** The code of getting to know each other appeared in each and every interview I conducted. Many times, participants would actually use the phrase “getting to know each other” when they were describing the initial stages of a relationship. This part of the relationship beginning seemed to encompass many different ways that partners would get to know one another including time spent together, things the partners would do together, talking, hanging out, types of contact, and communication throughout the day.

When getting to know each other, several participants (n = 6) said that they had a class with their partner, which helped them spend time with one another. When talking about the class she had with her partner, Tyra said, “...having that class together, that extra time...really helped us know each other more.” Similarly, Anna and Valerie mentioned that they had math or biology class with their partners. It seemed that having a class in common might be a way that the partners would get to know one another in a different context.

Whether the participants shared a class or not, the participants expressed spending some kind of time with their partners in the beginning stage of the relationship. Tom expressed the importance of spending time together when getting to know each other when he stated, “...it seems like there’s a lot more attachment with someone you see in person, someone you see consistently...” Participants tended to use the words “hanging out” or “talking” when in the beginning part of the relationship. Several participants spoke of “talking” as a phase of the relationship, for example, Elsa explained it when she said:

When you’re talking to a guy and you’re constantly texting him like everyday, you’re talking on the phone, and you hang out with them but you don’t have a title. So it’s like you don’t know what you are...but you’re not exclusive.

Elsa also mentioned a variety of subjects that she would talk about with a partner in this phase of talking and getting to know each other:

We would talk and get to know each other and talk about our family and talk about our friends and our goals and our interests and our likes and everything.

The act of “talking” seemed to involve actual talking along with hanging out with the partner and learning more about who they are as a person.

Participants would discuss keeping in constant contact with their partner throughout the day in between being able to spend time with them. All fourteen participants reported that they would text most of the time or all day and would spend an increased amount of time with his or her partner, which often tapered off as time went on in the relationship. Ben said that he and his partner, “talked and texted all the time” and “hung out all the time.” Similarly Hannah mentioned, “...as we started getting closer, we would spend more time with each other...”

Chanel stated that she and her partner would actively plan to see one another because she wanted to see her partner all the time. Others wanted to ease into the increase in time spent together. For example, Nicole stated that she was, “...testing the waters to see if, you know, I might like this person.” The getting to know you aspect of the relationship beginning gave the participants the opportunity to find out more information that would either continue the relationship or prevent one from forming.

Another aspect of getting to know each other and spending an increased amount of time together that participants reported was going on dates or hanging out in a variety of ways.

Different dates or hangouts that were mentioned included going to movies, dinner, hikes, the park, lunch, concerts, coffee shops, ice skating, and going somewhere to sit and talk. The reports



of these activities seemed to occur more frequently in the discussion of the beginning of the relationship.

**Relationship boundaries.** When discussing the beginning part of the relationship formation, many participants reported setting or having boundaries in the relationship. When discussing relationship boundaries, Tyra expressed, “I think it’s really important because then you know what your boundaries are, what you like to do, what you’re ok with telling people what you want to do or you don’t want to do.” She also said, “...you can set those boundaries in case someone else isn’t ok with them.” Participants expressed different types of boundaries including being in an exclusive relationship and different parameters around various types of relationships. Tom described some of his past relationships as “purely carnal” rather than for romantic relationship purposes. Matthew described that a “fling” type of relationship meant that it was “generally short-lived” and “highly physical” kind of relationship. At times, participants described relationships with ambiguous boundaries as well as relationships with the absence of boundaries. Danielle described her perspective on “things,” which were relationships with ambiguous boundaries. She said that these “things” were “inconsistent and unclear” and typically had a lot of flirting involved without exclusivity.

Twelve participants expressed that the relationships they entered were exclusive. Each participant said that once he or she declared the relationship as exclusive, he or she would discontinue pursuing other relationships and the relationship involved the participant and the chosen partner only. For example, Elsa said that she had been talking to other potential partners when her boyfriend asked her to be exclusive and that she broke contact with the other partners to be in an exclusive relationship with her boyfriend. Many times, participants were confused when asked the question of how they decided to become exclusive in his or her relationship

because the conversation was not brought up. Danielle describes the absence of a discussion about exclusivity when she said, "... I haven't had that conversation with him because there's no need to." It seemed as though in some of the relationships, exclusivity was assumed by partners at some point in the beginning of the relationship.

### **Milestones, Turning Points, and Firsts in Relationships**

The interview guide specifically asked about milestones and turning points in participants' relationships and four coding categories emerged. The categories that describe different milestones, turning points, and firsts in relationships include: (a) firsts, (b) important events, (c) introduction to important people, and (d) commitment.

**"Firsts" in relationships.** When asked about what important milestones and turning points, participants reflected on points in relationships that were experienced for the first time with their partner. Some of these firsts were reported as experienced for the first time in general, while others were experienced in multiple relationships for the first time with specific partners. For example, Anna stated that she and a past boyfriend had lost their virginities together, which would be a first in general for both partners. Participants (n = 4) also reported that losing their virginity was an important first in romantic relationships.

First sexual experiences with a partner regardless of previous sexual experiences with other partners were also mentioned as an important first in a relationship. When asked about important milestones or turning points, Chanel stated, "...when we had sex for the first time everything took a turn for the best." Participants (n = 5) also reported a first kiss and first love as salient firsts in past or current romantic relationships. The importance of events occurring for the first time may be due to newness, which creates that excitement described in the previous coding category of views and attitudes under relationship beginnings.

**Important events.** Participants mentioned several different types of important events when discussing milestones and turning points in relationships. Events seemed to be somewhat easy for participants to recall when asked about important times in the formation of a relationship. Hannah discussed the separation from her boyfriend as an important event for their relationship when she said, “I’d say summer was a turning point for us just because we kind of learned that we can handle being apart for a long time but still not lose contact with each other.”

Important events that were also discussed by participants included anniversaries and holidays spent together. Nicole expressed, “...anniversaries would be, I don’t know, a good milestone to see ‘Oh we’ve been together for x amount of months.’” These events seemed to track the progress or formation of the romantic relationship. Participants tended to express the importance of larger anniversaries, such as 6 months or a year rather than each month of the relationship. Alongside anniversaries and holidays, another important event that was mentioned by Terese was traveling together. She discussed:

I think just traveling together is a huge learning experience cause you get to see each other, you know, without sleep, without food, without having showered...you see each other for real.

It seems as though these events that were described as milestones or turning points in relationships involved learning more about one another or the relationship as well as documenting time that has passed in the relationship.

**Introduction to important people.** One milestone or turning point that ten participants reported to be important was introduction of their partner to people that are close to them including friends and family members. When asked about what milestones and turning points are important and what they represent in a relationship, Nicole stated, “...meeting my parents and my family is really important cause then they know who I’m with all the time and...how happy I

am.” Elizabeth also spoke about this coding category when she reported, “...introduce him to you parents, I think that’s a pretty big deal...meeting his family, that’s really nerve-racking but a good step.” Not many of the participants talked about meeting his or her partner’s parents but introduction to his or her own family was deemed an important step in the relationship.

**Commitment.** A variety of milestones and turning points were expressed in the interviews that increased the commitment in his or her relationship. These points of the relationship were described as important to the continuation of the relationship as well as increasing seriousness between partners. A few participants described becoming exclusive in the relationship as a milestone that influenced the intentions of the relationship. When asked about milestones and turning points, Hannah responded, “...that first day that he asked me to officially be his girlfriend was obviously a turning point cause then we were officially together.”

On the opposite side of this coding category, four participants described how the hesitancy to be exclusive or the absence of exclusivity in the relationship influenced the commitment and seriousness of the relationship. Chanel described several relationships she had in the past where partners were not looking for an exclusive relationship, which prevented the commitment from increasing in relationships together. This will be discussed further in the coding category of things that prevented or ended a relationship.

Other milestones and turning points that increased commitment and propelled the formation of the relationship were sexual experiences, overcoming obstacles, increased time, and increased seriousness. Sexual experiences were previously mentioned in this theme when referring to firsts in the relationship but are also included in this section. Tyra reported overcoming the obstacle in her relationship of outside opinions on the age difference between she and her boyfriend as something that was an important milestone. The getting to know each

other coding category is also captured in commitment milestones and turning points when participants discussed spending more and more time together and increasing the seriousness of dates and introduction to important people. Many of these milestones and turning points overlap into this commitment section as these events show that the relationship continues to form and become more of a committed relationship.

### **Partner Attributes**

The partner attributes theme emerged throughout the interviews although the interview guide was not structured to discover information about partners in particular. Participants tended to give these two coding categories as descriptions when referring to his or her partner: (a) physical attributes, and (b) personality and behaviors of partner.

**Physical attributes.** Five participants described different physical attributes when referring to his or her partner. Valerie described her boyfriend as, "...the tallest guy in our class" and said that he had, "a model's body six-pack." Danielle described a past partner as tall and blonde while Ben described his past partner as pretty. To some participants, physical attraction was more important than others. For example, Tyra expressed that physical attributes were not as important as personality characteristics when she stated, "it wasn't like he was the most attractive person out there but he could make me laugh." Overall descriptions of partner's physical attributes did not go much further than a short mention of something they had noticed in the first meeting or recollection of the relationship, although the coding category did still seem important in the attraction of the participant to his or her partner.

**Personality and behaviors of partner.** Twelve participants described their partners in both personality characteristics and behaviors most often when mentioning partners in the interviews. The multitude of positive personality characteristics that were used to describe

partners included smart or intelligent, nice, sweet, very touchy person, shy, gentlemanlike, selfless, patient, funny, among others. Participants tended to reveal these descriptions of their partners when they were describing an ongoing relationship, although positive personality characteristics were sometimes mentioned about past relationships. Some descriptions of partner's personalities tended to be on the negative side. For example, Matthew depicted a partner when he expressed, "...she's very bad at talking about herself," and "relatively emotionally reserved." Elsa also described a past partner as jealous and possessive, which eventually led to the end of that relationship. The more negative personality descriptions seemed to contribute to the prevention or termination of the relationship in some way.

Behaviors of partners were reported quite often in the interviews in different parts of the formation of romantic relationships. These behaviors also contributed to the progression or termination of the relationship in different ways. Valerie talked about the importance of her partner's attentiveness in the beginning and how, over time, he became less attentive to her in the relationship. Another example of the importance of partner behaviors during the relationship was in Terese's account of her current boyfriend's intentionality in pursuing and continuing the romantic relationship. She mentioned, "...it was easy for me to be intentional with him just because I saw the intentionality that he put forth first." Hannah described a positive behavior of her partner that she appreciated when she said, "...he allowed me to be a person that I wanted to be without any restrictions." On the other hand, Ben described his past girlfriend as being too clingy and wanting to spend all of her time with him, which eventually led Ben to break the relationship off. This coding category had such a wide range of behaviors of participant's partners that it is difficult to capture fully, however, the examples given encompass the general feel of the descriptions.

## **Expressions of Affection in Relationships**

This theme involves the romantic and affectionate aspects that set these relationships apart from friendships and other relationships in the participant's lives. This theme incorporates different expressions of affection including: (a) physical affection, (b) giving gifts, and (c) other.

**Physical affection.** Ten participants described experiencing some type of physical affection in the formation of his or her romantic relationship. Physical affection meant different things to different participants including sexual experiences with a partner, kissing, holding hands, and cuddling. These physical expressions of care and fondness were reported as important across the relationship formation. Terese explained her view of physical affection when she said, "...kissing and hand holding and hugging is a huge part...physical affection is one of our love languages... it makes you feel set apart." Similarly, Tom expressed his experience with physical affection when he explained that he had finally expressed his feelings to a friend of his and then they began to express those feelings physically. Participants did not explicitly describe the physical affection as increasing as the relationship progressed but it seemed as though showing physical affection increased as the formation of the relationship progressed. The physical affection for one another also appeared to be tied to an increase in intimacy and commitment in the relationship.

**Giving Gifts.** One other major expression of affection shared by participants was the giving of gifts reported by four participants. These gifts were mentioned in the beginning of the relationship initially, but also came about in different ways as the relationship progressed. In the beginning of his relationship, Tom expressed that he would share a "meaningful gesture" such as a romantic letter or poem and described that in times of stress he would begin to do the meaningful gestures once again. Other participants explained different gifts such as sentimental

birthday gifts, flowers, and random surprises. Gifts were shared for the purpose of expressing a participant's feelings for his or her partner no matter the timing of the relationship.

**Other.** The last coding category in the expressions of affection theme combines all other avenues of sharing love and fondness with a partner. Six participants mentioned different ways that they would show affection such as showing appreciation, prioritizing, and encouraging his or her partner. These expressions of affection showed the partner that he or she was important to the participant and that the relationship was intended to be romantic in nature. Tyra talked about how her boyfriend was very encouraging of her when she decided to move away for college and has stayed encouraging as she moved back when transferring to Colorado State University. She also discussed how her partner showed appreciation for her by thanking her for some of the things she would do for him.

### **Development/Knowledge About Self and Relationships**

One of the themes that emerged from the questions around what the participants learned from past current relationships is the development or knowledge about self and relationships and includes: (a) knowledge and awareness about myself, (b) what I learned about relationships, and (c) independence versus dependence. Each of these coding categories encompasses wants and needs in the relationship based on experiences in romantic relationships.

**Knowledge and awareness about myself.** The interview guide was designed to capture what participants have learned about themselves in the formation of relationships as they have experienced them. One major coding category that emerged was the personal knowledge and awareness that the participants gained. Each participant mentioned at least one thing that he or she has learned about him or herself during relationships. Often times these reports included



different wants and needs in a partner or relationship or the development of understanding about him or herself in relationships.

A few participants reported that after experiencing a romantic relationship, they know what to look for and what not to look for in a partner. This increase in knowledge about what kind of partner they desire seemed to be helpful in identifying whether relationships would continue or cease to form. Some participants expressed that they need someone to be there to support them emotionally while others described a need to be given personal space from their partner. Participants reported a wide range of needs and wants in their relationships and tended to base these reports of needs and wants being met or unmet in past relationships. If a participant experienced something that he or she liked in a relationship, it was expressed that he or she would want that in the future and vice versa for needs or wants that the participant did not experience. For example, Elsa had talked about a previous partner being jealous and possessive and mentioned, “Since I dated him I’ve realized I didn’t want to have a boyfriend that was really jealous and really possessive.”

Some participants reported that they attached to people too easily, while others mentioned that it took them a longer time to become attached to their partner. There seemed to be a similar duality when participants discussed dependency in their relationship. This coding category overlaps with the independence versus dependence category as well. Valerie reported, “I don’t like having people dependent on me...I don’t like being dependent on anybody.” The knowledge that Valerie gained about her view of dependency aids in the formation of her relationships. The intention behind reports about attachment and dependency awareness tended to be for protection purposes of not getting hurt in relationships. If a participant decided not to

get attached too quickly or did not become dependent on a partner, they were less likely to be hurt.

After her first relationship ended, Anna reflected on what she had learned about herself that will influence future relationship formations. She expressed, “I’m more cautious about meeting people and getting to know people.” Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments of taking current or future relationships more slowly because they have realized that they may be closed off at first and need time to get to know a potential partner before pursuing the relationship exclusively. Tyra expressed a different side of something she learned about herself when she said, “I am a lot more comfortable with myself. I feel more knowledgeable about who I am now.” She went on to explain that this new comfort and knowledge about who she is contributed to the formation of her current relationship. Knowing her boundaries and accepting herself for who she is were mentioned as avenues that strengthened her relationship formation as well.

A variety of other types of awareness were revealed through these interviews. Some participants mentioned that they have trust issues, that they have high standards for a partner, or exhibit clingy behaviors in a relationship. Rachel discussed that she learned how she presented herself in past relationship beginnings was to please the partner she was with, whereas with her current boyfriend she said that she was able to be herself. The insightful knowledge and awareness that participants would report tended to be revealed when the three blurbs were read at the end of the interview, although some insights were discussed throughout the interview.

**What I learned about relationships.** Not only did participants report what they learned about themselves, they also mentioned what they learned about relationships in general. Whether participants were involved in full-fledged romantic relationships or what participants called

“flings” or “things,” all participants expressed what they learned from different types of relationships. Ben discussed how he has learned that relationship information is based off of a case-by-case basis:

You really have to feel it out cause everybody views it kind of differently. Like some people like to start dating after a week or as soon as they think its going okay and then some people need to wait a couple of months before they start dating.

Looking back on a past relationship, Elizabeth noted that she felt that she had said that she loved her partner too soon in the relationship. She said that she realized that she said it at the time because she thought she felt it, but she has learned since then that she may wait longer in her current relationship to say it based on that experience. Rachel expressed that she learned about happiness in relationships when she stated, “I thought the partner would be the source of all happiness...the other person only makes you happier...you have to kinda rely on yourself to be happy.” Through her past relationships, Rachel grew to understand that partners contribute to happiness but do not provide it.

Other participants had mentioned that they learned how to be in a relationship when they experienced their first relationship and for some participants that were interviewed, their current relationship is their first. Hannah explained, “I’ve never experienced anything like this before so I have nothing to compare it to.” For those participants in similar situations to Hannah, it seemed that they were constantly learning as they were progressing into the relationship. Terese explained that she has learned that the purpose of her relationship is to discern marriage while other participants have learned the difference between an exclusive, committed relationship and “flings” or “things.” Learning about what relationships entail and what the purpose and intentionality is behind the relationship is something that was reported by some participants.

**Independence versus dependence.** The independence versus dependence coding category has the aspect of dependency in a relationship as well as the factors of how partners would navigate separateness and togetherness in their relationship. Six participants talked about how they felt more comfortable having a partner depend on them compared to being dependent on a partner. None of the participants reported being more comfortable depending on their partner but some did mention that they did not mind being somewhat dependent. Since the participants were identified to have a variety of romantic attachment styles, the view of dependency does not seem to be reliant on romantic attachment styles, which may look different in the parent-child attachment although this study did not measure it. Dependency in romantic attachments did not seem dependent upon length of relationship or age of the participants either.

The second part of this coding category is the separateness and togetherness of the partners. Eight participants reported desiring personal space, time away from their partner, or time to spend with their friends. Ben discussed his past relationship struggle with separateness and togetherness when he said, “She wanted to hang out every single day...but I also want to go out with my friends...that was the biggest issue.” Like Ben, participants discussed wanting time away from their partner as the relationship progressed. Almost all participants expressed that especially in the beginning of their relationship, they wanted to spend a majority of their time with their partner as they were getting to know them and it was the exciting part of the formation of the relationship. On the other hand, Rachel noted that she does not desire to spend time away from her partner so they spend all of their free time with one another. Participants varied on how they decided to spend time together and time apart and many participants mentioned that outside influences often dictated when they would spend time apart.

## **Communication Within Relationships**

Relationships naturally include different aspects of communication between partners at every point. Communication was specifically asked about in the interview guide in order to learn more about the ways that partners stay connected. This coding category captures three sub-themes of communication, which include: (a) what we talk about, (b) how we stay in touch, and (c) types of communication.

**What we talk about.** When discussing communication in relationships, participants mentioned what they would talk about with their partner. Often times the aspects of communication that participants reported in this coding category were different types of stressors, mutual disclosures, or vulnerabilities including fears and insecurities. Anna reported in the interview that she would tell her partner “basically everything” and specifically mentioned telling him everything about her day. Tyra expressed the mutual disclosure of fears with her partner when she was moving away and they knew they would be doing a long distance relationship. She said that they both had the fear that the other partner would find someone better to be with when they were apart. Furthermore, Tyra also gave an example of another mutual disclosure when she shared, “I just kind of started talking about my dad and everything...and then he started talking about things in his life that were hard to talk about.” Mutual disclosures between partners seemed to strengthen the comfort in communicating within the relationship.

More often, participants described scenarios of sharing vulnerabilities or stressors with their partners. For example, Danielle revealed to her partner some information about her experience in a past relationship when she said, “I told him that...the last guy I was with used me.” She also talked about how she and her partner sat down to check in with one another about any feedback they had for one another about the progression of the relationship. She goes on to

talk about how she and her boyfriend would ask clarification questions of things that they had said to one another and would inquire about what they are feeling about the relationship. Similarly, Chanel mentioned that she and a past partner would talk about the tough times they were experiencing in their relationship and were very open with one another. Each of these situations were around communication about the relationship as well as vulnerabilities from each partner. Other topics included work, school, family, and friend stressors that the participants would share with their partners when they were having a tough time.

**How we stay in touch.** Regardless of where participants were in the formation of their romantic relationship with their partner, each participant reported at least one or two of the same avenues of contact from a small group of examples given. Every participant mentioned using their cell phone to keep in contact with his or her partner throughout the days and weeks. The most commonly reported avenue of contact used was texting back and forth with a partner throughout the day. This communication would mostly occur during free time that the participant had although a couple of participants reported texting their partner during class or other moments where calling would not be an option. The next most commonly reported avenues were phone calls and FaceTiming with the partner. Some participants described talking on the phone or FaceTiming as something they enjoyed, while others expressed discomfort in using those ways of communication. The last technologies reported by participants used for communication were Skype and the occasional use of social media such as Facebook. Some participants reported using a mixture of communication while others mostly used texting to stay in touch.

Many participants mentioned staying in touch throughout the day and when asked about why that constant communication was important, Danielle stated, "...it lets me know what he's doing, it lets me know that I'm still kind of in his consciousness." This coding category

incorporated a sense of importance in knowing that a partner is available at anytime without actually being physically present for support. Texting allowed participants to continue living life while also being able to stay in contact with their partner. Four participants said that they would prefer contact in person rather than over the phone or other technologies but would use texting if they couldn't spend time together.

**Types of communication.** Not only did participants discuss what they talked about and how they stay in touch, they also described the type of communication with their partner. A variety of words were used to describe the communication in the various relationships discussed in these interviews. These descriptors ranged from positive to more negative descriptors. When discussing positive communication between partners, participants tended to use the words “open” or “honest” or “clear.” When participants were describing current relationships, they tended to use these words more often as they had a more positive view on the relationship than on past relationships. For example, Danielle discussed her communication with her current boyfriend and stated, “...he’s always very open...he’s very open with how he’s feeling and that actually really helps.” Participants that described communication in this light tended to talk about feelings and thoughts about the relationship together.

Participants would often talk about how the communication was mutual or reciprocated in full-fledged romantic relationships, whereas with the nonexclusive “flings” or “things” the communication was neither or completely absent. Matthew described a couple of “flings” that he was involved with that he did not ever have that communication. He mentioned, “I honestly don’t really know what she was thinking cause she never really told me.” Matthew was not the only participant that described the lack of or one-sidedness of communication with past “flings.” Chanel also described a past nonexclusive relationship and said that she did not ever want to ask

about exclusivity but she also did not want to reveal her feelings. The communication seemed to be a vulnerable thing that kept the relationship boundaries unclear.

At times, participants would express more negative descriptors when talking about communication with past partners. At times, the absence of communication was the negative part of the communication, while other times it was just a referring to the communication as not good or not healthy. Valerie described a situation where she found out that her boyfriend had been talking with an ex-girlfriend of his so the communication between her and her partner was either absent or untruthful. Communication was mostly spoken about when the partners felt like it was a positive experience and would allude to communication issues when the experience was negative.

### **Support and Comfort Within Relationships**

During the interviews, support and comfort were both explicitly talked about and implied in interactions reported between participants and their partners in the formation of romantic relationships. The interview guide specifically targeted whether partners felt supported or comforted in the formation of the romantic relationship. The explicit and implicit expressions of support and comfort within relationships can be broken down into four coding categories: (a) intimacy, (b) increased comfort and support, (c) turning to my partner, and (d) responsiveness and attentiveness from partner.

**Intimacy.** The interview guide did not originally ask about intimacy within relationships although participants naturally brought up intimacy so a question about the role of intimacy in relationships was added. When asked this question about intimacy, participants would refer to emotional, physical, or both types of intimacy. Participants would bring up intimacy in any form when talking about the later stages of the formation of romantic relationships. Intimacy was



referred to when talking about a type of connection that the partners shared, when partners would talk deeper conversations, and when they were referring so sexual experiences. Valerie discussed the importance of intimacy when she said, "...if you don't have intimacy you don't really have that really deep connection." Hannah shared in the sentiment of the importance of intimacy when she said that having intimacy is important because it's what makes up a relationship.

Physical intimacy was almost always referred to as the act of having sex and Elizabeth explained how physical and emotional intimacy tie together when she recited what her grandmother told her:

One of my grandmas said if you feel comfortable enough to be emotionally naked with them [the partner], you can be physically naked with them. So I feel like that's a good way to look at it.

Elsa described her relationship as intimate and shared that physical intimacy allowed her to see, "the most intimate part and...our weakest part." This statement describes the vulnerability that partners shared when experiencing emotional and/or physical intimacy.

**Increased comfort and support.** Participants did not only report comfort and support, but they were reported to increase as the formation of the romantic relationship continued. When comfort and support were decreasing, it meant that the relationship was no longer developing and then ended. Thirteen participants discussed the increase of comfort and support both explicitly and implicitly when discussing many aspects of the relationship. Participants conveyed the feeling of support and comfort during the description of communication with the partner as well as being vulnerable in intimate moments, among others. Some participants would discuss increased comfort and support when they would discuss getting to know their partner. As time progressed and partners grew to know one another better and became more comfortable as a result. On the other hand, it was also reported that part of the attraction to one another in the

beginning of the relationship was feeling comfortable in the first few interactions together. For example, Danielle discussed her first meeting with her partner which was at a mutual friend's SuperBowl party and she said, "we just clicked...we were just comfortable with each other."

Another piece of this coding category is the idea of support that is given from partners in a relationship. Terese explained that as time went on and she became more comfortable with her partner, she was able to trust him more fully and he started to know how to support her in the ways she needed. Similarly, Tyra talked about the support she felt from her boyfriend through his excitement for her when she had decided to move away for college and felt nervous. Furthermore, Hannah explained that she felt support from her partner when he allowed her the space to figure out who she is as a person while in the relationship. Support was not specifically described as any gestures in particular although support was brought up alongside comfort in the interviews.

**Turning to my partner.** Comfort, support, and intimacy all seemed to be tied to how partners feel about turning to their partner in times of need. When participants described their relationship as feeling comfortable, supportive, and intimate they tended to report that they feel that they could turn to their partner for anything they were experiencing. As comfort and support increased in the relationship, turning to his or her partner for support became easier and more apt to happen. Terese talked about her experience turning to her partner when she said, "...he's always been there...to reassure me and let me talk things out...it was natural to turn to one another." Having good experiences turning to a partner for support helped to increase that comfort and intimacy in the relationship.

At times, participants would describe scenarios of not receiving support or comfort when they turned to a partner in a time of need. Not feeling supported or comforted by a partner is one

of the reasons that participants reported that prevented or ended the relationship. If the participant perceived that the partner was not there for them when they needed them, the formation of the relationship was hindered or altered in some way. For example, Tom described a time when he failed to support and comfort his partner in the way that she needed. He said that that particular incident is what eventually ended their relationship. Being able to turn to your partner was a strong influence on the formation of romantic relationships.

**Responsiveness and attentiveness from partner.** Turning to one's partner is closely tied to the responsiveness and attentiveness from the partner when discussing comfort and support. The response from a participant's partner is what drove the participants to either turn to their partner for comfort or to decide not to turn to them. If partners were responsive and attentive, participants tended to feel even more comfortable leaning on them for support in the future. For example, Hannah explained that she remembers the first time she turned to her partner, he responded well to her disclosure of feelings for him. She expressed that this led her not to hesitate to turn to him in subsequent situations. Terese also discussed turning to her partner for comfort and being met with a supportive and attentive response when she said, "...he was so understanding and compassionate...he was always reassuring." One aspect of the responsiveness and attentiveness from the participant's partner was consistency. When partners were consistently supportive in responses and attentive to needs, participants grew closer to their partner and felt more comfortable turning to them because they knew their needs would be met with a caring response.

Not all participants discussed having a responsive and attentive partner. Hannah expressed that a past partner of hers was not able to respond to her in a supportive way when she said, "...he didn't really know what to do...he wasn't really a person to go to for comfort...he

didn't really care." When asked to recall a specific memory of when he turned to his partner for comfort, Ben reported that he does not think he ever did and he did not need to because he can handle issues on his own. Not having a partner that would attend to the needs and wants of the participant led to the relationship not feeling comfortable or supportive.

### **Relationship Conflict and Strains**

Participants not only reported the positive pieces of relationship formation, but also mentioned different conflicts or strains on their relationships. Each relationship had different experiences with conflicts and four main coding categories emerged: (a) conflict management, (b) conflict development, (c) types of stressors, and (d) things that prevented or ended the relationship.

**Conflict management.** To hear more about how participants handled conflicts with their partners over the course of their relationship, the interview guide asked a question specifically around conflict management. In this part of the interview, participants would often go into different conflict styles that they encountered. Valerie described having an opposing conflict style from her past partner as she talked about how her partner would avoid conflicts when she would try to confront them. This led to issues working through the problems they experienced in their relationship. Other times participants would describe how they would work through stressors and conflicts during their relationship by talking through the issue and apologizing then necessary. Elsa talked about how she explained to her partner some of her boundaries around partying and he did not agree with them at first so she told him, "...we have to both compromise." The way that partners managed conflicts together showed the strength of the relationship formation.

**Conflict development.** Participants discussed the development of conflicts over the course of their romantic relationships. The way that partners handled conflicts seemed to stay the same over the course of the relationship and sometimes participants reported feeling that they were better at addressing issues as the relationship developed. Eight participants reported not experiencing conflicts until farther into the formation of the relationship. These participants discussed not having issues in the excitement phase of the relationship because they were getting to know each other and were not fully comfortable disagreeing on anything. Tyra expressed, “In the beginning we really didn’t fight because we were together so much that it was like we didn’t have any of the problems we have now.” Terese also discussed her experience when she said:

I don’t think there was much conflict at one month...in the beginning it was more of just focusing on the goods...the whole love is blind thing it’s totally a thing...I don’t think there even was fighting in the first month.

It seemed as though when participants became more comfortable with partners, they experienced more conflicts because they would know each other more and therefore be able to disagree more often.

**Types of stressors.** When participants would discuss conflict development and management, they would also sometimes describe the stressors that caused the conflict. These stressors ranged from family issues to distress from separation to individual issues of themselves or the partner. Different stressors that participants reported did not always cause conflict in the relationship but somehow impacted or influenced the formation of the romantic relationship. Anna described a stressor that greatly impacted her relationship with a past partner. She talked about how her previous partner experienced severe suicidal thoughts and would often act upon those thoughts when he was with her or over the phone. Anna described how she felt that she couldn’t turn to him as the relationship developed because it would trigger those thoughts.

A stressor on Tyra's relationship was the separation they experienced when she moved away for a semester of college in Hawaii. She discussed that the 4 hour time difference created more arguments and said, "...even being a little distance away, we still argue more than when we were going to school together." Although Tyra and her boyfriend are just a few hours away from one another now, separation distress still creates conflicts at times. Other stressors that came up several times in the interviews were different forms of family stress. Tom explained his experience with family and friend stressors on his relationship when he said:

Her mom had recently had a kind of crisis...as well as she had stress with one of her best friends...so the addition of stress was released on our relationship...that's where she put it...and I think I did the same thing with stress in my life.

Dysfunctional family interactions, having conflicts with family members, and past family experiences were some of the stressors that participants would turn to their partners for whether the stressor had been past or present.

**Things that prevented or ended the relationship.** There were two aspects to the termination of the development of a romantic relationship. Some relationships were not ever really formed and a stressor or conflict prevented the relationship from continuing while others were identified as full-fledged romantic relationships and would experience an issue that would end said relationship. Some of these things that prevented or ended relationships have been previously mentioned, such as undesirable partner attributes or behaviors, the lack of a supportive and attentive partner and certain stressors or conflicts. Seven participants said that they experienced the prevention or termination of a relationship because it just did not work out or communication just stopped. They did not specify in the reason for these instances of ending the relationship.

Four participants mentioned experiencing a partner being unfaithful in the relationship or another kind of betrayal of trust as a reason that the relationship ended. Valerie discussed finding out about how her partner was cheating on her with his ex-girlfriend and she ended the relationship publicly. Differences in religion and ideology were mentioned as the prevention of the development of Matthew's fling. Matthew expressed that he did not have any issues with the difference but his partner expressed distress around the discrepancy. Things that ended the relationship were dependent upon the specific relationship and it is difficult to completely generalize. One last issue that ended the relationship that Ben described was the difference in views on the relationship. Ben described that he had talked to his previous partner about needing more time away because he felt she was too clingy. He said, "I talked to her about it...she did the same exact thing and then eventually I was like I can't do this anymore." Ben expressed that he had talked to his partner about a need in the relationship and she was not responsive or attentive to that need, which led to him ending the relationship.

### **Contextual Factors and Outside Influences on Relationship**

The last theme that came about throughout the different interviews incorporates the contexts and influences on the relationship. Friends and family seem to have large influences on relationships, as emerging adults tend to turn to these people in their lives for support and advice. This last theme is broad and wide-ranging to cover these five coding categories: (a) friend influences, (b) contextual factors, (c) gender and sexual orientation influence, (d) family dynamics/stressors, and (e) family opinion.

**Friend influences.** The influence of friends on the formation of relationships was continually brought up in the interviews. Nine participants reported friends as a major support when experiencing conflicts with his or her partner. Hannah explained how she leaned on friends

for support when she said, "...when I'm having a problem with my relationship and I need an outside perspective...I've called upon her multiple times." Terese also talked about how having female friends to support her helped her relationship with her partner because he wasn't able to understand some of the stressors she experienced like a friend could.

Other friend influences that participants reported were friend's opinions of the relationship that may influence whether participants would tell their friends about aspects of the relationship, time spent with friends and not with the partner, and losing friends when forming a romantic relationship. Anna stated that she met her partner online in an unconventional way and did not want to tell her friends about the relationship until the relationship had progressed to the first in person meeting for fear of what her friends might say. As discussed in the independence vs. dependence coding category, time spent with friends was an important factor for some participants. This time invested in friendships would influence the time spent with the participant's partner and therefore impacted the relationship formation. Some participants felt strongly about spending time with friends although Rachel was the exception to this desire. She discussed how she tries to prioritize friends when she is in a relationship but when the relationship formation takes place, she doesn't want that prioritization anymore.

**Contextual factors.** The contextual factors that were reported by participants ranged widely but I will discuss some of the major ones that seemed to have a stronger impact on the relationship formation. Three participants reported some type of age difference between the partner and him or herself. Elsa reported a larger age gap of 8 years and discussed that she is currently in emerging adulthood and her partner has already been through that point in his life. She stated:



He knows I'm in that stage...emerging adulthood and he's already been through it so...we've talked about it and he kind of just lets me do me and is there to help me out.

A few participants talked about living in a small town influenced their relationship because of the activities that were offered and how they would choose to spend time with one another. This may have also limited the choices of potential partners although participants did not discuss that as being impactful.

The variety of other contextual factors that were reported were differences in culture, work schedules affecting time spent together, religious differences, and long-distance relationships. All of these contextual factors played some role in limiting time spent together or preventing or ending the relationship. These last contextual factors listed often put restrictions on the relationship rather than opening up opportunities for continuing the development of the relationship.

**Gender and sexual orientation influence.** The interview guide asked about how participants believe their gender has impacted their relationship formation and some sexual orientation influences came through in the responses. As previously discussed, Matthew identified as a demisexual and explained the influence his sexual orientation and gender expression has impacted relationship formation. He stated, "I have to kind of develop something first and...I frankly just kind of get a friend label." Matthew later said, "...a lot of people mistake me as being gay and I'm not...I think people get the impression that I can be their gay best friend...I just act somewhat effeminately." Tom also discussed how his bisexuality influenced the formation of relationships. He talked about how same sex relationships were much harder to form based on the more secretive nature compared to heterosexual relationships in which he had been involved.

When asked about how gender impacts relationship formation, nine participants explicitly and implicitly discussed stereotypes of males and females and whether or not they fit those stereotypes. Participants discussed how females are seen as more emotional and passive in relationships while males are seen as less emotional, protective of females, and are usually the initiators of the beginning of the relationship. Danielle spoke to these stereotypes when she said:

I identify as female and very strongly so...almost in the stereotypical sense...I'm looking for very masculine characteristics...I think because I identify as being very gentle and very soft spoken and very, I guess, just easy going and compliant...I look for someone that sort of balances me out.

Both gender and sexual orientation impact the process of forming romantic relationships whether it helps or hinders that development.

**Family dynamics/stressors.** This coding category has been discussed throughout different themes and subthemes already although it still stands alone as an outside influence and contextual factor. Participants reported different aspects of family including what type of relationship they have with their family and stressors including illness of a family member or family dysfunction of some kind. Eight participants reported that they would turn to a family member in a stressful time before or alongside their partner. Elizabeth mentioned that she has had difficulties in her relationship with her family, "...my family life hasn't really been constant so with them [a partner] getting involved...I have to really trust them." She expressed that she also lived with her aunt and uncle for a while and her partner did not quite understand what it was like not to live with his or her own parents.

Stressors involving family members in some way tended to have an influence on the relationship around receiving support. Valerie discussed how multiple family members falling ill influenced her relationship with her past partner. She mentioned, "It was honestly nice cause I actually had somebody there that knew what was going on...so that was really a comforting

thing.” Valerie went on to talk about how when another family member was sick, her partner did not show the same attentiveness to her in the time of family distress and that eventually contributed to the end of the relationship. Participants tended to relate these family dynamics and stressors to turning to his or her partner for comfort and the responsiveness and attentiveness from his or her partner.

**Family opinion.** The main importance of this coding category is whether family members approved or disliked the participant’s partner. As previously mentioned, one of the milestones and turning points that was discussed was introduction to important people such as family members. Since this was an important event in the formation of romantic relationships, family opinion tended to be another important aspect of said formation. Many of the participants reported receiving family approval of their relationship while a few discussed how their family disliked their partner at one point or another. Participants expressed family disapproval of past partners while they described family approval of current relationships.

It seems that family approval may have been impactful in whether participants would end the relationship with their partner. Terese discussed the longer road her partner had to take to finally achieve family approval when she said:

We had a lot of push back, for example, from my family at first...I’m their oldest...their baby...they wanted just me when I went home instead of him and so they didn’t get to know him...and that lasted for a while and its just finally resolving now.

Other participants reported that they appreciated when partners would get along with their siblings and were able to spend time with them. Tyra discussed how her partner would come over and watch movies with her and her sisters and she liked how close they had all become. Families seemed to play a strong role in romantic relationship formation whether they approved of the relationship or not.

## **Experiences Based on Attachment Style**

After all of the coding was completed, I went back to the spreadsheet containing the attachment styles from the ECR-S scores for each participant in order to find the experiences of those in the varying attachment styles. I then read through each of the transcripts and pulled out salient information found on the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood based on attachment styles. Information drawn from experiences based on attachment style was difficult and found to be mostly inconclusive due to the small number of participants and few participants in the avoidant and disorganized attachment styles. There seemed to be only one clear finding to identify the second research question surrounding experiences of varying attachment styles. Otherwise, no clear differences emerged through this current study, and similarity is also challenging to confirm. Results should be interpreted with the knowledge that attachment styles can be discontinuous in nature and may include exceptions in experiences.

Similarities between attachment styles did seem to emerge through the findings of this study when mentioning milestones and turning points and discussing the increase of knowledge and awareness of self and relationships. Milestones and turning points mentioned by participants were all important events and periods in time when forming romantic attachments and each had meaning for that individual. Every participant expressed what they had learned from past and current relationship experiences about themselves and relationships. This knowledge and awareness seemed to strongly influence current and future romantic attachment formation for individuals regardless of attachment style. The biggest finding regarding similarity between attachment styles is that the basis of attachment formation seemed to be same although comfort seeking and receiving and giving support seemed less so.

The main finding that emerged surrounding experiences of individuals with varying attachment styles was that some securely attached individuals (n = 6) tended to describe relationships in a generally positive light and seemed to have the knowledge of what it takes for them to balance independence with the ability to turn to a partner for support when necessary. Insecurely attached individuals, whether avoidant, anxious, or disorganized, tended to report struggling with turning to a partner during times of need and balancing expressions of need with dependency on the partner. Insecurely attached individuals also reported more often on using or not wanting partners to use “clingy” behaviors. These “clingy” behaviors were reported by varying participants to include wanting to spend all of his or her time with their partner, overusing technology to keep tabs on the partner, and over sharing on expressions of affection and disclosures of feelings. Five out of the six individuals that were identified as insecurely attached were not currently in a relationship, while two of the eight individuals identified as securely attached were currently unattached. Overall, attachment styles did seem to be experienced differently in support and dependency in the relationships although more participants in each category would need to be interviewed.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments as well as these experiences of participants in varying attachment styles. Interviews were conducted with 14 emerging adults, aged 18-22 years old, who completed the ECR-S screening protocol survey and were then identified as one of the four attachment styles. As previously discussed, the interviews resulted in nine coding themes that seek to explain the formation of romantic attachments during emerging adulthood. Attachment theory was employed throughout the entire study as well as the developmental framework of emerging adulthood. The specific research questions that directed this study were:

1. What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments?
2. What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments with varying attachment styles?

In the next section I will discuss the results of this study based on the interviews conducted and the themes that arose. I will consider the existing literature on attachment across the lifespan, the developmental phase of emerging adulthood, and related tasks and processes. I will also discuss the implications for current theory and literature, limitations of the current study, recommendations for future research, and implications for professional practice.

### **Overview of the Results**

Findings from the current study reveal that the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments seem to be aligned with the current literature on how adults form romantic attachments (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Feeney, 2008; Fraley, 2002; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Zayas & Hazan, 2015). The general premise of the

way in which individuals form attachments seems to be turning to a primary attachment figure for comfort and receiving perceived support and comfort. From childhood, to emerging adulthood, into adulthood, individuals experience the formation of attachments in the same way. In this study, I found slight possible differences in how emerging adults form romantic attachments although most of the findings support the notion that people continue to experience the same underlying process of attachment development across the lifespan as well as across time. Experiences of those in varying attachment styles were inconclusive due to the small number of participants although some of the findings support the current literature (Kane et al., 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mohr et al., 2010; Zayas & Hazan, 2015).

The first research question regarding experiences of emerging adults in romantic attachment formation was answered and supports and extends current literature. The second research question regarding the experiences of emerging adults in varying attachment styles turned out to be inconclusive as previously stated as the number of participants was small and only one participant identified as avoidant and one as disorganized. Although some differences and similarities emerged based on attachment style, more exploration around attachment styles is needed to find support for literature in this area. The discovery of information from this study on the formation of romantic attachments shows that the general process of meeting a potential romantic partner, spending time together, getting to know one another, and navigating times of conflict and the need for support is how adults experience this development as well. The different themes and coding categories are salient to romantic attachment formation over the lifespan although a few aspects may be more specific to the developmental framework of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is known as a period of transition and exploration of self through work, love, and worldview domains (Arnett, 2000). The influence on identity formation tends to be an aspect specific to this time of an individual's life although adults can alter their identities over time as well. These individuals often experience the transition to work or further education as well as moving from their parent's home to another housing situation (Arnett, 2000). These transitions coupled with the exploration of one's identity as well as potential pursuits of romantic relationships provide an opportunity for growth and change. Identity formation and romantic attachment formation seem to influence one another, which may be different for adults when undergoing the development of a romantic relationship. This study lends support to the importance of romantic attachment formation in the development of an emerging adult's self-concept (Bartz & Lydon, 2004). These researchers proposed that the development of one's self-concept in emerging adulthood could be different depending on attachment styles as well. In the current study, I found that experiences in romantic attachment formation can trigger anxiety or avoidance no matter what the individual was identified as in terms of attachment style.

During the stage of emerging adulthood, social networks have strong implications for expanding an individual's self-concept (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). I found that this study supported that notion as individuals reported the influence of friends and romantic partners on their identity formation. Often the individuals would discuss the influence of social networks on beginning, continuing, or terminating a romantic relationship and how this influenced future romantic relationships with possible implications of impacting his or her self-concept. Loving (2006) discussed that who and what individuals ask in regards to opinions on their relationship matters to relationship fate. This supports what I found in this study on insider and outsider perspectives on an individual's relationship. When individuals have not figured out



what they like or dislike about his or her romantic partner, social networks are called upon to validate or challenge ideas regarding the relationship (Loving, 2006). Social networks were mentioned in this study as an important factor and were mostly described in the independence versus dependence task which lends support to this research.

No matter the identified attachment style, all participants in this study discussed the importance of technology on the formation of romantic attachments and support Reed, Tolman, and Safyer's (2015) work. I found that this study provides strong support to that notion due to each of the participants as noting technology as a salient contributor to the development of their relationship. Keeping tabs on the partner and with consistent contact through the use of cell phones was revealed as key throughout the formation of a romantic attachment to the partner (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). Morey and colleagues discussed the same findings in the area of technology for college students although findings in the current study slightly differed as no differences based on attachment style seemed to emerge.

Technology use as well as the characteristics of the developmental period of emerging adulthood seems to be the only major differences in experiences of those forming romantic attachments.

### **Implications for Current Theory**

The findings from this current research study lend support to the existing literature on attachment formation in various parts of the lifespan. Research from John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth on attachment formation in infancy and childhood has been shown to apply to adulthood attachment formation as well. In this study, I sought to understand the experiences in romantic attachment formation in emerging adulthood as well as experiences of emerging adults of varying attachment styles. Key concepts from attachment literature were found throughout the

interviews conducted and the coding scheme reflected different aspects of attachment formation that have been seen to be salient in this development.

One of the main premises of attachment formation, described by different attachment researchers over time, is the idea of a responsive and supportive attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Fraley, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Emerging adults in this study were not exempt from this concept in the formation of romantic attachments. Throughout the interviews, a sense of perceived comfort and support were noted as important in the continuation of the romantic relationship. Just as childhood attachment researchers describe in infancy, when an attachment figure is consistent in support and responsiveness an individual is able to form a more secure bond with a partner. For emerging adults, it seems that the ability to turn to a partner in times of need is just as important as it is for children and adults.

The idea of the distress-relief dynamic, proposed by Beckes and Coan (2011), fit for these emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments. When an individual perceived his or her partner to be consistently supportive and comforting in times of need, they were able to turn to their partner more and more. Turning to their partner was especially important in times of conflict and extreme stress on the relationship. This distress-relief dynamic created an opportunity for the romantic attachment to continue and become stronger and more secure. Other times, participants discussed not feeling supported or comforted when distressed, which seemed to prevent the relationship from continuing to form and at times ended the relationship. In this process of increased security in the romantic relationship, individuals seemed to manipulate the mental representation of his or her partner and create a more secure base just as Waters and Waters (2006) described. The internal working model seemed to change and update the secure base script when an individual's partner was able to be supportive and comforting or lacked that

responsiveness. The comfort and security in the relationship determined whether the attachment formation would continue or cease.

In this study, emerging adults were not asked about his or her relationship to their parents so the argument of continuous or discontinuous attachment cannot be truly addressed. However, as individuals spoke about past, present, and future romantic relationships some information was revealed about the continuity or discontinuity of attachment. Attachment experiences varied among the individuals, although it seemed that more support was given to the discontinuity of attachment behaviors with regard to romantic relationships, as participants who reported more secure dating partners also reported earlier dating partners that were not sufficiently responsive and supportive. Developmentally, it makes sense that attachment experiences in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood would be shifting and would be discontinuous in nature. Emerging adults are constantly learning from relationships and are updating internal working models, secure base scripts, and more.

Waters and Waters (2004) spoke to the secure base script and mental representation change, which seemed to come through in the interviews as the formation of the romantic attachment continued. Individuals often spoke about past relationships that lacked security, while current relationships had established security or continued to develop security depending on the length of the relationship. This idea of discontinuity was also seen when emerging adults would discuss what they have learned from past relationships that influence current and future romantic relationships as it showed that internal working models were altered. This also may have been influenced by the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, as it is a time of exploration and identity formation (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). In the current study, as emerging adults started to transition from primarily just attachment with their parents to forming romantic attachments,

they began to turn to their partner for comfort more and more. Participants would discuss turning to their partner more and more as the development of the relationship continued and the relationship felt more secure. Parents still seemed to play a large role in support in the participant's lives and family introduction to, and often approval of, the partner was also reported as a salient component in the formation of the romantic attachment.

In the formation of romantic attachments, emerging adults in this research study described this increased comfort and support the way Reis, Clark, and Holmes (2004) described the formation of intimacy between partners. The responsiveness and supportiveness of the partner created security in the relationship, which in turn allowed intimacy to develop in the relationship. This manifested itself in the romantic and close nature that individuals described through expressions of affection, sharing common goals and interests, intimate conversations, and sexual experiences. As partners would get to know each other and turn to one another in times of need, the intimacy developed in times of perceived support and comfort. Different milestones and turning points in the romantic attachment formation seemed to involve opportunities for responsiveness from the partner in order to increase commitment and seriousness in the relationship. As these opportunities were met with comfort and care, partners were able to continue to develop intimacy as well as commitment in the relationship. When these opportunities were not met, these milestones became an event that prevented the relationship from forming or ended the relationship. The emerging adults in this study discussed those events as important milestones that document the increase of commitment and attachment in the relationship, which is expressed in past research around turning points (Bolton, 1961; Zayas & Hazan, 2015).

Bowlby (1973) classified four defining features of attachment systems: proximity maintenance, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base. These defining features were used by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) to describe romantic relationships and were seen and supported throughout this study and aid in the description of how individuals form attachments. Proximity maintenance was seen through the way partners would stay in contact with one another, such as increase in time together as well as communication throughout the day in order to keep tabs on one another. The desire to be close to a partner, whether in person or through texting or calling, was an important part of forming a romantic attachment and the development of security and intimacy in the relationship. This increased time and communication provided the partners the opportunity to get to know one another more and to discover what they liked or did not like about the partner. Proximity maintenance also manifested itself through constant or consistent communication with the participant's partner. This contact determined whether the partner was still available if he or she needed them and that they were dedicated to the relationship, which impacted the perceived sense of responsiveness and the individual's mental representation of the partner.

The second of the defining features, safe haven, was best seen in the support and comfort discussed in the interviews. As previously discussed, when emerging adults in this study were able to receive support or comfort during a stressful situation, they were able to continue to build attachment with that partner. When a betrayal or an injury in trust occurred, the attachment was likely to be severed immediately or gradually over time. When a partner was unable to give the response that the participant needed, the attachment also ceased to develop as the relationship no longer felt secure. The feeling of a partner as a safe haven is one that is essential to the formation

of a romantic attachment as it lends itself to the component of the distress-relief dynamic (Beckes & Coan, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Separation distress seemed to be most important in the beginning of the relationship, as individuals described not wanting to be away from his or her partner. This defining feature was more difficult to find throughout the study although sometimes a separation was seen as a milestone in the relationship. The separation distress would create more conflict and if partners were able to work through those conflicts, the romantic attachment continued to develop. As time progressed, separation and time away became more important for participants as they were able to find more independence and desire time with friends. Which leads into the last of the defining features, secure base, which manifested itself in pursuing personal goals and autonomy in the relationship. For emerging adults, the aspect of secure base is one that lends a hand to identity formation that Erikson (1968) described as an essential part of emerging adulthood. Secure base is the defining feature of security in the relationship and allows emerging adults the opportunity to pursue relationships with friends and family, as well as education and work goals, while still feeling connected to the romantic partner. Each of these defining features aid in the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Many of the relationships were still in the early stages and the interviews did not specifically target these behaviors so it was not as strong but seem to contribute to the attachment development.

Zayas and Hazan (2015) proposed different stages or phases of romantic attachment formation that could also be seen throughout the interviews. As participants discussed romantic relationships, the stages seemed to naturally be discussed when talking through the progression that took place in those relationships. The first of these stages is pre-attachment, which Zayas and Hazan described as the initial interactions and attraction that take place for romantic

partnerships. This study was able to capture and note the relationship beginning as an essential part of the formation. Participants described this first phase as a time of excitement when they would get to know each other and spend an increased amount of time together. Relationship beginnings varied, although important no matter the variation. This stage included a mutual interest as the researchers said that it would as well as a determination of whether the relationship would continue to form based on the information gathered in this phase.

The second of these stages is attachment-in-the-making, which included the involvement of partners in more intimate interactions. For the emerging adults in this study, intimacy seemed to develop as partners were able to disclose more intimate information and seek support from one another. Intimacy took the form of emotional as well as physical closeness and vulnerability as well as sharing quality time together during dates and other activities in which they participated. Mental representations of the partner would begin to update and change as the partner was or was not able to be responsive to these intimate disclosures and interactions. Sexual experiences were salient in this stage of the relationship as participants would start to feel a connection and open up physically when they felt secure emotionally.

Zayas and Hazan (2015) combined the last two stages of clear-cut-attachment and goal-corrected partnership as they are more difficult to tease apart after childhood. This stage was discussed in the long-term relationships, as full-fledged attachments seemed to have formed. The participants in these long-term relationships described seriousness in the commitment to the relationship. These partners described conflict development and management that brought the partners closer together after working through the stressors that arose. Turning to a partner for comfort and support was reported to come before or at the same time as turning to a family member for support. As participants discussed the formation of his or her romantic attachment,

security in the relationship as well as identity formation was highlighted due to Erikson's (1968) ideas around emerging adulthood as a time of exploration of one's identity. The defining feature of secure base seemed to be emphasized and solidified in this stage of the romantic attachment development. Participants were able to explore his or her goals and interests while still having their partner there for support in discovering parts of themselves. These stages were seen in the interviews, although more exploration and possible comparison of stages would be beneficial as these findings did not emerge as strongly due to the small number of participants in longer term relationships.

Attachment styles did seem to play some type of role in the formation of romantic attachments for the emerging adults in the current study although findings were inconclusive due to the small number of participants interviewed. Participants would describe behaviors noted by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) as hyperactivating and deactivating strategies and were discussed in the context of self-presentation in the relationship. Insecurely attached individuals tended to report about the use of these strategies themselves and securely attached individuals seemed to discuss not wanting these behaviors in a partner. Hyperactivating strategies are typically used to draw the attachment figure to the individual to maintain proximity and include clinging and controlling behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These were noted in the current study as unwanted behaviors in a relationship and seemed to be contributors to the prevention or termination of relationships. Deactivating strategies tend to be used as a way to deny closeness and intimacy from a partner to continue self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This strategy was not seen to be detrimental to the attachment formation and was talked about through the lens of autonomy and independence in the relationship. The use or disuse of these two strategies seemed to be closely tied to how the participants wanted to be perceived by the partner. Self-



presentation in the relationship seemed to influence the formation of the romantic relationship, as participants reported changing some behaviors in order to come across in a desirable way to potential partners. Insecurely attached individuals were more often the ones that would discuss not wanting to come across as “clingy” or “dependent.” This idea of self-presentation to the partner has also been discussed by Mikulincer and Shaver and manifested itself in this study throughout the different stages or phases of the romantic attachment formation.

A notable finding from the current study was the increased knowledge and awareness of self and relationships that participants discussed. This finding was discussed by all of the individuals in some form as they learned how to navigate the formation of romantic attachments and extends the literature and current theory of attachment. Knowledge and awareness tended to influence self-presentation, as participants would alter their behavior in current relationships based on what had been successful in past romantic attachment formations. For example, clingy and dependent behaviors that may have deterred a romantic partner from continuing the development of the romantic attachment, resulted in the participant altering those behaviors for future relationships. The development of knowledge and awareness of self and relationships adds to the notion of the internal working model as participants would learn what it takes to successfully form a romantic attachment and what behaviors or relationships to avoid. Participants most often reported on this finding when looking back on relationships although knowledge and awareness also increased over the course of the romantic attachment formation. Some participants ( $n = 3$ ) reported that they are currently in their first relationship and are learning how to act and what to expect from romantic attachment formation as it develops. Overall, this finding seems salient to extending attachment theory as existing theories may not fully explain this experience.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study opened up several areas for future research and began the dialogue around romantic attachment formation in emerging adulthood, the findings are limited due to the sampling parameters. Since this study contained participants from one course on one college campus, the results may not be generalizable to all of the population of emerging adults. Due to the small sample, the research question about the experiences of varying attachment styles was found to be more difficult to learn about as only one participant represented the avoidant attachment category and one participant represented the disorganized category.

The screening survey that included the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale – Short Form (ECR-S) also limited the study in that the attachment styles may not have truly been captured in a representative manner. For example, current experiences with attachment formation may be different than past experiences and disclosures in the interviews may not have aligned with the attachment style identified by the ECR-S. The survey may not have been able to incorporate attachment styles accurately due to the potentially discontinuous nature of forming attachments. The current study was also unable to speak to how different demographic information may influence romantic attachment formation. Gender and sexual orientation are current areas where literature is lacking regarding attachment development in romantic relationships and this study did not have any implications due to the small number of participants. One last limitation was that many of the participants were on the younger side of emerging adulthood and often reported about relationships in adolescence more often than relationships in emerging adulthood.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings from the current study uncover that emerging adults do not form romantic attachments differently than adults although this study did not look for differences in experiences and did not have a comparison group. To fully explore the similar or different nature of experiences for emerging adults in relation to adult romantic attachment formation, future research would benefit from looking at the groups in a comparison study or examining romantic attachment development in a longitudinal study. Key concepts for this avenue of future research would also include the continuous or discontinuous nature of attachment across romantic relationship development as well as how a more fully formed identity may come into play during adulthood. Identity may be an area in which the internal working model may be impacted differently in adulthood and may influence the formation of the romantic attachment. In order to ensure a more representative sample of attachment styles in future studies, a more purposeful oversampling of insecurely attached individuals may be helpful. It may be helpful to also consider measuring and selecting participants based on parent-child attachments to triangulate attachment security. The Adult Attachment Inventory along with the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale would produce this pool of participants.

Another area that would benefit from exploration would be the area of gender and sexual orientation. Due to the limitations of the study, gender and sexual orientation influences in the formation of romantic attachments in emerging adulthood has been explored enough to make any sort of claims. Since emerging adulthood includes a time of exploration, these influences may have a large impact on the formation of romantic attachments. Gender was identified as a coding category in this study although not discussed at length. There seems to be some information there that may be a helpful contribution to the gap in the literature in this area.

One last recommendation for future research would be to delve deeper into the different terminologies that were used in this study. Often emerging adults would discuss different relationships as “flings” or “things” and would describe an important part of the beginning of the relationship as a time that partners are “talking” to get to know each other. These terms seem to be used by emerging adults in referencing romantic attachment formation although research has not been able to discuss what impact these terms have on relationship development. Findings in this study inspire curiosity in how these may influence or be influenced by attachment styles in emerging adulthood as well due to expectations in the secure base script.

### **Implications for Professional Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, emerging adults are likely to be involved in different types of romantic relationships and may need support during the various tasks and processes associated in this romantic attachment development. Since the current study was done on a college campus, implications for professional practice may be through resources offered through the university. Professionals that interact with or advise emerging adults may want to assess where these individuals are in the formation of their romantic relationship to know what kinds of support they may require. Although these individuals may receive support through friends and family, an objective perspective from a professional may be helpful in the process of navigating romantic attachments. As findings revealed, emerging adults in general have some type of experience with romantic attachment formation and may benefit from support in different forms.

Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as a time of exploration in different domains including work, love, and worldviews. Professionals can assist in this period of transition and romantic attachment formation with support groups, counseling, or connecting students to resources on campus that can promote a strong sense of self-worth that may carry over into their

partnership. Mental health services on a college campus mainly provide individual counseling services, which can be beneficial when working through issues in the romantic attachment formation although these services may be lacking. Services would benefit from offering support groups for emerging adults in the different stages of attachment formation (Zayas & Hazan, 2015). Having a sense of belonging and support as well as an avenue to talk through the difficulties or fears that an individual is having in the formation of a romantic attachment may have affects beyond the relationship. Mental health services may also want to provide therapy services and support for both partners in the form of couples counseling or host seminars on topics surrounding healthy attachments and promoting security in relationships. Fostering security in attachment formation may aid in identity formation and a stronger sense of self-worth, which may also include other positive benefits in the lives of emerging adults.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the nature of the experiences of emerging adults in forming romantic attachments and the tasks and processes involved in this process. This topic has received little attention in the literature regarding the context of the developmental period of emerging adulthood and the findings of this study supported and added to the current literature on romantic attachment formation. This study supports the notion that emerging adults experience the development of romantic attachments very similarly to adults and that attachment formation mimics the way in which children attach to their primary caregivers. Mental health providers and other professionals should seek to find ways in which to support emerging adults in forming secure and healthy attachments with romantic partners. These professionals should have knowledge of attachment development and provide a wide variety of programs and services to foster relationship security. Recommendations for future research highlight further

understanding of terminology used in emerging adulthood as well as comparisons to adult attachment formation and gender and sexual orientation influences on romantic attachment formation.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Attachment Style</u>	<u>Relationship Status</u>
Anna	18	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Anxious	Single
Valerie	19	Female	Native American	Heterosexual	Avoidant	Single
Tyra	18	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship
Tom	18	Male	Caucasian	Bisexual	Secure	Single
Matthew	19	Male	Caucasian	Demisexual	Anxious	Single
Elsa	21	Female	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship
Chanel	20	Female	Multicultural	Heterosexual	Anxious	Single
Danielle	19	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship
Terese	22	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship
Ben	21	Male	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	Single
Nicole	18	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Disorganized	Single
Elizabeth	19	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Anxious	In a Relationship
Hannah	19	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship
Rachel	18	Female	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Secure	In a Relationship

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

3. What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments?
4. What are the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments with varying attachment styles?

*As we have previously discussed, I am conducting a research study that looks at the experiences of emerging adults in the formation of romantic attachments. I want to remind you that your participation in this research study is voluntary and that you are able to decide to end the interview at any time. Your answers in the interview are confidential and the recordings will be deleted after I have transcribed the data and written my results. Do you have any questions for me at this time?*

*I will now read the Informed Consent Form to you and if you agree to the following information, then I will have you sign a copy for me, and I will give you a copy for your records.*

#### **Demographics And Background Information**

*I will first ask you some questions about you and your relationship status.*

Can you think of a pseudonym that you would like me to use in place of your name during the interview?

When and where were you born?

How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

What year are you at Colorado State University?

How would you describe your current relationship status? How long have you been in that relationship?

With what gender do you identify?

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

#### **Romantic Partnerships**

*I will now ask you questions pertaining to the formation of past, current, and future romantic relationships.*

Tell me about your first romantic relationship. (Probe: How old were you? How long did it last? What do you remember most about that experience?)

Since then, what can you tell me about the romantic relationships that you've had? (Probe: How long were they? How did you establish attachment?)

What did you learn from those relationships that influence your current romantic relationship? (Probe: Why was this important to you?)

What do you recall about your first meeting with your partner? (Probe: What were your first interactions like?)

Please describe your decision to be exclusive or non-exclusive in your relationship. (Probe: When did this take place in your relationship?)

In the first month of your relationship, how much time do you spend with your partner in a week? What do you and your partner do during time spent together? (Probe: How do you decide how much time to spend with your partner and how much time to spend away from your partner? How did your time change to how it is now?)

Tell me about the first time you turned to your partner for comfort when you were having a difficult time or what it would be like to turn to a potential partner? (Probe: What was that like for you? When in the relationship did you turn to them? Can you tell me about a time when you received support from your partner and also a time when perhaps your partner missed the boat?)

When something stressful happens, who do you seek support from in your life? (Probe: Do you have people you try to contact first? When did your partner become a person that was one of the first you would turn to?)

What does your communication with your partner or a potential partner look like each day or week? (Probe: What is the frequency and type of communication? What technology do you use, if any, to communicate? When you are apart, what does your communication look like?)

How have you and your partner dealt with conflict over the course of your relationship? (Probe: Depending on how long the couple has been together – At one month? At three months? At six months? At a year?)

Tell me about important milestones or turning points in your relationship with your partner or potential partner. (Probe: When did each of these occur in your relationship? What was important to you about each of these occasions?)

Tell me how you believe your gender as a (man/woman) impact your attachment or relationship formation? (Probe: How do you think it is different for individuals of the opposite gender?)

What role does intimacy play in your relationship? (Probe: How do you decide when to become intimate with someone? What about intimacy is important to you?)

*Now I'm going to read some blurbs to you and I just want you to react to them.*

“I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting to close to me.”

“I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.”

“I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person and this desire sometimes scares people away.”

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences forming romantic attachments before we end the interview today?

*Thank you so much for your time.*

## APPENDIX B

### Class Announcement

Are you interested in participating in a research study around romantic relationships in college-aged individuals? To be eligible to participate, you should be between the ages of 18 and 25 and willing to share experiences about romantic relationships. Your participation would involve one face-to-face interview, lasting no longer than 60-90 minutes, at a location and time of your convenience. Participants will receive extra credit upon completion of the interview and the submission of a written reflection paper on the experience of involvement in the study for HDFS 101. After you all complete a short survey regarding romantic relationships in class today, you may be selected to for an interview. Please note that if you are selected to participate in this study that you have the right to accept or decline participation. If you have any questions regarding the study, you may contact Devon Perkins at 913.481.7299 or speak with Dr. Ashley Harvey after class today.

## APPENDIX C

### Screening Guide – Qualtrics Survey

1. What is your age?
2. With what gender do you identify?

#### Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-S)

**Instruction:** The following statements concern how you feel in romantic 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. Circle your answer using the following rating scale:

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

1. It helps to turn to romantic partners in times of need.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
2. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by a romantic partner.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
3. I want to get close to a romantic partner, but I keep pulling back.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
4. I find that partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
5. I turn to romantic partners for many things, including comfort and reassurance.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
6. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
7. I try to avoid getting too close to romantic partners.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
8. I do not often worry about being abandoned.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
9. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with romantic partners.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
10. I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
11. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7
12. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

3. What is your first and last name?

## APPENDIX D

### Email Invitation for Participation

Dear student:

Thank you for completing my thesis survey in your HDFS 101 course. You have been selected to participate in my thesis project by completing a face-to-face interview with me regarding your experiences in romantic relationships. This interview will last between 60-90 minutes and will take place in a space that we agree upon. Please respond by Monday, March 14<sup>th</sup> by 5pm letting me know whether or not you would like to participate in an interview.

If desired, participants will receive extra credit upon completion of the interview and the submission of a written reflection paper. This extra credit assignment will be in place of, and equivalent to, the extra credit MyVirtualLife assignment (same due date in Week 14). Students will write a 1 ½ - 2 page reflection paper comparing their own experiences in romantic relationships and the interview with course material in HDFS 101. Students may also participate in the interview and choose not to use the experience for extra credit.

If you agree to participate, please respond to this email with the best way to contact you and times that you are available for an interview.

Thank you,  
Devon Perkins

## APPENDIX E

### Informed Consent Letter and Form

January 27, 2016

Dear Participant,

My name is Devon Perkins and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Human Development and Family Studies department. We are conducting a research study on how emerging adults form romantic attachments. The title of our project is Tasks and Processes Associated with the Formation of Romantic Attachments in Emerging Adulthood. The Principal Investigators are Drs. Christine Fruhauf and Ashley Harvey, Human Development and Family Studies Department, and the Co-Principal Investigator is Devon Perkins, Human Development and Family Studies Department.

We would like you to participate in a one time one-on-one interview discussing the development of romantic attachments. The location of the interview will be a comfortable place for both the participant and the investigators. Participation will take approximately 30-90 minutes of your time. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

Privacy and confidentiality will be maintained by creating pseudonyms for each participant, which are chosen during the interview by the participant. Only the Principal Investigators and the Co-Principal Investigator will have access to the data obtained in the interviews. After the interviews are transcribed, the transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in which only the investigators have access. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how emerging adults form romantic attachments. Compensation will take the form of extra credit for Dr. Ashley Harvey's HDFS 101 course on the completion of a reaction paper written about the experience of the interview.

There are no perceived risks involved in this study; however, the information brought about during the interview may be difficult to discuss for some participants.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact Devon Perkins at [devon.perkins@colostate.edu](mailto:devon.perkins@colostate.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Sincerely,

Christine Fruhauf  
Principal Investigator

Ashley Harvey  
Principal Investigator  
Informed Consent

Devon Perkins  
Co-Principal Investigator

**Project Title:** Tasks and Processes Associated in the Formation of Romantic Attachments in Emerging Adulthood

**Principle Investigator:** Devon Perkins, Master's Candidate, Human Development

**Faculty Advisor:** Drs. Christine Fruhauf and Ashley Harvey, Professors, Human Development

1. I hereby agree to participate in an interview in connection with the project known as *Tasks and Processes Associated in the Formation of Romantic Attachments in Emerging Adulthood*. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I will be asked questions about my experiences related to my current and past romantic relationships as well as potential romantic relationships.
2. I understand that I will be asked to participate in one interview, which will last no longer than 90 minutes.
3. I understand that I can withdraw from the project and the interview at any time without penalty. If I do withdraw, I understand that any tape made of the interview will be either given to me or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.
4. I understand that I will receive extra credit for my HDFS 101 class with Dr. Ashley Harvey for my participation.
5. I understand that there are no known risks to participating, though it may be difficult at times to discuss the experiences I wish to share about my romantic relationships. I also understand that the benefits of this project are great, as my experiences may help inform others of the tasks and processes associated with the formation of romantic attachments.
6. I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and that in the interview, I will be identified by a pseudonym so that I may remain anonymous in any transcript, tape, and reference to any information contained in the interview.
7. This project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Colorado State University.
8. If I feel I have not been treated according to the description in this form, or that my rights as a participant in the research have been violated during the course of this project, I know I can contact Drs. Christine Fruhauf and Ashley Harvey at the phone numbers listed below.
9. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and agree to be interviewed according to the terms outlined above. I have read and understand the Informed Consent and



conditions of this project. I have had all my questioned answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

---

Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about the research project or procedures, I may contact:

Devon Perkins

Dr. Christine Fruhauf

Dr. Ashley Harvey

Principle Investigator

Faculty Advisor

Faculty Advisor

913-481-7299

970-491-1118

970-491-3011

## APPENDIX F

### Formation of Romantic Attachments Final Coding Scheme

- 100 Relationship Beginnings
  - 101 Relationship Initiation
  - 102 Types of Attraction
  - 103 Speed
  - 104 Views and Attitudes
  - 105 Getting To Know Each Other
  - 106 Relationship Boundaries
  
- 200 Milestones, Turning Points, and Firsts in Relationships
  - 207 Firsts
  - 208 Important events
  - 209 Introduction to Important People
  - 210 Commitment
  
- 300 Partner Attributes
  - 311 Physical Attributes
  - 312 Personality and Behaviors of Partner
  
- 400 Expressions of Affection in Relationships
  - 413 Physical Affection
  - 414 Giving Gifts
  - 415 Other
  
- 500 Development/Knowledge About Self and Relationships
  - 516 Knowledge and Awareness About Myself
  - 517 What I learned About Relationships
  - 518 Independence vs. Dependence
  
- 600 Communication Within Relationships
  - 619 What We Talk About
  - 620 How We Stay in Touch
  - 621 Types of Communication
  
- 700 Support and Comfort Within Relationships
  - 722 Intimacy
  - 723 Increased comfort and support
  - 724 Turning to My Partner
  - 725 Responsiveness and Attentiveness From Partner

800 Relationship Conflict And Strains

826 Conflict Management

827 Conflict Development

828 Types of Stressors

829 Things that Prevented or Ended the Relationship

900 Contextual Factors and Outside Influences on the Relationship

930 Friend Influences

931 Contextual Factors

932 Gender And Sexual Orientation Influence

933 Family Dynamics/Stressors

934 Family Opinion