

**Romantic Relationship Trajectories: A Qualitative Analysis of  
Young Adults Exposed to Marital Violence**

by

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## Abstract

Guided by a review of the literature on the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence (ITV) and Johnson's typology of violence, the current study qualitatively examined 25 young adults' romantic relationship experiences during high school (HS) and college. Findings are partially consistent with ITV, but suggest that the relationship between DV exposure and later romantic relationship experiences is complex, as roughly half of the participants experienced dating violence during HS, but none reported dating violence in college. DV exposure, as well as other familial factors (e.g., family rules and boundaries) seemingly influenced DV-exposed young adults' romantic relationship experiences over time, including their desire or lack of desire to enter into relationships, their choice of romantic partner, the type of relationship they experience (e.g., abusive, non-abusive), and relationship dissolution. Participants compared their partner and romantic relationship to their fathers' abusive behaviors and parents' marriage and compared their own behaviors to that of their father and mother to manage their relationship involvement. Possible explanations for these findings are discussed in light of ITV and DV exposure literatures, emphasizing the heterogeneity in DV-exposed young adults' relationship experiences.

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## **Introduction**

Domestic violence (DV) refers to physical and/or sexual assault of one's intimate partner (Campbell & Boyd, 2000). Approximately one in four women experience DV in their lifetime (Black, et al. of Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2011). Researchers estimate that anywhere from 7 to 15.5 million youth are exposed to DV in their homes each year (Edleson, Ellerton, Seagren, Kirchberg, & Ambrose, 2007). Compared to their non-exposed peers, exposed youth have higher rates of physical, mental, and behavioral health problems (see review by Haselschwerdt, 2014). Children who are exposed to DV are at an increased future risk of experiencing dating violence in adolescence and in subsequent adult relationships (as perpetrators or victims; see reviews by Olsen, Parra, & Bennett, 2010; Stith, Rosen, Middleton, Busch, Lundeberg, & Carlton, 2000). According to the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence (ITV), children who observe DV in their homes are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of dating violence in their future relationships (Kalmuss, 1984). However, despite the theoretical justification for ITV, findings in support of ITV are mixed, and the strength in predicting later dating violence perpetration and victimization is modest at best (Kalmuss; Smith-Marek et al., 2015). Thus, in spite of the common refrain that DV exposure is associated with later DV experiences, a number of unanswered questions and gaps in the current literature remain.

The contradicting findings surrounding the theory of ITV have led researchers to question why some DV-exposed youth become perpetrators or victims of dating violence while others do not. One possibility is that the relatively unsophisticated measurement of DV exposure (i.e.,



dichotomous variables of DV exposure, focus on physical violence only) is preventing researchers from examining variations in marital and family dynamics that may impact subsequent dating experiences. Although the adult DV literature has shifted toward examining the complex context in which DV occurs and the variations in types of DV and relationship dynamics (e.g., situational versus coercive controlling violence; Johnson, 2008), the youth exposure literature is lagging behind (Haselschwerdt, 2014; Jouriles & McDonald, 2014). This gap in the youth exposure literature limits our ability to understand the plausibly differential impact of DV exposure on youth well being and adaption, in general (Haselschwerdt). An additional, complementary explanation is that while DV exposure likely plays a role in later dating violence involvement or romantic relationship experiences in general, DV exposure is only one piece of the puzzle (Smith-Marek et al., 2015 Stith). Other interactional factors, such as experiences during adolescence and young adulthood, especially pertaining to romantic relationships, influence the association between DV exposure and later DV involvement. For example, few studies have examined the cumulative impact of different DV exposure experiences (e.g., differences in physical violence, and type of DV) and parental factors such as child maltreatment and abuse (Jouriles, McDonald, Smith Slep, Heyman, & Gariddo, 2012) that may influence the association between DV exposure and dating violence involvement.

Considering not all, or even the majority of, DV-exposed youth later experience dating violence or DV in adulthood (Gover, Kaukinen and Fox, 2008; Kalmuss, 1984; Smith-Marek, et al., 2015; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), researchers ought to consider additional factors occurring at the time of exposure (e.g., type and degree of exposure, parenting factors, etc.) and subsequent experiences during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., romantic relationship involvement); moving away from assuming and examining a linear association between DV

exposure and later DV involvement. Involvement in increasingly committed romantic relationships is a salient developmental task during adolescence and young adulthood (Collins, 2003), therefore, an examination of the complexity of romantic relationship experiences among DV-exposed youth is needed. Thus, the current study sought to address the gaps in the current literature by examining the retrospective (i.e., high school) and current (i.e., college) romantic relationship experiences of DV-exposed young adults, focusing on the variety within their DV exposure experiences.

## **The Nature of Dating in Adolescence and Young Adulthood**

Though many assume adolescent romantic relationships are trivial and transitory, their onset is a hallmark of adolescent development (Collins, 2003). Prior to adolescence, most interaction and friendship is between same-sex peers; however, interaction between opposite-sex peers increases during early adolescence, which encourages the formation of romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2008). By the age of 18, 89 percent of adolescents report having been in a romantic relationship (Glass et al., 2003).

Romantic relationships during adolescence set the stage for and distinctively influence romantic relationships in young adulthood and later adulthood, and therefore, are fundamentally important to romantic relationship trajectories over time (Meier & Allen, 2008). Adolescents gain the benefits of developing companionship and physical intimacy and develop skills of reciprocity and cooperation within romantic relationship experiences (Meier & Allen). Building these skills and experiences during adolescence results in more committed and involved future dating relationships as having gained these beneficial skills sets a precedence for subsequent relationships (Meier & Allen). During young adulthood, relationships take on a different meaning. The primary task of young adult development is achieving interpersonal intimacy, and therefore, romantic relationships often become more significant (Conger, Elder, Cui, & Bryant, 2000). More specifically, relationships in young adulthood include increased love, closeness, bonding, feelings of security, support, and an alliance between partners (Meier & Allen). These qualities normally do not occur until young adulthood, but once developed, they serve as protective factors for relationship commitment and quality (Meier & Allen; Collins, 2003).

These, and other findings suggest that adolescent romantic relationship experiences have distinct and enduring implications on future young adult relationships (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

### **Dating Violence in Adolescence and Young Adulthood**

Adolescent romantic relationships often come with many risks, including the potential for dating violence between partners. Dating violence includes emotional, verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse and is used to get another to do what he/she wants, gain power and control, to retaliate against a partner, or to cause humiliation and promote fear (Foshee & Langwick, 2010). The reported prevalence rates of dating violence involvement during adolescence are quite varied and debated among researchers, spanning anywhere from 9-63% of adolescents (Zweig, Yahner & Lachman, 2014; Vezina et al., 2015). Olsen, Parra and Bennett (2010) found that 39.3% of adolescents reported perpetrating dating violence, and 38.2% reported victimization. Additionally, Hamby and Turner (2013) examined gender differences in perpetration rates from a violence severity perspective, finding that females perpetrate more violence than do males, however male perpetration tends to be more severe (i.e., causing more fear or injury) than female perpetration.

Crucial to the research on dating violence is identifying the risk factors of violence perpetration and victimization, as their discovery can be a central step in curbing the prevalence of this maladaptive experience. Documented individual risk factors include, education level – young adults with lower education levels are at an increased risk for victimization (Coker, Follingstad, Bush, & Fisher, 2015), history of perpetration (Olsen, Parra, & Bennett, 2010), and relationship length – longer relationships have a greater likelihood of resulting in violence (Miller, 2011). Additionally, family of origin factors such as exposure to interparental violence

(Olsen, Parra, & Bennett), low quality parent-child relationship, non-supportive parenting (low warmth, consistency, monitoring and reasoning), and parent inflicted child abuse (Olsen, Parra, & Bennett) may impact one's propensity for dating violence perpetration or victimization. Smith, White, and Holland (2003) found that the greatest risk factor for victimization in college was a history of victimization of any kind during childhood and adolescence, and that the participants most likely to be victimized were those who had experienced both childhood victimization (witnessing DV or experiencing child abuse) *and* adolescent physical victimization. Therefore, understanding the family violence history is crucial to understanding the heightened risk of dating violence involvement.

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Violence**

The family of origin plays a key role in socializing and launching children into adulthood with the skills necessary to develop successful relationships, and through modeling, has the power to influence a child's future interactions and relationships (Kalmuss, 1984). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1978), when families model aggressive behaviors, their children are more likely going to observe and then model these aggressive behaviors in later relationships (Kalmuss). This theorized pattern of familial socialization is the cornerstone of the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence (ITV), or the often referred to "cycle of violence," which posits that violence is modeled as acceptable means to communication and conflict resolution, and therefore, children develop beliefs regarding the acceptability of violence in familial and intimate relationships that they carry into their own romantic relationships (Kalmuss, 1984; Murrell, Christoff, & Henning, 2007). Kalmuss (1984) proposed that ITV involves two types of modeling: specific and generalized. Specific modeling refers to the replication of specific acts of violence and aggression that one was exposed to in their family of

origin (e.g., observing interparental violence and then experiencing, as perpetrator or victim, subsequent violence in romantic relationships). Generalized modeling refers to exposure to or experiencing any form of family violence (e.g., child abuse, DV exposure, sibling abuse) and subsequent replication or experiencing of any form of familial or romantic relationship violence (e.g. experiencing child abuse and then experiencing, as perpetrator or victim, subsequent violence in romantic relationships).

Though there is an increasing body of literature on generalized modeling, the majority of past research focuses on specific and not generalized, or a combination of these modeling types. Therefore, this study focuses solely on specific modeling. As previously stated, there is substantial evidence that childhood exposure to DV is associated with future violence perpetration and/or victimization (e.g., Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), however empirical support for specific modeling of ITV is mixed. Black, Sussman, & Unger (2010) found that children exposed to physical violence or psychological aggression were at a greater risk for perpetrating physical violence or psychological aggression, respectively. Gover, Kaukinen and Fox (2008) found that exposure to perpetrated DV predicted both physical and psychological dating violence victimization and perpetration, further supporting the theory of ITV and specific modeling. In contrast, many studies have not found support for ITV and selective modeling, such that witnessing DV does not increase one's propensity to perpetrate or be victimized (Edwards, Dixon, Gidycz & Desai, 2014; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Lundberg, Stith, Penn, & Ward; 2004; Smith-Marek et al., 2015). Although Stith and colleagues (2015) found an association between growing up in an abusive home and later involvement in DV during adulthood, the effect sizes were quite small; underscoring the likelihood that there are other factors, occurring over the course of an individual's life, influencing this association.

Past research has identified factors such as the severity and frequency of the physical violence to be associated with support for specific modeling of ITV. For example, Ireland and Smith (2009) only found support for ITV when the adolescents were previously exposed to severe physical DV (e.g. hitting, kicking, or choking). Exposure to mild physical DV (e.g. throwing items, pushing, grabbing or shoving) was not associated with subsequent perpetration – not supporting ITV. Additional factors such as the context in which the DV occurs may also influence associations between DV exposure and later dating violence involvement as the victim or the perpetrator. For example, Haselschwerdt (2014) and Jouriles and McDonald (2014) have documented how the mixed findings regarding the overall impact of DV exposure, may be due in part to the inconsistent and imprecise measures of DV. When efforts have been made to understand the variation in impact due to DV exposure, researchers have largely focused on dimensions of physical violence, such as severity and frequency of violence, without also examining the context in which the violence occurred, failing to capture the overall pattern of abusive behaviors that may impact later relationship experiences.

**Johnson’s typology of DV.** The adult DV literature has become quite sophisticated and nuanced over the past few decades – documenting the importance of examining the context in which the DV occurs. Johnson (2008) and his colleagues have advanced the adult DV literature by making a theoretical and empirical case for distinguishing between two main types of DV – coercive controlling (CCV) and situational couple violence (SCV) – based on the level of coercive control in violent couple dynamics (see Haselschwerdt, 2014 for review of the literature). Coercive control “involves the repetitive use of tactics to regulate and dominate an intimate partner’s daily life and restrict personal liberties” (Hardesty et al., 2015, p. 2). CCV is distinguished by an abusers’ use of a high level of coercive control and entails the combined use

of coercion involving a demand or threat, the abuser's ability and willingness to follow through on the demand or threat, surveillance or monitoring of the victim's activities, and wearing down of the victim's resolve to resist his control (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). In contrast, SCV entails physical violence that erupts from a conflictual situation (in the absence of or among low levels of coercive control). Compared to SCV, CCV is more likely to be perpetrated by men against women, more likely to escalate, less likely to be mutual, more likely to involve serious injury, induce more fear for one's life, and entail more per-couple incidences of violence (Johnson, 2008; Hardesty et al., 2015). However, Johnson and colleagues caution that these are mean patterns; exceptions to these patterns do exist and should be thoroughly examined (i.e., SCV that is severe and injurious).

Recently, researchers have begun to document the differential family life and home experiences of young adults who were previously exposed to SCV versus CCV (Haselschwerdt, Hlavaty, Carlson, Schneider, Maddox, & Skipper, in press; Jouriles & McDonald, 2014). These findings support Haselschwerdt's (2014) theoretical argument for making distinctions in DV exposure based on type or degree of DV, as this context influences the overall impact on children's health and wellbeing. However, no known studies have applied Johnson's typology when examining the impact of DV exposure on subsequent dating violence experiences (i.e., ITV). The present study contributes to this gap in the literature by examining the context in which violence occurs, particularly as it pertains to IT



## **The Current Study**

The current study sought to address several limitations in the current DV exposure and ITV literatures with a sample of DV-exposed young adults. First, the findings in support of specific modeling of ITV are mixed, warranting a more detailed examination of the family of origin violence and subsequent romantic relationship violence association. The role of different DV types (i.e., SCV versus CCV) has only recently been applied to the youth exposure literature, but it has not been applied to the study of ITV. Thus, the current study addressed this limitation by examining the variability within DV exposure, including the two main DV types and characteristics of physical violence (e.g., severity, frequency), as they are associated with young adults' romantic relationship experiences. Based on the current literature, it was hypothesized that young adults exposed to CCV and more severe and frequent physical violence will report greater dating violence experiences than those exposed to SCV and less severe and frequent, or chronic DV. Second, although prior exposure to DV may increase the likelihood of experiencing dating violence or DV in later years, a substantial percentage of DV-exposed youth do not report subsequent dating violence nor DV experiences (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). Far less is known about the general romantic relationship experiences of DV-exposed youth and young adults aside from assessing their later engagement in violent relationships. Therefore, the current study contributed to this literature by exploring the understudied range of romantic relationship experiences of DV-exposed young adults, including but not limited to dating violence, other unhealthy patterns (e.g., infidelity), and supportive and healthy relationships. To address these limitations in the current literature, we sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the romantic relationship experiences of young adults exposed to father-

perpetrated marital violence? 2) How do the nature of marital violence (e.g., degree of coercive control, severity and frequency of physical violence) and family rules and boundaries (e.g., restrictive parenting) independently and dually influence young adults' romantic relationships over time?

## **Method**

To best address our two exploratory research questions, we applied an inductive, descriptive qualitative study design (Sandelowski, 2000) with grounded theory overtones (Charmaz, 2006). Qualitative description is relatively low-inference and entails less interpretation than other types of qualitative designs, allowing the analyses to stay close to the data and thus providing an accurate summary of young adults' DV exposure and romantic relationship experiences (Sandelowski). However, portions of our analysis did require some inference, as we used the participants' descriptions to categorize their romantic relationship experiences and describe the influence of their family of origin experiences. The strengths of qualitative methods make this the appropriate method to use when there is a large body of research with conflicting or contradictory findings that need more in-depth exploration (e.g., impact of DV exposure on future dating violence perpetration or victimization; Goldberg & Allen) and when studying particularly sensitive topics (e.g., IPV), as participants are given agency in the telling of their own stories (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

### **Participants and Sampling Strategy**

Twenty-five participants from one state university in the Southeast United States were recruited and interviewed as a part of a larger qualitative study (Young Adults Live and Learn; Haselschwerdt et al., in press) investigating the experiences of young adults exposed to DV. From September 2014 through March 2015, potential participants were recruited through advertisements on campus and in newspapers, emails from instructors, announcements in classes, social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and word of mouth. To be eligible to participate, the young adults needed to meet the following criteria: (1) between the ages of 19-25, (2) their father

or father-like figure (hereafter referred to as father) must have physically hurt their mother on more than one occasion (e.g. pushed or shoved with force, slapped, punched, kicked, or beat up), and (3) their parents must either still be married, or must have separated or divorced sometime after their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. Halfway through recruitment, we adjusted the third inclusion criteria to allow for participants' whose parents had separated after their eighth birthday as all interviewed participants vividly recalled their earliest DV exposure experiences earlier or around this age; thus, their eighth birthday was a modest cutoff for inclusion. The participants interviewed following this decision reported similar ages of first DV exposure unless their mothers married their stepfathers later in life; thus, this criteria remained throughout the duration of the study.

Upon learning of our study, 41 potential participants either emailed or called the research project. The three eligibility questions were sent via email or asked verbally over the phone depending on the nature of initial contact. Of those who initially contacted the project, 27 responded to the eligibility questions and were eligible, 12 responded and were ineligible, and 2 never responded to the eligibility questions and subsequent follow-up attempts. Although it is unknown whether the non-respondents were eligible or ineligible, we suspect that some may have chosen not to respond if they did not meet the eligibility criteria. After determining the young adults' eligibility, a research team member set up the location, date, and time for the interview.

The analytic sample for the current study consisted of 23 female and 2 male young adults. The participants were between 19 and 25 years old ( $M = 20.48$  years old;  $SD = 1.46$  years). The majority of participants were European American/White ( $n = 13$ ) or African American/Black ( $n = 7$ ), with the remaining participants identifying as biracial ( $n = 3$ ; European American/Black), Latina ( $n = 1$ ), and Asian American ( $n = 1$ ). Participants had an average of almost 2 siblings ( $M$

= 1.84 siblings), with a range of 1 to 5 siblings. Eleven participants were first-born children, four were middle children, and nine were the youngest child in their family. The majority of participants ( $n = 20$ ) had been involved in at least one romantic relationship during HS ( $M = 2.36$  years) or college ( $M = 2.57$  years).

Participants' mothers ranged in age from 37 years to 66 years old ( $M = 48.96$  years;  $SD = 7.2$  years). The majority of mothers ( $n = 21$ ) reportedly had at least some education beyond high school/GED – some college ( $n = 7$ ), Associate's degree ( $n = 4$ ), Bachelor's degree ( $n = 6$ ), some graduate school ( $n = 2$ ), or Master's degree ( $n = 2$ ). The majority of fathers were the participants' biological father ( $n = 17$ ), although 8 were stepfathers who were described as either their sole father figure or played a substantial role in their upbringing. The fathers ranged in age from 39 years to 65 years old ( $M = 49.7$  years;  $SD = 6.98$  years). The majority of fathers ( $n = 22$ ) reportedly had at least some education beyond high school/GED – some college ( $n = 4$ ), Associate's degree ( $n = 7$ ), Bachelor's degree ( $n = 5$ ), some graduate school ( $n = 5$ ), or Master's degree ( $n = 1$ ). At the time of the interview, 11 of mothers were still married to the participants' father, 12 were divorced, and 2 were separated.

Based on the participants' self-report, they came from a nearly equal distribution of rural ( $n = 9$ ), urban ( $n = 7$ ), or suburban ( $n = 9$ ) communities. Half of the participants reported that their family received at least one type of public assistance support during their childhood or adolescence, such as free or reduced school lunch ( $n = 9$ ) and food ( $n = 9$ ), health or child care ( $n = 5$ ), and/or cash assistance ( $n = 2$ ).

## **Procedure**

University Institutional Review Board approval was obtained in order to protect the rights of participants in our study. Additionally, the principal investigator obtained a Certificate of

Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in order to protect the collected data from potential subpoenas – an additional step to assure confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in our private, on-campus interview room. Interviews ranged from 48 minutes to 142 minutes, with the average being 87 minutes ( $SD = 26$  minutes). Follow-up interviews were conducted with two participants for the purpose of asking follow up questions or questions that were accidentally skipped in the initial interview. These two secondary interviews lasted 12 and 24 minutes, respectively.

Prior to beginning the interview, written informed consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol that was based on a review of the DV, DV exposure, and dating violence literatures and allowed for probing or follow up questions (see Appendix C). This interview protocol was then pilot-tested with a young adult who met the larger study criteria with the exception of living in a different state. She provided feedback on the questions and total interview protocol, which was then incorporated into the final protocol for this study. Consistent with grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), questions in the interview protocol were broad with probes to allow for elaboration (see Appendix A). The protocol begins with basic background questions about the participants, their parents, and their siblings followed by questions pertaining to their community of origin. The remainder of the protocol was broken into three sections: 1) Violence and Abuse (e.g., violence and exposure description, different types of abuse, children's involvement, causes of violence and abuse) 2) The Impact of Abuse on Family Dynamics and Functioning (e.g., family communication, cohesion, and involvement), and 3) Interpersonal Relationships (e.g., peer and romantic). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms to assure confidentiality, which are used in the

reporting of the findings. Identifying information in participants' quotes was altered to protect confidentiality without changing the meaning. Any identifiers linking an interview transcript to a participant were kept separate and only accessible to the research team. Following completion of the interview, participants received \$25, a thank you note for their participation, and a list of campus, local, and national resources such as counseling services and DV hot-line numbers.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis for this study was initially concurrent until data collection ceased and analysis continued. In accordance with grounded theory, constant comparison was used throughout data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). For example, we analyzed data through the use of memoing and tabling (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), going back and forth between interviews and ongoing analyses to compare within the individual interviews but also across the interviews. In addition to memoing and tabling, we used an initial coding approach consistent with the goals of the larger project to compare our emerging findings with the data coded in the qualitative software, MAXQDA, specific to the participants' romantic relationships (see Haselschwerdt et al., in press, for description of coding process).

Memoing served the purpose of making analytic connections between the raw interview data and patterns identified in the data (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Thus, memoing was an ongoing and core component of our preliminary analyses as we made sense of the data and compared each interview. After each interview was conducted and transcribed, research team members independently wrote a summary memo of the interview to help us stay grounded in the participant's experience. Summary memos were written for each of the 25 interviews. To address the larger study aims, as well as to classify participants for this study, memo writing also entailed classifying each interview along a coercive control continuum from no coercive control exposure

to high coercive control exposure. No and low coercive control exposure were collapsed into the categorization of SCV and moderate and high were collapsed into the CCV category (see Haselschwerdt et al., in press, for description of classification process).

Memoing and tabling were used interchangeably throughout the data analysis process, such that writing out identified patterns often led to creating detailed tables and vice versa; this was an ongoing, iterative process that we detail below. Following the preliminary classifications and summary memo writing, I along with the rest of the research team wrote more detailed and focused memos on topical areas (e.g. romantic relationships). In keeping with our constant comparative analyses, after every fourth interview, each team member wrote a memo comparing the analyzed interviews up to that point on their particular topical area. Each memo was peer reviewed on multiple occasions by at least two team members and the principal investigator; comments, edits and revisions were incorporated into subsequent drafts. I created a more targeted topical memo on “romantic relationships over time,” which focused on the trajectories of romantic relationship experiences between HS and college. Upon the development of this memo, I created a table that documented the romantic relationship experiences of each participant during HS and college, including a general description of each relationship, salient family factors, details regarding whether or not the participant disclosed their exposure experiences or general family issues, romantic relationship beliefs, their partners’ background, and salient quotes from the interviews. I, along with the principal investigator and a fellow graduate student, then independently completed this table and met to discuss any discrepancies within the description of each category; ultimately merging the three tables into one that was used for all further analyses. The process of analyzing and reviewing the data for each participant led to the decision to categorize participants by the type of relationship they were involved in at



each time point. Initially, we classified participants' relationships as either healthy or abusive, but upon further analysis determined that not all non-abusive relationships were *healthy*, but rather, they simply were not physically or verbally abusive. Therefore, we began categorizing relationships as either non-abusive or abusive. In order to better illustrate the participants' relationship trajectories we developed a matrix that organized their relationship experiences by developmental stage that differentiated HS and college relationships (see Figure 1).

By analyzing these tables, comparing across participants' narratives, and discussing emergent patterns during weekly lab meetings, we noted that participants explicitly and implicitly *compared* their romantic relationships to their DV exposure and parents' relationship. We created a new table to then organize and assess the varying ways in which participants compared, including comparing their romantic partner to father, comparing their romantic relationship to parents' marriage, and comparing their own relationship behaviors to those of their mother or father. I then began writing a series of memos on these comparing behaviors, how they influenced the participants' relationship decisions and experiences, and noted how they varied (or did not vary) depending on the type of relationship (i.e., non-abusive, abusive, no relationship). At this stage, we decided to separate HS from college relationships, as the developmental stage seemed salient to notably different relationship experiences, while noting the influence of other family factors (i.e., family rules, boundaries). I along with the principle investigator created a series of tables by developmental stage and type of relationship to better examine the participants' relationship experiences, how they compared their romantic relationship experiences to their family life, and additional, influential family factors. For example, one table detailed the experiences of participants who had abusive HS partners. Following the completion of these tables, I wrote memos that helped further disentangle what

non-abusive and abusive behaviors looked like, leading us to adjust the placement of a few participants within the aforementioned matrix. This process was aided by returning to the interviews and MAXQDA to check our participants in the matrix, as well as any additional details that warranted an extra check. Upon the finalization of the matrix, I along with the principle investigator returned to the DV exposure analyses from Haselschwerdt et al. (in press) to examine whether the participants' relationship experiences appeared related to the type of DV they were exposed to (i.e., SCV or CCV) as well as the severity and frequency of the physical violence (see Tables 1 and 2). I then returned to the memoing process, focusing on the impact of family factors and DV exposure as well as developmental timing of romantic relationships. Through drafting revisions– using constant comparison between the interviews, memos, tables, and the matrix – these detailed memos ultimately comprised the Findings section.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, or the degree to which qualitative findings are supported by evidence and can be trusted as accurate reflections of participants' beliefs and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was achieved in three ways. First, the data was independently coded and checked by at least two research team members at all stages throughout the data collection and analysis process. Specifically, all interviews were read and listened to on multiple occasions by each team member; memos were peer reviewed by the principle investigator and at least one team member; tables were reviewed for accuracy by the principle investigator. Additionally, all interview transcripts were independently coded into MAXQDA by at least two research team members. My tables and memos were peer reviewed by multiple research team members, including the principle investigator, and the main romantic relationship table was independently completed by three team members. There were few discrepancies within the team members coding and

interpretations throughout this research process, but any discrepancies were discussed at weekly meetings until arriving at a consensus. Second, reflexivity (Charmaz, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2015) was integrated into my analyses through discussions during lab meetings as well as a reflective memo on my social positioning and personal experiences, as they pertained to this research study with the goal of reducing my subjective bias. Finally, trustworthiness was established by presenting direct quotes from the participants as evidence of the findings.

## Findings

Participants had varying romantic relationship experiences during HS and college. Sixteen participants were involved in romantic relationships both during HS and college, two participants were in HS relationships only, and one participant was in a romantic relationship during college only. Most participants reported only one romantic relationship during each developmental stage, but when participants reported multiple romantic relationships, we focused only on salient (e.g. serious, impactful) versus casual relationships. Romantic relationships were categorized into either non-abusive or abusive, with attention paid to the variations within each type. We begin with a description of the participants' HS romantic relationships, followed by an explanation of how exposure to DV and other family factors influenced those relationships, and conclude with a description of the participants' college relationships, including the impact of DV exposure, other family factors, and HS relationships. We also discuss the role of DV and other family factors for the participants who were not involved in romantic relationships during HS ( $n = 6$ ) or college ( $n = 8$ ) at the time of the interview, including those who had never been in a romantic relationship ( $n = 5$ ) at the time of the interview.

### High School Romantic Relationships

The nineteen participants who reported involvement in HS romantic relationships were categorized as having been in either non-abusive ( $n = 7$ ) or abusive ( $n = 12$ ) relationships. Non-abusive HS relationships were by and large developmentally appropriate and did not involve physical violence or abuse, whereas abusive HS relationships involved violence, verbal abuse, and/or coercive control. HS romantic relationships varied in length from one month to over five years ( $M = 2.36$  years). With the exception of one participant who casually dated in middle school, these participants did not recall romantic involvement prior to HS.

**Non-abusive high school romantic relationships.** Seven participants reported involvement in non-abusive romantic relationships during HS, ranging in length ( $M = 2.43$  years), level of commitment, and quality; all participants were female and dated males. In general, these relationships ( $n = 5$ ) were healthy, supportive, developmentally appropriate for HS, and ended amicably. In contrast, two HS relationships or romantic partners were described as unhealthy and unsupportive, but not violent nor abusive. For example, Aaliyah's boyfriend reportedly used drugs, got into trouble in school, and made poor grades. Aaliyah attempted to help and motivate him to do better, but ultimately ended the relationship because he cheated on her and she "was giving it 100%, and he was giving like 50 [to the relationship]." Overall, these relationships were less committed and shorter in duration than those described as healthy.

The five participants with healthy and supportive HS partners recalled bonding over common interests (e.g. camping, kayaking, video games) and described their partners as sweet and supportive. Involvement in healthy relationships with supportive partners seemingly encouraged more comfortable disclosure of their DV exposure experiences, and thus, many relied on their partners for support, which helped participants manage their home lives. Supportive HS boyfriends often exhibited protective behaviors such as helping participants escape or avoid potentially dangerous situations involving their fathers, or opening up their homes as a safe place from the DV. For example, while Taylor and her mother were in hiding from her abusive stepfather, her boyfriend helped protect them by telling her stepfather that he and Taylor had broken up to prevent her stepfather from finding her and her mother. These partners also physically intervened in the rare event that fathers became violent towards the participants' mother or siblings in front of them. For example, Caitlin described an instance in which her father was physically attacking her brother and her boyfriend intervened: "My

boyfriend . . . walked in and actually pulled my dad off of him. I was like extremely grateful for that. I don't think he ever realizes how much.”

The majority of non-abusive relationships ended either before the participant began college ( $n = 4$ ) or during the participants' first year of college ( $n = 1$ ), with the exception of one relationship that had resulted in a marital engagement. Relationship dissolution was most often initiated by the participants ( $n = 4$  versus  $n = 1$  partner initiated) when they did not see their relationships becoming more serious (i.e., marriage), or they were no longer romantically interested in their partner; however, many participants stayed in touch or remained friends with their former partners. Details regarding the relationships dissolution were unavailable for three participants, although it was inferred that the ending was amicable given the participants' description of the relationship.

**Abusive high school romantic relationships.** Twelve participants were in abusive relationships during HS and with one exception, all participants were female and dated males; relationships lasted an average of 2.29 years. Abusive HS relationships involved varying forms of violence and abuse, including physical violence ( $n = 5$ ), verbal abuse ( $n = 4$ ), and coercive control ( $n = 10$ ); most relationships involved multiple forms of abusive behaviors ( $n = 7$ ). For example, three participants experienced physical violence *and* controlling behaviors by their HS partners.

Five HS romantic relationships involved physical violence perpetrated against the participant ( $n = 4$ ), or perpetrated mutually between the participant and her partner ( $n = 1$ ). Acts of physical violence ranged in severity and frequency and included behaviors such as shoving, hitting, and being pushed down the stairs. Three participants reported repeated acts of physical violence, whereas two reported sole instances of physical violence (i.e., pushing on one

occasion) by their partner. Four participants minimized the violence by justifying their partners' use of violence or diminishing its' impact. Justifying their partners' use of violence entailed not blaming their partner for their use of violence, or by placing full or partial blame on themselves for engaging in arguments that led to violence. Participants diminished the impact or severity of the violence by describing a lack of injury or distress after describing the violence. Allison said:

He never broke any bones; he never hurt my face. It was more [like] he would throw things at me. The last time that I saw him, he did push me down the stairs, but they were short stairs, like, I was not injured.

Aside from or, in some cases, in addition to physical violence, participants reported experiencing verbal abuse, including being called names, being degraded and demeaned, and being yelled at or cussed out.

Although physical violence and verbal abuse were commonly described by the participants, HS partners' use of controlling behaviors was the most prevalent form of abuse ( $n = 10$ ). Abusive partners use of controlling behaviors limited the participants' independence and autonomy. These controlling behaviors included using surveillance and monitoring (e.g. questioning whereabouts, what they were doing, and with whom) and controlling partners clothing and appearance, actions that are consistent with the definition of coercive control in the adult literature (Hardesty et al., 2015; Johnson, 2008). Elizabeth recalled how her former boyfriend would say, "you look like a tramp for wearing this . . . you should wear more make-up for me when you come over to visit because I don't like that you come back from work looking like a sweaty mess." With the exception of Mary Beth, whose boyfriend became controlling toward the end of their relationship in an attempt to keep her from leaving for college, controlling behaviors were a pervasive, continuous part of these HS relationships. It appeared

that the root cause of the abusive partners' use of controlling behaviors was jealousy. Four participants explicitly described their HS partners as jealous, which was generally characterized as a concern that the participant may be unfaithful or act in a way that the partner disapproved of while in his or her absence. Hence, abusive partners would use surveillance and monitoring behaviors to maintain awareness of participants' whereabouts and company or demand that their partner refrain from certain activities. Mia said, "People would put pictures up on Facebook, and I would be standing next to a boy . . . and he would get very upset and say, 'You're standing too close to him. I don't even know why you're going out.'" Despite numerous examples of jealous and controlling behaviors, three participants' HS boyfriends cheated during their relationship.

All of these abusive relationships ended either before the participant began college ( $n = 10$ ) or during the participants' first year of college ( $n = 2$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 10$ ) ended these relationships upon realizing that their partners were indeed abusive, the violence and control were escalating (e.g., being pressured sexually, partner threatening family), but also out of fear of that the violence was going to escalate. The influence of or interference from another individual helped three participants determine that their relationships were abusive, and that they needed to leave the relationship. For example, London's best friend observed London's stepfather's abusive behavior and her HS boyfriend's behavior and encouraged her to "get away from it now" because they both knew "what abusive relationships can lead to," in reference to her stepfather. Going away to college also served as a catalyst for realizing the nature of their partners' behavior and deciding that they deserved better; thus, they ended the relationship. Jasmine explained:

It was getting to college and realizing the world is humongous because I grew up in a small town . . . I just didn't feel like there were a lot of people there for you to have a



choice of who you want. Then I got to college and there were all these different types of people and . . . I didn't have to be stuck with anyone I didn't want to be stuck with. No one could be a part of my life if I didn't want them to be, and I ended up just growing and realizing that I needed standards for my life if I was going to be happy.

**The role of familial contextual factors.** Familial contextual factors, including DV exposure ( $n = 15$ ), and family rules and boundaries ( $n = 14$ ) directly influenced how participants initiated, managed, coped with, and ended their HS relationships. These family factors impacted all three types of HS romantic relationship experiences (i.e., abusive, non-abusive, or no relationships). For several participants, multiple familial factors influenced their relationship experiences. It is likely that the participants' families indirectly influenced these HS relationships, however, we focused our analyses on the directly stated or strongly implied family contextual factors pertaining to their HS romantic relationship experiences.

*The influence of DV exposure.* DV exposure experiences directly impacted fifteen participants' HS relationship perception and management. DV exposure was influential for participants who were involved in non-abusive and abusive HS relationships, as well as those with no HS relationship experiences, though its influence manifested differently in each group. Participants compared their HS partners, relationship dynamics, and themselves to their abusive fathers and their parents' relationship, but these comparisons occurred at different times in the relationship depending on whether or not they were in a relationship and the type of relationship (i.e., non-abusive versus abusive) they experienced.

Participants without HS romantic relationship experiences, as well as those who had non-abusive HS relationships compared potential partners and HS relationships to their fathers' behavior and their parents' relationship *before* entering a relationship or in the relationships'

early stages. Exposure to DV and high-conflict marriages led these two groups to fear romantic relationships and commitment, resulting in hesitancy or avoidance of romantic relationships or commitment. Though both groups expressed similar caution and hesitancy toward romantic relationships, those without HS relationships seemingly avoided relationships all together, whereas those in non-abusive HS relationships were cautious but not relationship avoidant. Participants in non-abusive HS relationships reported exposure to more frequent and severe physical violence and higher CCV compared to the other groups, which may explain some between-group differences. Participants who were exposed to more intense physical violence and CCV were very aware of warning signs of abusive relationships dynamics, and therefore, actively sought out romantic partners who would treat them well, unlike how their fathers treated their mothers. For both groups, hesitancy or general caution in entering romantic relationships was often out of self-protection and fear of repeating their parents' mistakes. For example, Stephanie explained that her parents rushed into their relationship, and therefore, she planned to take romantic relationships slowly for fear that rushing could lead to an abusive relationship. These precautions helped participants to guard themselves from potential partners who behaved similarly to their fathers. For example, Ellie used her parents' marriage to help her identify red flags to determine whether potential partners are worth dating. She said, "I think I observe things . . . a lot more than maybe people who come from happy homes because they don't know what to look for, and I know what it could turn into in the future."

Participants who had abusive HS relationships similarly compared their partner and relationship to their abusive fathers and their parents' marriage, but they did so at *later* stages of their relationships than the other participants. These comparisons generally occurred once participants began to recognize initial signs of abuse in their own relationship, rather than before

the relationship began. Through the process of comparing their own relationship experiences to their DV exposure experiences, participants were able to note similarities and differences between their relationships and those of their parents. These comparisons led six participants to recognize how their partners' abusive behavior or the nature of their relationship was reminiscent of their DV exposure, and based on that conclusion, decided to end the relationship. For example, when Lauren's boyfriend became violent, she saw this as a sign to end the relationship because she "couldn't be with someone like that because he was too much like her dad." Comparing HS relationships to their parents' abusive marriage also led participants to modify their own relationship behavior either in that relationship, or in new relationships. For example, Blair and her HS boyfriend both engaged in physical violence to resolve their conflicts, which she attributed to how she learned to resolve conflict from her family of origin: "It's like, that's the way that you fix it, just hitting, and then you deal with it. I see now that [hitting] is not solving anything." Participants also began comparing themselves in their abusive relationships to their mothers in their abusive marriages, which helped them to recognize warning signs and leave the relationship or modify their own behavior. Jasmine said: "I constantly kind of just brushed it off, which now that I look back, is kind of what I saw my mom do. It's like, 'Oh it's okay because he still loves me.'"

*The influence of family rules and boundaries.* Family rules and boundaries, including overt rules and restrictions (e.g. limiting social life, not allowing to date until age 18, and strict curfews), and open (e.g., parents providing relationship support and advice) versus closed-off (e.g., inability to discuss dating relationships, emotionally inaccessible parents) emotional boundaries directly influenced how 14 participants managed their HS relationships.

Explicit rules and restrictions against dating and closed-off emotional boundaries created a family environment in which participants were reluctant to discuss their abusive relationship experiences with their parents, resulting in no parental guidance nor support, since they were not supposed to be dating or discussing romantic relationships in the first place. For seven participants, these rules and boundaries were attributed to their reportedly overly intrusive and controlling fathers who limited their ability to partake in what is often viewed as developmentally normative, adolescent activities (e.g. dating, spending time with friends, leaving the home for non-school related activities). For two participants, cultural rules (e.g., first-generation immigrants, religious beliefs) against dating were the main reason they abstained from romantic relationships during HS. Keli stated, “The culture wouldn’t allow it . . . We never talked about it [romantic relationships], but it always seemed like very taboo.” Overly intrusive parenting did not always preclude romantic relationships, but at times, the parents’, including the mothers’ personal beliefs regarding whom the participant was dating (e.g., same-sex partner, dislike of partner due to personal biases) led to more secrecy or less honest disclosures about their romantic relationship involvement; further contributing to closed-off boundaries and creating an environment in which participants could not disclose dating violence or unhealthy relationships.

In contrast, two participants described how their families’ open boundaries created environments that facilitated communication about their romantic relationships. Specifically, two mothers intervened by talking with their daughters about abusive relationships when they noticed warning signs in their daughters’ partners’ behavior. For example, Barbara’s mother noticed signs that Barbara’s boyfriend was abusive and talked to Barbara about it, likening the

boyfriends' behaviors to those of her father. This open communication resulted in Barbara's decision to address these concerns with her boyfriend. She stated:

It worried my mom when I came home upset so often after he [HS boyfriend] left . . .  
My mom talked to me about that, and I was going to talk to him about how he was  
treating me differently, when he decided he didn't want to date me anymore.

Similarly, Amelia attributed her healthy HS relationship experiences to her mothers' openness in discussing the red flags of abuse, which created a comfortable environment for her to discuss relationship issues.

### **College Romantic Relationships**

Seventeen participants reported involvement in at least one romantic relationship during college; one participant described two salient college romantic relationships. In contrast to the HS relationships, there was less heterogeneity in college experiences, as all seventeen college relationships were categorized as non-abusive and reasonably positive, healthy, and long lasting ( $M = 2.57$  years; hereafter referred to as healthy college relationships). At the time of the interview, eight participants reported no involvement in committed, college romantic relationships; most ( $n = 7$ ) participants were in the first three years of college at the time of the interview. Three of these participants casually dated, but did not describe these relationships as committed. Five participants without college relationships also did not date in HS, and therefore, had not had any romantic relationships through the time of the interview. Like the non-abusive, healthy HS partners, the college partners were described as caring, supportive, empathic, and protective, but the participants described the college relationships as more committed, which is consistent with past research on HS versus young adult romantic relationships (Meier & Allen, 2008). Serious and committed relationships created an environment in which participants ( $n =$

14) were comfortable disclosing their DV exposure experiences, resulting in their feeling validated and supported by their partner; thus, deepening the relational bonds and commitment level. Though the majority fully disclosed the DV to their college partners, four participants were cautious in how much they shared, selectively disclosing some but not all of their family issues (e.g. sharing about affairs, but not physical violence). Others recalled feeling reluctant to disclose because their partners did not have similar experiences, and they feared judgment or pity. Allison stated:

He grew up in a different household than I did. He's heard his mom and dad fight; he can count [the fights] on one hand . . . so they're very normal, I guess. He was the only [person] that I have ever met that I was really worried about judging me when he found out, but he's taken it very well . . . the entire time.

Unsurprisingly given the participants' description of these relationships as healthy, supportive, and committed, the majority ( $n = 15$ ) of non-abusive college relationships remained in-tact at the time of the interview; two relationships resulting in marriage engagements, although one was carried over from HS as noted before. The remaining three relationships ended due to normative relationship dissolution reasons, such as growing apart, or not foreseeing a long-term partnership.

**The role of family on college romantic relationships.** Family contextual factors, including DV exposure ( $n = 18$ ) and family rules and boundaries ( $n = 2$ ), directly influenced how participants initiated and managed their college relationships. As in the HS section, we solely focus on directly stated or strongly implied family contextual factors.

*The influence of DV exposure.* DV exposure was a salient factor in participants' management and understanding of their college romantic relationships. The participants in

healthy college relationships reported exposure to more severe and frequent DV and more CCV in their homes than those without college relationship experiences. As with those in non-abusive HS relationships, these participants actively identified partners who were dissimilar to their fathers. In order to make decisions regarding romantic partners or aspects of their relationships, participants directly compared their partner to their father, or their own relationship to their parents' relationship. Ellie stated, “. . . he's very different from my dad—very different. He's just very easy going, and he's not like my dad in any aspect . . . he is a lot more caring.”

For the eight participants without college romantic relationship experiences, exposure to DV appeared to contribute to their lack of involvement. However, with one exception, all participants reported that their experiences had not diminished their desire to date, and they aspired to get married someday. Exposure to DV contributed to their beliefs regarding what was and what was not acceptable in relationships, and gave them the tools to better recognize the red flags of an unhealthy relationship. Stephanie said that she would “run” if she came across anyone with the traits of her father. Actively avoiding partners with traits that were similar to their fathers was common among participants without college relationship experiences, and led them to remain very guarded to the point of avoiding romantic relationships, or deeper intimacy when dating in college. Annie explained, “I kind of don't want to date, and when I do, I don't really get that involved in it. And I don't really [want to] put that many emotions into it because I don't want to get hurt.” Similarly, Emma expressed her caution and self-protection regarding romantic relationships:

I feel like it [DV exposure] has made me very skeptical . . . I am very picky . . . it is like I am very cautious about what I do. I have that wall and you better start chiseling it because it is not coming down anytime soon . . . I am just like very protective of myself .

. . . all of the experiences with my dad and my stepdad have turned me into a woman that I am not going to let any man get in my way. I am not going to let you hurt me, harm me, control me, like I am very much set on my wants, my needs . . . I feel like that it can be very positive, but it can also be very negative in the sense that I do have that wall up. I don't let people in.

Exposure to DV and high conflict marriages also led to a fear that the participants would mirror their parents' relationship in their own lives. Thus, they were hesitant and cautious in choosing partners or entering relationships all together for fear that the partners would become abusive. London said, “. . . I do look for those red flags a lot . . . I think it has made me a little more picky than others, but that's just because I want to be cautious.”

Further, eight participants compared themselves to either their mother or father, noting how their similarities (e.g. conflict avoidant, verbally aggressive) or differences (e.g. more cautious in romantic partner choice) impacted their behavior or management of romantic relationships. Those who compared themselves to their mothers generally described a fear that they would end up in a similarly abusive relationship and struggle to leave due to people pleasing or conflict avoidant tendencies. Sarah termed her mother a “people pleaser” and feared that she will behave similarly because she “lets people push her around,” but she was working to improve that aspect of herself. In contrast, participants who compared themselves to their fathers generally noted how their own aggressive tendencies in romantic relationships mirrored those of their fathers. However, these participants recognized their fathers' behaviors through their own actions and were working to modify these behaviors. For example, Keli said she grew up in a “family of yellors,” so yelling was part of her relationship communication style, but she had made improvement and said, “I pride myself on not yelling, like I don't raise my voice



anymore.” Stefan reported actively working on working through arguments with his college girlfriend, a skill his parents struggled with: “I made a point to learn how to argue . . . state my case, but let it go.”

*The influence of family rules and boundaries.* It seemed as though family rules and boundaries were less impactful on college relationship experiences compared to the HS relationships, which is logical given the participants’ shift from living at home to attending college away from home. Thus, they were away from particular family rules and dynamics that inhibited their prior relationship involvement. College allowed for more freedom and provided participants with the opportunity for a “fresh start” in terms of their relationship experiences. However, both Mia and Briana reported the residual effects of their family rules or boundaries, even as they transitioned into college. Mia explained that her college boyfriend was “wonderful” and was her best friend, but she felt things were moving too quickly and that she was becoming too deeply involved, and therefore, ended the relationship. Mia’s families’ closed-off boundaries (e.g. no open communication, minimal expression of emotion or affection) negatively impacted her ability to become intimately connected with a romantic partner. Briana’s mother does not approve of the fact that she dates women, and therefore, she has less support of her relationship from her family because her mother “doesn’t really agree with [her] lifestyle,” making it hard to discuss her relationship.

*The role of abusive HS relationships on college relationships.* Just as many participants’ made comparisons between their families of origin and romantic partners to guide their relationship involvement and management, five of the ten participants who had abusive HS partners used their past relationship *and* DV exposure experiences to inform their college relationships. It is likely that all of the abusive HS relationships influenced the participants’

involvement in and experiences with college relationships, but we only include the five participants who make a direct or strongly implied reference to the impact of their abusive HS relationships on their college relationships.

Having an abusive HS relationship in addition to their DV exposure further emphasized red flags of abusive partners, or what they were *not* looking for in a romantic partner. In retrospect, some participants expressed regret or were surprised that they did not recognize the similarities between the abusive partner and their father or the signs of abuse sooner. However, as we know from the adult DV literature (e.g., Hardesty et al., 2015; Johnson, 2008), not all DV is the same, which can contribute to missed warning signs if you are only cognizant of some aspects of abuse but not all. For example, Elizabeth noted that she struggled to recognize her HS boyfriend's behaviors as abusive because they differed from how her father treated her mother. She said,

I [didn't] recognize the more subtle things, because I'm like, I know what abuse looks like. It looks like yelling, and screaming, and hitting walls, and throwing grills. When really, it can be a lot more subtle; and it can be little like snide digs that happen over the course of like several months.

Moving forward, these participants said they would never accept the kind of treatment and abuse they had experienced in their HS relationships, knowing what they know now and when contrasting their abusive HS partners to their healthy and supportive current partners. In addition to their greater awareness of the complexity of DV, the participants noted differences between their HS and college partners' levels of support, kindness, emotional availability, generosity, and flexibility (e.g. less controlling and rigid behaviors among college partners). Barbara stated,

“Yes, he’s very different [than my HS boyfriend]. He wants to do things I want to do, and not force me to do anything that I’m not wanting to do.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to build upon the literature examining the association between early DV exposure and adolescent and young adult romantic relationships (i.e., ITV), particularly dating violence, to shed light on the complexity of this association. The theory of ITV posits that exposure to DV increases one's propensity for involvement in dating violence during adolescence and adulthood (Christoff, & Henning, 2007; Kalmuss, 1984), but support for this theory is mixed (Edwards, Dixon, Gidycz & Desai, 2014; Kalmuss; Lundberg, Stith, Penn, & Ward; 2004; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Smith-Marek; et al., 2015). These mixed findings and the unitary focus on testing the ITV, neglecting the full range of potential romantic relationship experiences (Gover, Kaukinen and Fox, 2008; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), warranted a qualitative examination of DV-exposed young adults' relationship experiences beyond solely focusing on abusive relationships. Our findings provide partial support for the theory of ITV, particularly in the context of HS relationships. Nearly half of the participants report involvement in abusive HS relationships, but no abusive relationships during college through the time of the interviews. In addition, our findings highlight complexity in these romantic relationships over time, such that diversity within DV exposure (e.g., DV type, and characteristics of physical violence) and other family factors (i.e., rules and boundaries) strongly influences the participants' romantic relationship experiences.

### **Romantic Relationships over Time**

Our first research question asked about the romantic relationship experiences of young adults exposed to father perpetrated marital violence. Our findings are consistent with our

hypothesis in that participants reported a range of relationship experiences, from great to terrible, with plenty of variation in between. Yet, these relationship experiences vary depending on whether the young adults were in HS or college, revealing the salience of *developmental timing* on assessing the association between DV exposure and dating violence involvement.

Our findings are consistent with Smith-Marek and colleagues (2015), suggesting that other interactional factors beyond exposure to DV are important in the examination of ITV and also explain the past literatures' mixed findings; the association between earlier DV exposure and later relationships is complicated and not linear, as often presented or hypothesized. For example, all of the participants were exposed to DV and would meet the typically used quantitative criteria for exposure (e.g., any reported DV exposure), but only 10 of the 25 participants reported abusive relationships up to the time of the interview; all occurring during HS. This finding underscores the complexity and importance of examining ITV at multiple developmental stages. Consistent with prior research demonstrating the distinct influence of adolescent relationships on young adult relationships, our findings suggest the salience of adolescent romantic relationships as scaffolding for future relationships (Meier & Allen, 2008). Similarly, previous research has found that the greatest risk factor for college dating violence victimization is previous victimization during childhood and adolescence (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Our findings, however, suggest that relationship experiences tend to improve over time, as ten participants involved in abusive HS relationships went on to have non-abusive relationships during college.

Further, as proposed by developmental timing theory, early involvement in serious and committed relationships can often lead to maladaptive outcomes, as young adolescents' coping skills are too underdeveloped to successfully navigate serious relationships (Furman & Collibee,

2014). Participants involved in abusive HS relationships may have used romantic partners as a source of protection or support from their high-conflict home environments, especially given that their DV exposure experiences were more extreme than those without abusive relationship experiences. However, one or both partners may have been ill-equipped to handle these developmentally inappropriate levels of intimacy and commitment (Meier & Allen; Collins, 2003) simply due to their age and inexperience, thus leading to coercive or violent tactics to manage relationship difficulties. Therefore, emphasizing the importance of examining romantic involvement at multiple developmental time periods. Finally, it seems as though leaving their abusive home environments, as well as the *contexts* of their home environment (e.g. peers, small town mentality, extended family) allowed for young adults to start fresh and create a new reality. Coming to college created distance between a home environment that may have fostered negative beliefs and habits regarding romantic relationships as well as unsupportive or distant parents. With college also came a new pool of eligible partners, likely larger than that of their high schools or hometowns, allowing for more opportunity to create healthy relationships.

### **The Impact of Family Contextual Factors**

Our second research question addressed how the nature of marital violence (e.g. CCV, SCV, severity and frequency of physical violence) and family rules and boundaries (e.g. restrictive parenting) influence young adults' romantic relationships. Participants' family of origin impacted their romantic relationship experiences as we hypothesized, but not in the manner in which we hypothesized. For example, we hypothesized that young adults exposed to CCV and more severe and frequent physical violence would report more involvement in abusive romantic relationships during HS and college, but our findings did not support this hypothesis. Our findings do, however, suggest that the impact of DV exposure was salient to participants'

romantic relationship experiences, though the association is complex and highly variant between participants. In contrast to Ireland and Smith's (2009) findings that more severe and frequent physical violence exposure increased the risk for perpetrating dating violence, our findings suggested that exposure to more severe, frequent, and coercive DV was associated with *not* engaging in dating violence during adolescence and young adulthood. However, Ireland and Smith's (2009) sample was predominately male and focused on dating violence perpetrations, whereas our sample was almost entirely females who largely reporting on dating violence victimization, which likely accounts for these contrasting findings. Participants exposed to CCV and more severe and frequent physical violence, instead, were quite strategic and particular in choosing romantic partners dissimilar to their fathers or their parents' abusive marriage. We suspect that these participants' particularly abusive and violence exposure experiences led them to be extra cautious when meeting potential romantic partners and before entering into a committed relationship. In contrast, the participants exposed to SCV and less severe and frequent physical violence seemed more likely to be involved in abusive HS relationships. A potential explanation is that these participants were less attuned to more coercive and manipulative types of abusive relationships, as was the case for Elizabeth, since her HS boyfriends' abuse differed from that of her father. Additionally, it is plausible that those exposed to SCV report experiences more consistent with the theory of ITV than those exposed to CCV. However, future research focused on DV-exposed young adults is needed to better explain these findings.

The influence of DV exposure on romantic relationship involvement was also evidenced by participants' differential comparing behaviors. Comparing their own experiences to those of their parents often took place at different times, likely contributing to differential relationship experiences. Those with non-abusive relationships were more apt to compare potential partners

or relationships to their fathers' or parents *early* in the relationship or even before the relationship began. Preemptive comparisons likely led participants away from potentially abusive relationships, as they avoided partners who may have engaged in behaviors similar to their father. It is likely that these participants compared at earlier stages due to their more extreme DV exposure (i.e., CCV), further reinforcing their desire to avoid situations reminiscent of their home environments. In contrast, participants in abusive relationships utilized comparing behaviors *during* or *after* the relationship; the comparisons then served as a reinforcement of what they did not want in future relationships. These participants likely engaged in comparisons at a later time because many of their DV exposure experiences were less severe (i.e., SCV), and experiencing abuse first hand was potentially more influential in their desire to have non-abusive future relationships. Ten participants involved in abusive HS relationships went on to have non-abusive relationships during college. By comparing their abusive partner or the relationship to that of their fathers' abuse and parents' marriage, participants were able to recognize these patterns in the abusive tendencies of their partners. These participants often learned what they did and did not want from a romantic relationship from their DV exposure experiences and their own negative relationship experiences. Upon recognizing similarities between their own partner and father, or their own relationship and their parents' relationship, many participants expressed no desire to repeat the pattern of abuse. This recognition often led initially to the termination of the relationship, but in a more long-term sense, led participants to be more particular in partner choice and cautious about potential involvement in abusive relationships.

Aside from the direct DV exposure, the participants' family rules and boundaries also contributed to their romantic relationship experiences. We found that participants raised in households with closed off boundaries were more discouraged to communicate and seek support



from parents regarding relationship concerns, including dating violence and other unhealthy behavior than those with more open and supportive communication, which is consistent with previous literature asserting that low emotional responsiveness and closed off boundaries in families are related to poor adjustment (Stocker, Richmond, Rhoades & Kiang, 2007). Having parents who welcomed and initiated conversations regarding relationship involvement and engaged in coaching behaviors (e.g., providing advice, skills, or information) at the very least, created a family dynamic that allowed the participants to seek help if in an abusive relationship as they were comfortable seeking advice or help.

### **Limitations**

This study's findings should be considered in the context of several limitations. First, the interviews conducted were at least partially retrospective. Although the participants were seemingly able to recall very detailed memories from their childhood, we could not fully avoid retrospective bias, in that memories may have been incorrectly recalled. Since many of the participants had abusive HS relationships and were now involved in healthy college relationships, their recollections may reflect their current perspectives on their relationships as opposed to characteristics or elements of their HS partners and relationships. Additionally, the influence of having healthier relationships since their abusive relationship experiences may have shaped their interpretations of the abusive behaviors. However, consistent with previous researchers' hypotheses (Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010) these young adults were able to recall and process exposure to DV and coercive control, and relationship experiences in a more sophisticated way than they would have at a younger age, which is a strength of the current study. A second limitation of the study is that we did not ask detailed follow-up or probing questions focused on the participants' romantic relationship experiences during all of the

interviews, as this study is part of a larger study that included various areas of study, not solely romantic relationships. Thus, there were inconsistencies in the level of detail that participants provided – some offering very detailed accounts of their partners and the relationship and others providing more abstract or superficial responses (e.g., “HS boyfriend was supportive”). Nevertheless, the participants provided ample detail on their past and present relationships to address the two research questions. Finally, despite our concerted effort to recruit male participants, our sample was predominantly comprised of females, and therefore the findings are less generalizable to DV-exposed men. An even gender distribution may have allowed us to more fully examine dating violence victimization *and* perpetration, previous research has found small effect sizes revealing that DV exposure is more often related to later perpetration for males, and victimization for females (Smith-Marek et al., 2015). However, the two men in our study provided narratives that were consistent with the larger Findings.

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

Despite the noted limitations, our findings can inform future research, and potentially, practice with DV-exposed young adults, particularly women. Our findings highlight the complexities and implications of DV exposure on romantic relationship involvement. It is important to recognize the multifaceted nature of DV exposure and the factors that contribute to future propensity for dating violence.

The current study focused primarily on the impact of selective modeling, however future directions would benefit from examining generalized modeling in conjunction with specific modeling (often referred to as dual exposure). Research examining the association between experiencing child abuse and future involvement in dating violence has also yielded mixed results (Edwards, Dixon, Gidycz & Desai, 2014; Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008, Karakurt,

Keiley, & Posada, 2013; Smith-Marek et al., 2015). Haselschwerdt et. Al. (in press) found that fathers who exhibit more severe and controlling violence are also more likely to perpetrate violence toward their children, putting children of coercively controlling fathers at greater risk for dual exposure and greater maladaptive outcomes. Future directions may assess the impact of dual exposure in the context of SCV and CCV to assess ITV in particular, but also to extend out study's findings to examine the broader role of DV exposure and family factors on young adults' romantic relationship experiences.

Further, future directions may address the fact that participants were still of college age when data was collected and therefore their adult romantic relationship experiences are unknown, which presents as a limitation as time proved an important consideration in understanding how DV impacted their romantic experiences. Theoretically, future research would benefit from examining how DV exposure influences romantic relationships into adulthood as well. Further, it would be pertinent for future research to examine other variables that may be mediating the relationship between DV exposure and romantic relationship involvement. For example, assessing partner characteristics may reveal further nuances in exposed youths' abilities to manage romantic relationships, such as partner DV exposure, romantic relationship beliefs, and partner perception of participant experiences. Though not addressed in the current study, partner characteristics likely play a salient role in participants' management, disclosure, and outcomes following DV exposure.

Clinicians and other professionals working with DV-exposed youth should be aware of the important role developmental timing plays in relationship health for those exposed to DV, as well as consider salient family factors related to future dating violence involvement or avoidance. Specifically, recognizing the increased risk of younger individuals for involvement in

dating violence and thus increasing early intervention and prevention would be beneficial. Additionally, clinicians and other professionals should attempt to assess and conceptualize family variables to identify risk factors and plan for prevention or treatment. It is imperative to encourage family factors that facilitate positive adjustment, including open communication and boundaries, and emphasis on disclosure. Finally, practitioners would benefit from recognizing the increased risk of dating violence involvement for those youth exposed to less severe, frequent and coercive forms of DV, helping them to recognize the signs of abuse *before* it occurs rather than after. To do so, families and clinicians may encourage the use of comparisons to increase awareness of behaviors similar to those they grew up exposed to. These nuances could play a distinct role in educating parents, children, teachers, and others involved in a DV-exposed

## **Conclusions**

DV-exposed young adults have varying romantic relationship experiences during HS and college. Our findings provide partial support for the theory of ITV, particularly in the context of HS relationships, but all participants described various ways in which variations in DV exposure strongly influenced their involvement (or lack of involvement) in romantic relationships, as well as how they managed and ended the relationships. We found that romantic relationships of DV-exposed young adults report more involvement in dating violence during HS than college, indicating a general improvement in relationship experiences over time. Participants compared their partner (non-abusive and abusive) and their relationships to their father and parents' marital relationship, as well as their own behavior within the relationship based on their DV exposure experiences and family rules and boundaries. Nevertheless, the influence of DV exposure, the role of the participants' parents and family environment, romantic relationship experiences, and participants' view of their involvement in romantic relationships changed over time. When taken

together, these findings underscore the heterogeneity in DV-exposed young adults' romantic relationships, and the importance of examining the complexities of their experiences.

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## **Appendix A - Tables**

Table 1. *Domestic Violence Exposure and Child Abuse by High School Relationship Type*

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Violence Type</u>		<u>Physical violence exposure</u>	
	<u>SCV</u>	<u>CCV</u>	<u>Severe</u>	<u>Frequent</u>
<b>Abusive High School (n = 11)</b>				
P1 Lauren	<i>low</i>			
P2 Elizabeth	<i>low</i>		X	
P3 Jasmine		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P4 Barbara		<i>high</i>	X	X
P5 Sarah		<i>high</i>		X
P6 Briana	<i>none</i>		X	X
P7 Mia	<i>low</i>			X
P10 Blair		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P13 London		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P20 Stefan	<i>none</i>		X	
P24 Allison	<i>low</i>		X	
<b>Non Abusive High School (n = 7)</b>				
P9 Ellie		<i>moderate</i>		
P11 Caitlin		<i>high</i>	X	X
P15 Taylor		<i>high</i>	X	X
P16 Aaliyah		<i>high</i>	X	X
P17 Alexis		<i>high</i>	X	X
P23 Emma		<i>high</i>	X	X
P25 Amelia		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
<b>No High School (n = 7)</b>				
P8 Keli		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P12 Annie	<i>low</i>		X	
P14 Victoria	<i>none</i>		X	
P18 Stephanie	<i>low</i>		X	
P19 Joshua	<i>none</i>		X	
P21 Mary Beth		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P22 Rebecca		<i>moderate</i>	X	

yellow = both

blue = verbal

pink = physical

red font = mother only

Table 2. Domestic Violence Exposure and Child Abuse by College Relationship Type

Participants	Violence Type		Physical violence exposure	
	SCV	CCV	Severe	Frequent
<b>Non -Abusive College(n = 17)</b>				
P1 Lauren	<i>low</i>			
P2 Elizabeth	<i>low</i>		X	
P3 Jasmine		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P4 Barbara		<i>high</i>	X	X
P5 Sarah		<i>high</i>		X
P6 Briana	<i>none</i>		X	X
P7 Mia	<i>low</i>			X
P8 Keli		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P9 Ellie		<i>moderate</i>		
P10 Blair		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P11 Caitlin		<i>high</i>	X	X
P15 Taylor		<i>high</i>	X	X
P16 Aaliyah		<i>high</i>	X	X
P17 Alexis		<i>high</i>	X	X
P20 Stefan	<i>none</i>		X	
P24 Allison	<i>low</i>		X	
P25 Amelia		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
<b>No College (n = 7)</b>				
P12 Annie	<i>low</i>		X	
P13 London		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P14 Victoria	<i>none</i>		X	
P18 Stephanie	<i>low</i>		X	
P19 Joshua	<i>none</i>		X	
P21 Mary Beth		<i>moderate</i>	X	X
P22 Rebecca		<i>moderate</i>	X	
P23 Emma		<i>high</i>	X	X



## **Appendix B - Figures**

Figure 1. *Relationship Type by Developmental Period*

		<b>College</b>		
		<i>No Relationship</i>	<i>Non-Abusive Relationship</i>	<i>Abusive Relationship</i>
<b>High School</b>	<i>No Relationship</i>	<b>P12 – Annie</b> <b>P14 – Victoria</b> <b>P18 – Stephanie</b> <b>P19 – Joshua</b>	<b>P8 – Keli</b>	
	<i>Non-Abusive Relationship</i>	<b>P22 – Rebecca</b> <b>P23 – Emma</b>	<b>P9 – Ellie</b> <b>P11 – Caitlin</b> <b>P15 – Taylor</b> <b>P16 – Aaliyah</b> <b>P17 – Alexis</b> <b>P25 – Amelia</b>	
	<i>Abusive Relationship</i>	<b>P13 – London</b> <b>P21 – Mary Beth</b>	<b>P1 – Lauren</b> <b>P2 – Elizabeth</b> <b>P3 – Jasmine</b> <b>P4 – Barbara</b> <b>P5 – Sarah</b> <b>P6 – Briana</b> <b>P7 – Mia</b> <b>P10 – Blair</b> <b>P20 – Joshua</b> <b>P24 – Allison</b>	

## **Appendix C. -- Interview Protocol for Young Adults Live and Learn (Y'ALL) Project**

The purpose of this interview is for me to learn more about the experiences of young adults who were exposed to violence and abuse perpetrated by their father or father-like figure towards their mother. I am going to ask you to tell me about your family life while you were growing up through the present time as well as your past and current romantic relationships. I will also ask you how you managed your experiences within your family and community. I will ask about the violence and abuse you were exposed to in a variety of ways, but I'll encourage you to just share your story through the majority of our time together.

Finally, I want to let you know that I will not be judging you based on your responses. If I don't comment on certain things you tell me, it is because I am listening and want you to continue your story.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

We are going to begin with some demographic and background information pertaining to you, your parent's relationship, some specific questions about each family member, and then also a few about where you grew up, but first, how did you learn about the Y'ALL Project?

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### **I. Demographics/Background Information**

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. What is your highest level of education?

*If participant did not indicate who his/her mother's abusive partner was/is during the initial screening, ask the following:*

**Over email/phone you had said that your father or father-like figure had physically harmed your mother while you were growing up, was this your biological or adopted father, stepfather, or mother's partner not from marriage?**

**Now I'm going to ask you a little bit more about your mom's marital status and relationship with \_\_\_\_\_ (refer to him as participant did)?**

*[Mother's abuser is referred to as her "partner" but will be identified according to participants' labeling during interview process]*

What is your mother and her partner's marital status? [*Probe for when they got married, separated or divorced; who initiated separation/divorce; who do they primarily stay with or visit when they are home*]

*[If parents separated or divorced, probe for current relationship status, remarriage, step or half siblings]*

**Now I'm going to ask you to tell me a little bit more about your individual family members.**

1. What is your mom's age?
2. What is your mom's race or ethnicity?
3. What is your mom's highest level of education?
4. What does your mom do for a living? [Probe if these are jobs or occupations that have remained constant or have varied while growing up.]

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5. What is your mother's partner's age?
6. What is his race or ethnicity?
7. What is his highest level of education?
8. What does he do for a living? [Probe if these are jobs or occupations that have remained constant or have varied while growing up.]
9. Do you have any siblings? [If yes, probe for...]
  - a. How many?
  - b. What is their age?
  - c. Gender?
  - d. What is the birth order of siblings (e.g., oldest, middle)?
  - e. Any still living at home?
10. Are there any extended family members or individuals (e.g., nanny, grandparent) who lived in your house while you were growing up? If yes, who? When did they live in your home?

Now I'm going to take the information that you gave me to draw out a picture of your family – it's called a genogram – so that I can get a picture of who is in your family and the relationships in your family. This genogram will make it easier for me to keep track of who is in your family and the relationships between your family members while you are telling me about your experiences.

**Alright, now I'm going to ask you some questions about your family as a whole and the community you grew up in.**

11. How would you classify your family while you were growing up? *[Probe for changes between then and present; would you classify your family as \_\_\_\_\_ at the current time?]*

*Read as options, not like a multiple choice question:*

- a. Impoverished/living in poverty
- b. Working class
- c. Middle class
- d. Upper-middle class
- e. Upper class

12. Did your family ever receive any of the following public assistance services? Reduced or free school lunches, cash assistance, food assistance (food stamps), health care or child care assistance, or housing assistance (e.g., Section 8 housing)? *[If yes, specify which ones.]*

13. In what town, village, or city did you grow up or spend the majority of your childhood?

14. What sort of setting did you grew up in (for example, was it rural, urban, or suburban)?

15. If you were an outsider (e.g., not close friend or family member), how would you describe your family?

- a. How does this compare to your perspective or the reality of your home and family life?

**II. Violence, Abuse and Family Life:** I am now going to ask you to tell me about your mom and her partner's relationship and how he hurt your mom, but I will also ask you some questions about your relationship with your mother's partner and the possible ways in which he may have hurt you.

1. How would you describe your mom and her partner's relationship while you were growing up? *[Probe for whether this has always been the case, or if there were ebbs and flows or patterns of change throughout their childhood]*

2. Reflecting back on your childhood, can you tell me about the first time you realized that your mother's partner was hurting your mother? *[Probe for specific age or year in school. They did not need to label it abuse at the time, but now when they reflect back]*

3. Can you describe the physical abuse against your mother while you were growing up?

- a. Moms who experience abuse often think or hope their children don't know about, see, or hear the physical abuse but research shows children and adolescents are often very aware of the abuse. Can you tell me about your experiences (and the experiences of your siblings if relevant) of witnessing or overhearing abuse towards your mom? *[Probe for whether they witnessed, overheard, saw the aftermath (e.g., bruises, property damage),*

*or were told about it by someone else if they were not present; frequency; whether or not the participant or siblings intervened in any way]*

1. Some children and adolescent say they sometimes tried to intervene to stop the abuse, but others have said that they did not intervene because they were too scared or thought they would make things worse. Can you tell me about your experiences and opinion about intervening?

*[Probe for factors that played into their decision not to intervene; if they did intervene, did the ways in which they intervened change over time; what happened when they intervened?]*

4. In addition to physical abuse, can you describe some of the other ways that your mom experienced abuse by her partner? *[Probe with examples of emotional, sexual, financial, etc. abuse, if needed. Probe for possible controlling behaviors by asking to elaborate on examples of abuse; frequency]*

- a. *[If participant does not mention control issues in the preceding questions, directly ask if such behaviors were present.]* Would you describe him as controlling of your mother or not controlling? If yes, how so? Can you give me some examples? If no, why would you say he was not controlling?

- b. Research has indicated that children and adolescents are often exposed to the physical abuse, but we do not know much about exposure to some of non-physical abuses that you described. Can you tell me about your experiences (and the experiences of your siblings if relevant) of witnessing or overhearing these non-physical but abusive behaviors towards your mom?

*[Probe for whether they witnessed, overheard, or were told about it by someone else if they were not present; frequency; whether or not the participant or siblings intervened in any way; when they figured out that these behaviors were abusive]*

5. From your perspective, why your mom's partner was abusive towards her or what was going on to cause or lead up to the physical and non-physical abuse? *[If necessary, probe regarding specific arguments, unpredictable violence, and violence used to control.]*

6. Some women who experience abuse respond by using violence to defend themselves or protect their children, whereas others use violence against their partner because they are angry with them or want to take control of the situation. How does your mom's behaviors align with what I just read? (Or, can you tell me about a time when your mother used acts of physical violence or other abusive acts towards her partner? *(If so, did she initiate or did he, what was her motivation for her use of violence; common? infrequent)*)

7. How has your mother and her partners' relationship changed over time? *(If divorced or separated and mom initiated divorce and/or separation. Probe for responses that indicate*

*control, such as threats of violence if she left, or threats to the kids. [Probe for whether abuse continued post-separation, types of abuse]*

**Alright, now I'm going to ask you a set of questions asks about actions your mom may have experienced in her relationship with her abusive partner. You have already answered many of these questions these past few minutes. These questions have only been used in research with adult women who were hurt by their partner, so we want to see if the questions are useful in better understanding the experiences of young adults exposed to violence and abuse.**

<b>PMWI: Using the following scale, tell me how often each statement occurred from childhood through the present (If mom is separated or divorced from abusive partner, say: tell me how often each statement occurred from childhood through your mom and her partner's separation and divorce. You are also welcome to elaborate on or say more about any of the following items.</b>						
	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently	[If never] Has this ever been a problem for your mom?
PMW11. He monitored her time and made her account for her whereabouts.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW12. He used her money or made important financial decisions without talking to her about it.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW13. He was jealous or suspicious of her friends.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW14. He accused her of having an affair with another man.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW15. He interfered in her relationships with other family members.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW16. He tried to keep her from doing things to help herself. ( <i>Anything that would help her improve herself or situation.</i> )	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW17. Her partner called her names.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW18. Her partner swore at her.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW19. Her partner yelled and screamed at her.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW10. Her partner treated her like an inferior	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW11. Her partner told her that her feelings were irrational or crazy.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW12. Her partner blamed her for his problems.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes
PMW13. Her partner tried to make her feel crazy.	1	2	3	4	5	0 ___ No 1 ___ Yes



**We are about halfway through the interview, do you want to take a break or keep going?**

### **III. The Impact of Abuse on Family Dynamics and Functioning.**

For the rest of the interview, I'm going to ask you some questions about your family dynamics and functioning, how you managed your experiences, and how your experiences have influenced you, particularly in terms of your view of and involvement in relationships with your romantic partners and peers.

**First, I am going to start off with some questions about your relationship with your mother's partner. Just as a reminder, I am a mandated reporter of ongoing child abuse, so if you report any ongoing child abuse towards a sibling under 19, I would have to report this to the proper authorities.**

1. Many people report that they have a complicated relationship with their mother's partner if he was abusive to their mother meaning that they have both a good and bad relationship with him, whereas others report all positive or all negative memories or encounters with their mother's abusive partner. Can you tell me about your relationship with your mom's partner while you were growing up?

*[Probe for whether this has changed over time; probe for physical and non-physical abuse, controlling behaviors; provide examples]*

- a. *[If probes did allow for information on controlling behaviors]* Would you describe him as controlling over you and your siblings? If yes, how so? Can you give me some examples? If no, why would you say he was not controlling?

2. Compared to when you were growing up, what is your relationship like with your mom's partner now or in the past few years? *[Probe for discussion of all aspects of relationship, good, bad, controlling]*

3. (Back up question if not getting enough detail) Some people believe that a husband (or partner) who is abusive can still be a good father to their children or the mother's children while others argue that the two cannot be separated. What are your beliefs on this?

**I am now going to shift our attention to your family and home life in general and how you managed your experiences in the context of your immediate family members and those outside your family.**

4. If you were to describe what your family or home life was like in three words, what would the three words be and why would you choose them?

5. Can you tell me about a time when you talked with another family member about your his abusive behavior? *(Who initiated the conversation, when, what was the response of the other person, did the conversation remain ongoing; messages about secrecy)*

a. *If no communication, what do you think the response would have been had you told others about his abusive behavior?*

6. *(If not covered earlier)* As I mentioned in an earlier question, some mom's feel like should keep the violence and abuse a secret from their children to protect them from knowing, but other moms talk with their children and adolescence about their partner's behavior. How would you describe your communication with your mother about the abuse she experienced?

7. Can you tell me about a time when someone outside your family learned about your mother's partner's abusive behavior? *(Who initiated the conversation, when, what was the response of the other person, did the conversation remain ongoing; any other conversations with others)*

b. *If no one ever learned, how do you think someone outside the family would have responded had they learned about his behavior?*

8. Compared to when you were growing up, what is your family and home life like now? *(Probe for mother, mother's partner, siblings; reasons for change; beneficial or detrimental change)*

**IV. Interpersonal Relationships.** Alright, in this final section, I am going to ask you some questions about your relationships with peers as well as romantic partners.

1. Thinking back to your childhood and adolescence, how would you describe your relationships or how well you got along with your classmates, neighbor kids, and friends that you met while growing up? *[Probe for bully perpetration/victimization, ability to maintain close friendships; changes over time]*

a. Some young adults report that their ability to develop and maintain friendships has been negatively impacted by the abuse they experienced or were exposed to, whereas other young adults report that they have many positive friendships that helped them cope and manage their abusive home life. How does your peer or friend experiences compare with these perspectives?

2. The romantic relationships, both positive and negative, that we are exposed to in our families of origin are known to impact our views of and involvement in romantic relationships. Can you talk about how your abuse exposure experiences have impacted or not impacted your decision to enter into a romantic relationship at this point in your life, your choice of romantic partner, and your interactions with romantic partners? *[If they have never been in a romantic relationship, ask them how they EXPECT the exposure will impact their choice of and interactions with a future partner]*

3. And finally, as we wrap up, if you were given the opportunity to talk with others who were exposed to violence and abuse in their family of origin, based on your experiences, what tips or

advice would you share for coping and managing their experiences in a beneficial manner?  
**Do you have any questions or concerns for me? If not right now, please know that you can email or call if any questions arises after our meeting.**

**Thank you very much for your time and willingness to share your experiences with us. Please accept this thank you note, \$25 cash, and referral list.**

In the future we may conduct studies similar to the Y'ALL Project, would you like to give me your contact information so we can invite you to participate in future studies? This information will be kept in a confidential file cabinet and electronic file. If we were to contact you in the future, we would be using a project name similar to the Y'ALL Project and would not identify as you a participant in the current project. If you provide your contact information, you can decline our invitation to participate in any future study. This does not commit you in any way to participating. [If the participant agrees, ask the following contact information]

**Date of Participation:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Contact information:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(Email)** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(Cell/phone)** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(Additional contact information)** \_\_\_\_\_

*(Regardless of providing contact information for future studies)* **Would you like me to contact you with an overview of the final results from this study?**

*(If yes):* How would you like me to contact you? [Regardless of contact method] I will not identify the nature of the study, but rather, I will refer to the study as the Y'ALL Project and ask to make sure you would still like me to provide you with the results via the mean of communication that you suggested today. For example, I will not just email the results to you without first checking to make sure that is what you would like.

*(If yes and did not provide contact information above)*

**(Email)** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(Cell/phone)** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(Additional contact information)** \_\_\_\_\_