

ABSTRACT

EMILY ANNE BAGGETT

Familial Predictors of Young Adult Romantic Relationship Functioning: A Closer Look at Boundary Dissolution

(Under the Direction of DR. ANNE SHAFFER)

The current study examines the specific relations of boundary dissolution—the disintegration of normal parent-child roles in which the child fulfills the parent’s emotional needs to an inappropriate degree—to young adult romantic relationship satisfaction and insecurity. Boundary dissolution, retrospectively reported by 779 college undergraduates, was regressed along measures of relationship satisfaction and insecurity while controlling for the variance explained by measures of adult attachment and authoritative parenting style. Authoritative parenting style was measured by the Authoritative subscale of the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991). Adult attachment was measured by the total parent scale score of the Inventory of Peer and Parent Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Boundary dissolution was assessed using the parentification, adultification, and seductive spousification subscales of the Parent-Child Boundary Scale (PBS; Kerig, 2006). The PAQ, IPPA, and PBS were administered separately for mother and father. Romantic relationships outcomes included measures of insecurity and satisfaction. Our results indicate that, after controlling for PAQ and IPPA scores, the measures of boundary dissolution are significantly related to romantic relationship satisfaction and insecurity. Specifically, relationship satisfaction was predicted by maternal and paternal adultification, maternal spousification, and paternal parentification. Relationship insecurity was predicted by maternal spousification and paternal adultification. The results of this study extend the theoretical understanding of the interpersonal outcomes of boundary dissolution. Future research will seek to identify factors that may mediate the relations between boundary dissolution and romantic relationship functioning.

INDEX WORDS: Boundary Dissolution, Romantic Relationships, Family Relationships

FAMILIAL PREDICTORS OF YOUNG ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING: A
CLOSER LOOK AT BOUNDARY DISSOLUTION

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first to my parents. The endless support and encouragement you've shown have given me the confidence to explore my own passions. Your example has laid the foundation for me to begin a lifetime of learning and laughter. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to those few, close friends I've grown so close to over the last four years. More than just giving me great memories, you've become family.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Within the past few decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding a form of child maltreatment called boundary dissolution. In its most general sense, boundary dissolution refers to an interaction style in which the traditional parent-child roles are confused, distorted, or reversed (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005). Boundary dissolution can take many forms. For example, parentification is characterized by the child taking on the traditional caregiving role of the parent and seductive spousification refers to the child meeting the parent's need for non-sexual physical intimacy. Boundary dissolution has also been called enmeshment, adultification, and hostile spousification. Though each of these forms has distinct behavioral manifestations, they are all characterized by the child meeting the parent's needs in some way (Kerig, 2005). Research to date shows that children who experience boundary dissolution are more likely to later endorse externalizing symptoms, depression, and less identity exploration (Carlson, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1995; Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993; Jacobvitz, Hazen, Curran, & Hitchens, 2004). Boundary dissolution has also been linked to maladaptive interpersonal outcomes in middle childhood (Sroufe, Bennett, Englund, Urban, & Shulman, 1993). Much less is known about how boundary dissolution affects young adult romantic relationship outcomes. The aim of the current study is to expand boundary dissolution research into this important outcome domain.

Romantic relationships constitute one of the most important aspects of most individual's lives. They can provide a sense of joy, companionship, and well being. They can also bring about the much less desirable feelings of disappointment, frustration, or rejection. As such a rich source of human development and emotion, psychologists have long been interested in better understanding how individuals arrive at their romantic relationships. Not surprisingly, familial predictors of early adult

romantic functioning have been heavily studied. A large amount of this existing literature looks at these associations through the perspective of attachment theory and parenting style. In the current study we take advantage of this growing body of knowledge to look beyond more general parenting practices and explore parental boundary dissolution, an area that has received little attention until recently. Building upon what is now known about how early experiences with the family of origin can affect early adult romantic relationships and what is understood about the long term effects of boundary dissolution, we propose that experiences of boundary dissolution will predict romantic relationship outcomes over and above what measures of general parenting styles predict.

Significance of the Romantic Relationship in Emerging Adulthood

For a majority of the population, romantic endeavors begin during adolescence and continue to be pursued throughout the lifetime. The romantic relationships of interest in the current study are those which occur during the late teens through the early twenties. Researchers have begun to label this period as a new developmental stage called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998; Arnett, 2000). In developed countries, where individuals have the opportunity to use their twenties as a time of experimentation, emerging adulthood constitutes the period when identity formation, begun in adolescence, is explored with little or no limitations. One important aspect of the identity that is explored is love. By the conclusion of emerging adulthood, around the age of 30, many individuals will have made more enduring relationship decisions, including having made a lifetime commitment to a partner (Arnett, 2000). Theoretically, the relationships experienced between the ages 18-29 play an invaluable role in forming the long term future of an individual's romantic profile.

The importance of romantic relationships during emerging adulthood can also be seen in more immediate ways. There is a vast amount of evidence suggesting that romantic relationships can lead to beneficial outcomes during this period. Among college undergraduates surveyed, men reported romantic relationships to be their most supportive relationship while women reported them as one of the most

supportive (Furman & Buhrmester, 1996). Likewise, 20-28 year olds reported increasingly relying on romantic partners to meet many of the needs that peers and parents once fulfilled (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). In another study, positive romantic relationship qualities predicted an individual to be closer to achieving identity formation and conceptualizing themselves as an adult. Friendship quality was negatively related to these same outcomes (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, Badger, 2009). However, not all romantic encounters lead to positive results. Maladaptive behaviors within emerging adult romantic relationship have been linked to the experience of depression (Marchand-Reilly, 2009).

If these relationships play such an important role in the lives of emerging adults, it becomes worthwhile to understand what shapes the nature of these interactions. The individual characteristics of each partner and their current situations will certainly play a large role. But many researchers have recently begun to ask what part an individual's developmental history plays in determining their romantic relationship outcomes. We will examine two forms of early childhood experience that have been empirically linked to romantic relationship outcomes; adult attachment and authoritative parenting style.

Attachment Theory

Since its inception in the 1950's, attachment theory has been looked to as one of the primary explanations of how experiences in early childhood affect later adult relationships. Attachment theory, viewed from an evolutionary perspective, emphasizes that an instinctual desire to be close to a caregiver increases one's own likelihood of survival. John Bowlby operationalized these attachment behaviors as any action that increases the infant's proximity to the attachment figure. These attachment behaviors illustrate the infant's increasing expectancies that emotional and physical needs will be met, with general consistency, by the caregiver (Bretherton, 1992). As discussed in more detail below, these expectancies develop into cognitive schema that are carried forward in development, and used as the "working models" for the formation of other relationships.

Following Bowlby's theoretical study of attachment processes, Mary Ainsworth developed the observational procedures by which infant attachment security could be measured empirically and in so doing, identified the patterns of individual differences that can exist in infant-caregiver attachment security (Bretherton, 1992). In her seminal study, Ainsworth conducted observations of infants and their mothers in their homes and in a lab environment. In the lab procedure, termed the Strange Situation, infants (i.e. 12-18 months of age) were subjected to 8 sequential scenarios in which their mother and/or a stranger was in the room with them. The infants' behaviors were observed upon both separation and reunion with their mothers. Infant reunion and separation behavior was significantly correlated to maternal sensitivity observed in the home environment months earlier. During the Strange Situation infants tended to react to separation and reunion in three distinct ways, and the results allowed researchers to qualify attachment types (Bretherton, 1992). The resulting attachment classifications, secure, insecure/resistant, or insecure/avoidant, were the lasting legacy of the study.

A central tenet of attachment theory is that all relationships an individual has throughout their lifetime are influenced by the internal working models of relationships that begin to be formed during infancy (Waters & Cummings, 2000). The feedback an infant receives from its mother about what to expect from an attachment figure, whether responsive care or inconsistent or chaotic behavior, is carried forward into expectations of future relationships through their internal working models. There has been extensive empirical evidence supporting the idea that early attachment style predicts later interpersonal outcomes. For example, infant attachment classification predicted victimizing and exploitive behaviors among pre-school dyads as well as pre-schoolers' interaction styles with their teacher (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Mothers, though heavily studied, are not the only figure infants attach to. Attachment to fathers significantly predicted expectations of friend support, peer interactions, self worth, and depressive symptoms in eight graders (Liu, 2008).

The infant's relationship with their attachment figure(s) does not abruptly end with the onset of childhood or even adulthood. Consequently, one of the outcomes that can be predicted by infant attachment security is the stability of attachment security over time. Adult attachment, the measure of how a grown child relates to their infant attachment figure in adulthood, ultimately intends to measure the same attributes as infant attachment. The gold standard of adult attachment measurement has been the Adult Attachment Inventory, a semi-structured interview that classifies adults as secure, preoccupied, or dismissing. Secure adults' narratives about their experiences growing up and their attachment relationships are both coherent and believable. Insecure adults have incoherent narratives. They may be dismissing, a state in which they have trouble recalling events, idealize their experiences, and fail to see attachment relationships as important. Insecure adults can also be classified as preoccupied, in which case they are confused about their past experiences and their attachment relationships are characterized by active anger and constant attempts to please (Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000). Individual differences in coherency are systematically related to differences in infant attachment status. In early reports from a longitudinal study, significant correlations have been found between infant security and adult security status (Main, Hesse, & Kaplan, 2005).

A number of empirical studies have found support for the theory that adult attachment styles influence young adult romantic relationships. Roisman and colleagues (2005) collected data from adolescents' scores on the AAI administered at age 19, parent-child interactions observed when the child was 13, and child-partner interactions observed between the adult child and their romantic partner at ages 20-21. The significant correlations between positive parent-child interactions and positive child-partner interactions was reduced to non-significance when the intermediate AAI scores were controlled for, suggesting that the effects of parent interactions during adolescence upon the child's later romantic relationships were mediated by the child's mental representation of their relationships growing up.

Partly because of the time consuming nature of the AAI, attempts have been made to identify reliable and valid self-report measures of adult attachment. These projects have met with some success (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1999). Rather than classifying respondents as insecure or secure, these measures assess the general quality or security of the parent-child relationship.

Using self-report measures of attachment, adult attachment security has also been shown to relate to self-reported levels of relationship satisfaction in emerging adults. In a study by Stackert and Bursik (2003), participants, aged 17-28, completed a modified version of Hazan and Shaver's (1987, 1990) self-report measure of adult attachment style. Those who endorsed insecure attachment (i.e., corresponding to anxious-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles) were significantly more likely to also endorse irrational relationship beliefs (e.g., sexual perfectionism, belief that partners cannot change). In turn, both the endorsement of an insecure attachment style and irrational relationship beliefs predicted significantly less relationship satisfaction (Stackert & Bursik, 2003).

Empirical evidence clearly suggests that adult attachment to one's parents has significant associations to one's own romantic relationship functioning in young adulthood. In studies using both observational and self-report measures of attachment and romantic relationship outcomes, secure attachment predicted positive romantic outcomes (Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). Furthermore, insecure attachment predicted negative romantic relationship behaviors such as irrational beliefs (Stackert & Bursik, 2003).

Authoritative Parenting

Although heavily studied, attachment is not the only way parents affect their children's later relationship behaviors and adaptation. Other modes of familial influence that researchers have begun to investigate can be collectively called general parenting styles. In an observational study, Diana Baumrind categorized three parenting styles based upon whether preschool children's behavior was mature,

discontent, or immature. The mature children had parenting that was strict and controlling but also highly communicative. Discontent children had parenting marked by low nurturance while immature children had parenting marked by low strictness and control (Baumrind, 1967). Respectively, these parenting styles are referred to as Authoritative (high discipline and high warmth) Authoritarian (high discipline and low warmth) and Permissive (low discipline and high warmth). Researchers now recognize a fourth category, Neglectful, characterized by both low discipline and low warmth. Empirical evidence suggests that of these four styles, authoritative parenting is associated with the most positive child outcomes (e.g. social responsibility, achievement orientation, self actualization, and school engagement) (Baumrind, 1971; Dominguez & Carton, 1997; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009).

Within the last decade, researchers have begun expanding the study of authoritative parenting into the domain of romantic relationship outcomes. The findings mirror those of previous studies.

In a longitudinal study, Donnellan and colleagues (2005) found that young adults who experienced nurturant-involved parenting (consisting of the warmth and consistent discipline characteristic of authoritative parenting) during their late adolescence were significantly less likely to display negative interactive styles and more likely to report high quality of their current romantic relationships. These results held even when parents' marital interaction style and measures of individual personality differences were controlled for. Thus, the participants were not simply modeling behaviors they observed between their parents.

Another longitudinal study provides evidence that positive parent-child experiences predict both emotional and physical wellbeing in the child's later romantic relationships. Adolescents who reported themselves as having a close and trusting relationship with their parents at ages 15 and 17 went on to report significantly higher levels of connectedness and physical attraction to their romantic partners at age 20 (Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Kiessinger, 2001).

Crockett and Randall (2006) interviewed participants once while they were in high school and again seven years later. Those who reported positive relationships with their parents as measured by the Family Relations subscale of the Self-Image Questionnaire for Young Adolescents (SIQYA; Petersen, Schulenberg, Abramowitz, Offer, & Jarcho, 1984) while in high school reported higher levels of connectedness and lower levels of discord with their romantic partners seven years later. These relationships were mediated by the conflict tactics endorsed by the participant in their romantic relationships, such that more positive relationships with parents predicted greater use of constructive conflict tactics like discussion, and thus better relationship functioning with romantic partners. No significant relations were found between quality of peer relations at time one and romantic relationship outcomes at time two.

Another study found that flexible control and family cohesion, two important elements of authoritative parenting styles, showed positive relationships with participants' experiences of happiness in love during young adulthood (Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998). Cohesion and flexible control were strongly correlated and both significantly predicted happiness in love. Other family factors, respect for privacy and marital satisfaction, were also examined. Only mother's marital satisfaction predicted intimacy in young adulthood. Respect for privacy actually had negative relationships to satisfaction with intimacy in young adulthood for men and women. Women who experience respect for privacy during adolescence reported more intimacy in young adulthood while the opposite was true of men. Both associations were significant. In this single study, we see compelling evidence that both parent and child gender have significant moderating effects on how familial antecedents relate to romantic relationship outcomes.

Similar results were found in another study of college undergraduates. Participants reported on their mother and fathers' parenting styles using a modified version of the Descriptions of Parental Caregiving Style questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1986). They also completed measures of the quality of

their current romantic, peer, and parental relationships and a measure of belief in one's own ability to form secure, close, and independent relationships with others. As in previous studies, significant positive relationships were found between warm and responsive parenting and the quality of participants' concurrent relationships with parents and partners (no significant relationship was found with peers) as well as belief in one's ability to form secure and close relationships with others. The authors looked at these relations separately for mothers and fathers. They found that only reports of fathers' parenting were significantly related to positive feelings about concurrent relationships with romantic partners. Reports of mothers' parenting were only significantly related to the quality of concurrent parent relations (Dalton, Frick-Horbury, & Kitzmann, 2006). Participants' attachment to their fathers seem to play a particularly important role in their later feelings about their romantic relationships.

Similar results were found in another cross-sectional study by Auslander and colleagues (2009). Parents whose behavior was characterized by acceptance, involvement, strictness, and supervision had adolescent and young adult daughters who reported greater concurrent romantic relationship satisfaction. These associations were mediated by mutuality within the daughters' romantic relationships.

Boundary Dissolution

Boundary dissolution is a broad term that describes different forms of malfunction in the parent-child relationship. Shaffer and Sroufe define it as a "disturbance in which the typical parent-child roles become distorted or even reversed" (2005, p. 1). Examples of terminology used to describe these distorted relationships include parentification, adultification, spousification, and enmeshment. Behaviorally, boundary dissolution could manifest as a child serving as an emotional confidant for a parent or being treated as a peer by their parent. What these conceptualizations share is the failure to preserve the typical boundaries between parent and child in such a way that the child becomes responsible for meeting the parents' needs, rather than the parent serving the child's needs (Kerig, 2005).

Boundary dissolution is firmly grounded in the theory of family systems (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Conceptualizing the family unit as a system creates three assumptions important to the theoretical foundations of boundary dissolution. First, the family is interdependent, meaning each member affects and is affected by every other member. In order to study individual outcomes, it is imperative to include that individual's role within larger multi-person patterns of interaction. Second, systems undergo times of stability and change. As children grow, behavior that is considered appropriate by each member of the system will shift. This assumption underscores the significance of the context in which boundary dissolved behaviors occur, a topic that will be covered in more detail below. Lastly, as a system, families consist of subsystem boundaries. In a family, subsystems are comprised of member dyads (e.g. father-son, wife-husband, etc.) The boundaries between these different subsystems are maintained by certain rules and norms of behavior (Minuchin, 1988).

Maintaining subsystems' boundaries is essential for healthy functioning within the family. An example of appropriate boundary maintenance is each member of the spouse subsystem turning to the other for physical intimacy. Another example includes adults providing nurture to the children without expecting the children to support them in turn. Ideally, in a functioning family system, by being nurtured, children will develop the propensity to accept and give nurturance in future adult relationships (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988).

If boundary maintenance within the family plays a pivotal role in positive individual development, then boundary dissolution should represent a grave risk factor. Shaffer and Sroufe (2005) note an important theoretical risk posed by parents who place caregiving or other adult responsibilities on their children. The cost of this type of violation is twofold: first, the child will be expected to perform at an emotional and cognitive level which they have not yet reached; and second, because the parent is often not performing their own roles effectively, the child is robbed of their primary model for learning the very emotional and cognitive maturity expected of them.

It is important to note that many of these boundary dissolved behaviors seen in everyday life would not strike the observer as maltreatment. They may even come across as particularly sweet. For example, seductive behavior can be characterized by the mother stroking and passionately kissing her infant or young child. These spontaneous displays of affection may appear loving or affectionate, and, in fact, in isolated instances these actions are not maladaptive. The danger arises when this becomes a recurrent pattern of interaction between the mother and child. The damaging aspects of such behavior originate from the fact that these affections are unsolicited by the child and are experienced by the child as psychologically and physically intrusive. Similarly, a child who has been parentified, or charged with responsibilities normally taken by the mother or father figure, may appear to outsiders to be particularly mature or competent for their age. However, as noted above, as a consequence of parentification, they may have experienced developmental demands beyond their abilities or been deprived of important opportunities to receive adaptive nurturing from a parent.

Boundary dissolution has been studied primarily has a form of dysfunction. However, researchers have noted an important caveat to this perspective. As mentioned before, family systems go through periods of change, and situational factors should inform any assessment of behaviors within the system. This applies to boundary dissolved behaviors as well. Not all experiences of boundary dissolution are equally detrimental to children. In certain situations, the negative effects of role reversals or dissolutions may be minimized. For instance, if the parent becomes ill and the child takes over certain adult-like responsibilities, boundary dissolution may actually constitute a normative event (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005). Hooper and colleagues lend support to this theory by providing empirical evidence of the bimodal effects of parentification. In their study of college students reporting on childhood experiences and current psychological symptomatology, parentification significantly predicted both post traumatic growth and psychological distress. The authors suggest that it may be fruitful to explore emotional parentification and

instrumental parentification separately and not to too quickly assume psychopathology among individuals who have experienced boundary dissolution (Hooper, Marotta, Lanthier, 2008)

While these studies and perspectives shine a different light on how boundary dissolutions can be approached, they do not contradict the conceptualization of boundary dissolution as a type of dysfunction. Rather, they point out that children may be resistant or resilient in the face of this particular type of challenge.

Empirical research supports the theory that boundary dissolution is related to negative developmental outcomes down the road. Seductive spousification and enmeshment have been linked to the development of both ADHD and depressive symptoms in middle childhood (Carlson, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1995; Jacobvitz, et al., 2004) Jacobvitz and colleague's findings were moderated by the child's gender. Girls were more likely to show signs of depression while boys were more likely to display symptoms of ADHD as per teacher reports.

Another important but subtle distinction is that boundary dissolution does not simply represent another means of describing general parenting ability. In a study of at-risk mothers and their children, mothers who presented signs of seductive behavior toward their children (e.g. passionate kissing, stroking their stomachs, sensual teasing) were more likely to display a harsh, derisive parenting style. Also, the seductive behavior was found to be specific to one child, usually a son, while the parenting style was consistent across children (Sroufe, Jacobvitz, Mangelsdorf, DeAngelo, & Ward, 1985). If boundary dissolution were a parenting quality of the mother, such behavior should not be unique to one child. Furthermore, if the boundary dissolution arose from some quality of a particular child, it should not predict a more general parenting style (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Thus, the evidence suggests boundary dissolution represents a facet of interpersonal interaction that is distinct from universal parenting and that arises due to relational rather than individual factors.

Little empirical evidence of how boundary dissolution affects young adult romantic functioning exists. There is some evidence from the ongoing longitudinal Minnesota study about adolescent dating outcomes. Boundary dissolution in infancy was positively associated with gender boundary violations in middle childhood (Sroufe, Bennett, Englund, Urban, & Shulman, 1993). In turn, gender boundary violation in middle childhood was negatively associated with security and disclosure in romantic relationships at age 16 (Collins, Hennighausen, Schmit, & Sroufe, 1997). Valleau and colleagues found a strong association between retrospective reports of parentification and the adoption of a caregiving style in the current interpersonal relationships of college women (Valleau, Bergner, & Horton, 1995). In another study, college women who reported having boundary dissolved relationships with their parents also reported less identity exploration and less exploration of dating relationships (Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993). Collectively, these studies support the hypothesis that a history of troubled or dissolved boundaries within the parent-child relationship lead to difficulties in maintaining healthy boundaries within relationships later in life.

The Effects of Parent and Child Gender

A number of the empirical studies have found that the relations between attachment, authoritative parenting style, and boundary dissolution and romantic relationship behavior in young adulthood are moderated by both the parent and child's gender. First, Dalton and colleagues (2006) found that retrospective reports of fathers' parenting styles were significantly related to concurrent romantic relationship security and satisfaction. Retrospective reports of mothers' parenting were significantly related to the quality of concurrent relationships with parents but not romantic partners. Furthermore, only reports of fathers' parenting were significantly associated with perceptions of the self as being able to create close and secure relationships. When examined separately for male and female participants, these relations were largely the same for women but were either mixed or nonsignificant for men.

Feldman and colleagues (1998) conducted a longitudinal study which found that mothers', but not fathers', marital satisfaction predicted their grown children's happiness in love. This same study also found differences among male and female participants. While family cohesion and flexible control predicted happiness in love for men and women, family respect for privacy predicted happiness in love for women but unhappiness for men. Flexible family control also predicted secure romantic attachment in women but did not significantly predict any form of romantic attachment in men. The authors conclude that women are more sensitive to familial precursors of romantic relationship functioning.

Finally, Jacobvitz and colleagues (2004) found that experiencing enmeshed family interactions at 24 months had unique effects in middle childhood for girls and boys. Girls were more likely to show signs of depression while boys were more likely to exhibit symptoms of ADHD per teacher reports.

Empirical evidence clearly shows that both parent and child gender have the potential to affect how early dysfunction within the family system relates to the child's later functioning. Mothers and fathers both appear to make significant, but unique, contributions. As a whole, evidence suggests that women's romantic relationships are affected by early experiences within the family more than are men's relationships. However, a lack of replicated findings indicates that continued research that separates the effects of parent and child gender is still necessary.

The Current Study

It is clear that early family experiences predict many facets of one's later young adult outcomes, including romantic relationship functioning. The effects of attachment and authoritative parenting in particular have been well documented. Not surprisingly, secure attachment and authoritative parenting are linked to positive romantic outcomes while the opposite is true of insecure attachment and less authoritative parenting. Experiences with mothers and fathers in each of these realms appear to make distinct contributions in romantic relationship outcomes, although the results are mixed. Conversely, much less is known about how experiences of boundary dissolution in childhood affect functioning within

a young adult romantic relationship. Existing studies predominantly include samples of young or adolescent children and their mothers while omitting fathers. The empirical evidence that exists suggests that, as in other domains, boundary dissolution leads to negative romantic outcomes.

These three ways of measuring family interaction – attachment, authoritative parenting style, and boundary dissolution – are not mutually exclusive. To fully understand how early family experiences impact later romantic relationships, each of these elements should be thought of as working in conjunction with the others. That being said, each measure is still distinct. Authoritative parenting may make secure attachment more likely, but authoritative parenting and secure attachment are not the same concept. Boundary dissolution is theorized to be a distinct form of maltreatment, and there has been some empirical validation for this theory (Jacobvitz et al., 2004; Sroufe et al., 1993).

The goal of the current study is to replicate and expand the research on boundary dissolution into the domain of young adult romantic relationships while controlling for more commonly studied parenting factors (i.e. attachment and authoritative style), and to include measures of fathers as well as mothers boundary dissolved behaviors. In this study, we included three subtypes of boundary dissolution that are theoretically salient to romantic relationships: seductive spousification, parentification, and adultification. We measured two domains of romantic relationship functioning: romantic relationship satisfaction and perceived insecurity in the relationship. Our hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 1: Boundary Dissolution will predict romantic relationship outcomes above and beyond attachment security and retrospective reports of authoritative parenting.

Hypothesis 1a: Seductive spousification, adultification, and parentification will negatively correlate with satisfaction within adult romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 1b: Seductive spousification, adultification, and parentification will positively correlate with insecurity within adult romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Boundary dissolution by fathers and mothers will each significantly relate to participant romantic relationship outcomes. Because of the lack of research on fathers' boundary dissolved behaviors, comparisons of maternal and paternal boundary dissolution are exploratory.

Hypothesis 3: The relationships between each type of boundary dissolution (seductive spousification, parentification, and adultification) and relationship satisfaction and insecurity will be moderated by participant gender with women being more negatively impacted than men by experiences of boundary dissolution.

CHAPTER 2 METHOD

Participants

Participants were drawn from 776 undergraduates currently enrolled at the University of Georgia who participated in an online study for course credit. Only those who reported currently being in a relationship were included in our analysis, reducing the final number of participants to 306. Participants who reported being single endorsed significantly higher levels of parentification by their mother than participants who reported a current romantic relationship, $t(627) = -2.14, p < .05$. The two groups did not differ significantly in age, gender, or any of our other key variables.

The analysis sample was 29.4% male ($n = 90$) and 70.6% female ($n = 216$). The mean participant age was 19.4 years ($SD = 2.13$). A majority, 80.4%, identified as white, 7.2% identified as African American, 7.2% identified as Asian, 2.6% identified as mixed, 2.3% identified as Hispanic, and .3% identified as other. Participants were asked to report the length of their current romantic relationship in months. Responses ranged from less than one month to 86 months ($M = 17.15$ months, $SD = 16.38$).

Measures

General Parenting Styles

The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) is a 30 item self-report measure that consists of three subscales: Permissive, Authoritarian, and Authoritative. For the current analysis data are drawn from the 10-item Authoritative subscale. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.” Participants were also given the option to respond “prefer not answer.” Scores on the authoritative subscale can range from 10 to 50 with higher scores indicating more authoritativeness. The PAQ has been shown to have acceptable validity and reliability

(Buri, 1991). Separate forms for mothers and fathers were used and participants were instructed to respond to each form. Sample items include, “As I was growing up, once family policy had been established, my mother/father discussed the reasoning behind the policy with the children in the family” and “As I was growing up, my mother/father directed the activities and decisions of the children in the family through reasoning and discipline.”

Attachment

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment - Parent form (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is a 20 item self-report measure of attachment. As with the PAQ, separate forms for mother and father were completed. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “almost never or never true” to 5 “almost always or always true.” Participants were also given the option to respond “prefer not to answer.” Higher scores indicate more security in the parent-child relationship. Sample items include, “My mother/father respected my feelings” and “My mother/father accepted me as I was.”

Parental Boundary Dissolution

The Parent-Child Boundaries Scale III (PBS-III; Kerig, 2006) is a 53 item self-report measure consisting of subscales measuring role reversal - Parentification, Role Reversal - Adulthoodification, Enmeshment, Intrusiveness, and Spousification. Both mother and father forms were administered. We used data collected only from the parentification, adulthoodification, and seductive spousification subscales. An example of an item measuring parentification is “My mother needed me to take care of her.” An example of an adulthoodification item is “My mother talked to me about her worries.” An example of a seductive spousification item is “My mother acted toward me in a way that was like flirting.” Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “almost always.” Higher scores indicate more experiences of that form of boundary dissolution. Participants were also given the option to respond “prefer not to answer.”

Romantic Relationship Outcomes

A 33 item relationship perceptions battery measured idealization, insecurity, subjective closeness, and satisfaction experienced within a romantic relationship. We used data collected from the insecurity and satisfaction subscales. Sample items include, “I worry about losing my partner’s affections,” and “How well does your partner meet your needs?”

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the Department of Psychology’s Research Participant Pool (RP) and through flyers placed around campus. All participants had to be 18 years of age or older and currently enrolled as an undergraduate student to be eligible to participate in Phase I of the study. Students enrolled in an introductory psychology course register in the RP as part of a mandatory class assignment. Phase I of the present study was worth 2 research hours. In the event that a student does not wish to complete research credit, they may opt to write summaries of scientific articles. Those who were recruited through campus flyers were entered in raffle to win a \$50 gift card. Participants who reported currently being in an exclusive dating relationship were invited to earn \$40 by participating in Phase II of the study. The current paper includes only data collected during phase I, in which participants completed a battery of self-report measures using an online survey system. Participants received a link to the online web site, Survey Monkey, through an email along with instructions on how to proceed. Each link was unique to the participant and could only be accessed once. Participants were invited to participate on their personal computers but were allowed access to the lab computers if they preferred to do so. At the beginning of the survey, an electronic consent form was presented that each participant had to acknowledge reading before they could proceed. Every question had the response option of “prefer not to answer” and no identifying information was entered at any time during the survey. The survey took approximately 2 hours to complete and consisted of questionnaires pertaining to the participants’ past and, if applicable, current romantic relationships, family experiences growing up, current risk taking

behaviors, and relevant demographic information. After exiting the program, the data was encrypted and participants were not able to re-access their responses. Data was imported to the statistical program SPSS 15.0 to be analyzed.

CHAPTER 3 RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

For each predictor variable – attachment, parenting style, and boundary dissolution – participants responded separately for mother and father. Thus, mother parentification refers to the level of parentification a participant reports experiencing with their mother. Mother attachment refers to the participants' attachment quality they report having had with their mother. Each of our analyses was run separately for mother and father variables.

Group response norms for criterion and predictor variables can be found in Table 1. Each of our measures showed good response variability. Relationship satisfaction had the lowest standard deviation ($SD = .94$).

We next examined whether our sample differed significantly by participant gender. We found several significant effects. Men recalled experiencing more mothers seductive spousification and mother parentification, $t(292) = 3.07, p < .05$ and $t(290) = 2.15, p < .05$. Men also recalled more father parentification and father adultification, $t(281) = 2.55, p < .05$ and $t(276) = 5.16, p < .05$. Within current romantic relationships, women reported higher levels of satisfaction while men reported higher levels of insecurity, $t(285) = -2.35, p < .05$ and $t(285) = 2.04, p < .05$.

Bivariate correlations run between our predictor and outcome variables yielded the expected relationships. All three predictor variables – attachment, authoritative parenting style, and boundary dissolution – were significantly correlated with at least one romantic relationship outcome. The one exception was mother parentification which did not significantly correlate with either outcome variable. There was significant correlation between many of the predictor variables as well. Specifically,

attachment and authoritative parenting styles were strongly correlated among both mothers and fathers, $r = .69, p < .01$ and $r = .74, p < .01$ respectively. Boundary dissolution was only weakly correlated with attachment and authoritative parenting style. The strongest relationship was between mother parentification and mother attachment, $r = -.28, p < .01$. Table 2 depicts the full correlation matrix.

Table 1

Group Descriptives on Key Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>
Mother Parentification	10.83	4.27	1.28
Mother Adultification	17.78	4.60	0.48
Mother Seductive Spousification	7.30	2.19	2.90
Father Parentification	8.83	3.76	2.00
Father Adultification	14.32	4.98	0.85
Father Seductive Spousification	6.76	2.25	4.20
Mother Authoritative Parenting	36.62	6.07	-0.83
Father Authoritative Parenting	35.03	6.42	-0.64
Mother Attachment	46.28	16.00	-0.93
Father Attachment	38.18	19.50	-0.62
Relationship Insecurity	47.22	14.25	0.35
Relationship Satisfaction	5.94	0.94	-1.03

Table 2

Intercorrelations among Measures of Mother Parenting, Father, Parenting, Romantic Relationship Behavior

Note. mParent = mother parentification; mAdult = mother adultification; mSS = mother Seductive Spousification; fParent = father parentification; fAdult = father adultification; fSS = father seductive spousification; mAuth = mother parenting style; fAuth = father parenting style; mAttch = mother attachment, fAttch = father attachment; Rel Ins = romantic relationship insecurity; Rel Sat = romantic relationship satisfaction

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. mParent	--											
2. mAdult	.57**	--										
3. mSS	.21**	.11	--									
4. fParent	.40**	.24**	.19**	--								
5. fAdult	.25**	.34**	.14*	.59**	--							
6. fSS	.20**	.09	.59**	.39**	.28**	--						
7. mPStyle	-.18**	.19**	-.03	-.09	.03	-.08	--					
8. fPStyle	-.12	-.04	-.18**	-.26**	.11	-.14*	.45**	--				
9. mAttch	-.28**	.11	.05	-.13*	-.01	-.05	.69**	.30**	--			
10. fAttch	-.14*	-.03	-.14*	-.20**	.22**	-.06	.40**	.74**	.49**	--		
11. Rel Sat	-.08	-.12*	-.17**	-.20**	-.13*	-.14*	.09	.15*	.17**	.21**	--	
12. Rel Insec	.06	.01	.13*	.18**	.14*	.08	-.12*	-.22**	-.18**	-.26**	-.53**	--

Primary Analysis

Having established that our variables relate to one another in the expected directions, we ran hierarchical regressions for each form of boundary dissolution. In the first step, attachment and authoritative style were entered. In step two, a boundary dissolution measure was added. These analyses were run separately for mothers and fathers and for relationship satisfaction and insecurity, resulting in twelve regressions. Father parentification was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.13, p < .05$) and father adultification was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction and relationship insecurity ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$ and $\beta = .16, p < .05$). Mothers' adultification was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$) and mother seductive spousification was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction and insecurity ($\beta = -.18, p < .05$ and $\beta = .13, p < .05$). Regression results are listed in tables 3-5.

Finally, we re-tested the hierarchical regressions to explore the role of participant gender as a potential moderator. In these analyses participant gender was included with PAQ and IPPA scores in step 1 of the hierarchical regressions, the boundary dissolution variable was included in step 2, and a participant gender X boundary dissolution variable was added in step 3. Participant gender only moderated relation between father adultification and relationship insecurity. When effects were analyzed separately by participant gender, women's relationship insecurity was significantly associated with their reporting experiences of father adultification ($\beta = .22, p < .05$), although this relation was not significant for men.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Parentification

Note. PAQ = Parental Authority Questionnaire; IPPA = Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; Parent = Parentification

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Variable	Mother						Father					
	Satisfaction			Insecurity			Satisfaction			Insecurity		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Step 1												
PAQ	-0.004	0.01	-0.02	-4.16	0.20	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.05	0.20	-0.02
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.2	-0.19	0.08	-0.21	0.01	0.00	0.24	-0.18	0.07	-0.24
Step 2												
PAQ	-0.004	0.01	-0.02	0.00	0.20	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.08	0.01	0.21	0.01
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.19	-0.19	0.08	-0.20	0.01	0.00	0.23	-0.18	0.07	-0.24
Parent	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.07	0.21	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.13*	0.46	0.25	0.12
Total R^2	0.04			0.04			0.06			0.08		

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Adulthood

Note. PAQ = Parental Authority Questionnaire; IPPA = Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; Adult = Adulthood

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Variable	Mother						Father					
	Satisfaction			Insecurity			Satisfaction			Insecurity		
	B	SE	B	B	SE	B	B	SE	B	B	SE	B
Step 1												
PAQ	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.10	0.20	0.04	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	-0.06	0.21	-0.03
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.19	-0.18	0.08	-0.20	0.01	0.00	0.23	-0.18	0.07	-0.24
Step 2												
PAQ	0.00	0.01	0	0.09	0.20	0.04	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.04	0.20	-0.02
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.18	-0.18	0.08	-0.20	0.01	0.00	0.27	-0.21	0.07	-0.29
Adult	-0.03	0.01	-0.15*	0.11	0.20	0.04	-0.03	0.01	-0.15*	0.48	0.19	0.16*
Total R ²	0.05			0.03			0.06			0.09		

Table 5

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Seductive Spousification

Note. PAQ = Parental Authority Questionnaire; IPPA = Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; SS = Seductive spousification

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Variable	mother						father					
	Satisfaction			Insecurity			Satisfaction			Insecurity		
	B	SE	B	SE	B	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B
Step 1												
PAQ	-0.002	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.20	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.21	-0.01
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.17	0.08	-0.18	-0.16	0.08	0.01	0.00	0.24	0.07	-0.24
Step 2												
PAQ	-0.004	0.01	-0.03	0.06	0.20	0.03	0.03	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	0.21	-0.01
IPPA	0.01	0.01	0.2	-0.18	0.08	-0.20	0.08	0.01	0.00	0.25	0.07	-0.24
SS	-0.08	0.03	-0.18*	0.91	0.42	0.13*	0.42	-0.02	0.04	-0.04	0.55	0.00
TotalR ²	0.06			0.05				0.05			0.06	

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

The goals of this study were to first examine if boundary dissolution predicted romantic relationship outcomes over and above adult attachment and authoritative parenting styles, and, second, to examine the distinct role of mothers and fathers within this relation. We hypothesized that boundary dissolution would predict romantic relationship outcomes above and beyond attachment security and retrospective reports of authoritative parenting. We also expected that boundary dissolution by fathers and mothers would each significantly relate to participant romantic relationship outcomes. Finally, we also hypothesized that the relationships between each type of boundary dissolution (seductive spousification, parentification, and adultification) and relationship satisfaction and insecurity would be moderated by participant gender with women being more negatively impacted by experiences of boundary dissolution.

Our hypotheses were largely supported. Each form of boundary dissolution studied – parentification, adultification, and seductive spousification – was significantly associated with a negative romantic relationship outcome (i.e. lowered satisfaction, higher insecurity) in at least one regression model. These results are consistent with the existing literature on maladaptive outcomes of boundary dissolution in other behavioral and social domains (Sroufe et al., 1985; Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005; Jacobvitz, 2004; Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008). As predicted in hypothesis 1a and 1b, self-reports of having experienced boundary dissolution were significantly associated with both lower levels of romantic relationship satisfaction and higher levels of romantic relationship insecurity for both men and women.

We also found some support for our second hypothesis. The effects of boundary dissolution made distinct predictions for romantic relationship outcomes depending on whether it was committed by mothers or fathers. This is consistent with previous findings that mothers' and fathers' general parenting

(e.g. child's attachment, authoritative style, marital satisfaction) have differential long term effects for children's later romantic endeavors (Dalton, Frick-Horbury, Kitzmann, 2006; Scharf & Mayseless, 2008; Feldman et al., 1998).

Interestingly, men reported significantly higher levels of boundary dissolution by both mothers and fathers. Specifically, they are more likely to endorse being parentified by both mothers and fathers, adultified by their fathers, and spousified by their mothers. In previous research, mothers were significantly more likely to display spousification behaviors towards their sons than towards their daughters (Sroufe et al., 1985). This cross-gender pattern makes sense as spousification involves the parent seeking intimacy needs that are not being met by what would normally be an opposite gendered adult. The higher frequency of parentification and adultification among male participants may reflect a tendency among parents to subscribe to gender role stereotypes. Young boys may be expected to act as the proverbial "man of the house." Such an explanation is purely speculative, and these results pose interesting questions for further research.

In addition to expanding past empirical studies, our results provide exciting new implications. First, it is clear looking at both the correlations and hierarchical regressions that boundary dissolution is measuring an area of parenting distinct from adult attachment and retrospective reports of authoritative parenting styles. As both Sroufe and Shaffer point out (Sroufe et al., 1985; Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005), boundary dissolution is not a parenting style per se, but rather a unique aspect of an individual parent-child relationship. Our results offer empirical evidence that even within the self-reports of an individual son or daughter, boundary dissolution is at most only weakly correlated with other general measures of parenting. In four of our twelve regressions, boundary dissolution accounted for variance in romantic relationship outcomes above and beyond variance accounted for by attachment and authoritative parenting styles.

Second, there has been very little empirical evidence of how fathers' boundary dissolved behaviors may impact their children. Our results indicate that boundary dissolution committed by a father is just as damaging as boundary dissolution committed by a mother. However, the types of boundary dissolution that appear most harmful are distinct for mothers and fathers. Among our sample, parentification and adultification are the most damaging forms for fathers while adultification and seductive spousification are the most damaging forms for mothers. It appears that adultification, regardless of the offender's gender, is a significant predictor of negative romantic relationship outcomes. There are no theoretical reasons why this should not be the case. The finding that mothers' seductive spousification is significant while fathers' seductive spousification is not also makes sense given that more mother than father seductive spousification was endorsed ($M = 7.30$ $M = 6.76$) and that men are more likely to report this form of boundary dissolution. Men who experienced an inappropriately seductive relationship with their mothers growing up will logically have difficulty adjusting to intimate relationships later in life. The result that fathers' parentification (i.e. placing normal caregiving tasks upon the child) is more strongly associated with our outcomes than mothers' parentification is harder to explain. It seems more likely that mothers, as the traditional caregivers, would be in a better position to engage in this form of boundary dissolution. Indeed, mother parentification was more highly endorsed than father parentification in our sample ($M = 10.83$ $M = 8.83$). Yet, fathers' behavior in what is usually conceptualized as a more mothering domain is actually the more predictive element. These results add to the growing body of evidence that fathers play as important a role as mothers in many of their children's developmental outcomes (Liu, 2008; Scharf & Mayseless, 2008).

Finally, our exploratory analysis of the moderating effects of participant gender on these regressions yielded one significant result. Women are particularly vulnerable to being adultified by their fathers. These women experience significantly more insecurity in current adult romantic relationships. Perhaps being burdened with overly adult concerns in one of their earliest cross-gender relationships

primes women to feel less stable and confident and consequently less secure in later close relationships with men.

There are a number of limitations within our study. First, as an exploratory study, the study included an extensive series of regressions, which may have resulted in an inflated Type 1 error rate. Also, as shown in the regression results, the R^2 were rather small, indicating small effect sizes. Given that the outcomes of the study are likely to be multiply determined, this was not surprising but does limit the conclusions that can be drawn from the current results. Additionally, our results rely on self-report data, some of which was retrospective. Although all of our measures show good variability among responses (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations), the current results would be enhanced by using observational data of romantic partner interactions, and these assessment are currently in progress as a follow-up to the survey study. We will be able to collect observational data for these couples as well as the partners' developmental history. No relationship is the product of one individual, and it is important to see how a partner's own past experiences equip them to interact with someone who has experienced boundary dissolution.

Another limitation with our study is its cross-sectional nature. A longitudinal study that employs observational data of both parent-child and child-partner interactions would provide the potential for more nuanced analysis. It is unlikely that experiencing boundary dissolution as a child leads directly to lowered capacity for romantic satisfaction or security. More likely these boundary dissolved experiences impact an intermediary form of social and/or emotional functioning (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005). Longitudinal studies would allow us to begin identifying some of these mediators.

A final significant limitation is that our sample consists entirely of college students. The non-representative nature of our sample limits the generalizability of our findings.

Though limited, this study represents one of the first attempts to examine if and how childhood boundary dissolution affects romantic relationships in young adulthood in ways distinct from other

familial behaviors. The findings indicate that experiences of adultification, parentification, and seductive spousification in childhood impact young adult romantic relationships in meaningful ways. By further investigating the data to see how parent and participant gender affects these associations, we are closer to understanding and ultimately interrupting the mechanisms and pathways that lead to negative romantic relationship experiences.

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