

The Impact of Family of Origin on Romantic Relationships: A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract: This review examines the influence of diverse family of origin factors on adult romantic relationships, concentrating on critical elements such as attachment styles, communication patterns, conflict resolution, family cohesion, family structure, and self-differentiation and self-regulation formed by early family experiences. Existing research reveals that early family dynamics significantly affect individuals' behaviours, beliefs, and satisfaction in romantic relationships during adulthood. The paper consolidates empirical findings from multiple studies, accentuating the role of secure and insecure attachment styles in determining romantic relationship satisfaction. It also investigates how family functions, specifically communication patterns, conflict management, and family cohesion, influence relationship outcomes. Additionally, the review highlights the degrees of self-differentiation and self-regulation influence the quality of intimate relationships. Psychological frameworks including attachment theory, family systems theory, and social learning theory offer the primary perspectives for comprehending these influences. The review also recognises critical deficiencies in the literature, including the requirement for more longitudinal studies and cross-cultural social class and gender comparisons. Overall, Individuals who grow up in nurturing, positive family environments with good parent-child interactions tend to have higher quality and more satisfying romantic relationships in adulthood. Studying on the impact of family of origin on romantic relationships can assist society in resolving family emotional conflicts and fostering harmony, it can likewise enrich the theoretical framework of family and emotional-related research in the academic field.

Keywords: family of origin, romantic relationship, attachment style, family systems.

1. Introduction

"My family of origin is my emotional GPS, steering my romantic relationships in ways I often don't realise." This idea underscores early family experiences' profound impact on our perceptions of love and intimacy. In other words, an individual's family of origin may assume a significant role in molding their behavioral and emotional development. With this query in mind, this literature review was conducted, and it was discovered that some studies have probed into the relationship between early family dynamics and an individual's attachment style, emotional expression and interpersonal relationship patterns. Nevertheless, despite the burgeoning body of literature, there needs to be more focus on how family-of-origin factors shape adults' interactions, beliefs, and satisfaction within romantic relationships.

This study is significant because it provides a more comprehensive perspective in the literature by integrating various factors from early primary family relationships that shape human romantic relationships. Even though numerous studies have centred on attachment theory and family dynamics, there has been a need for studies that have integrated multiple factors to investigate how early family factors influence the patterns of interaction, beliefs, and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships. This study aims to provide practical insights that can guide therapeutic practice, especially in marriage counseling and family therapy. Clarifying the impact of early family patterns can help improve relationship dynamics and promote the formation of healthier adult-partner relationships.

This review paper endeavours to investigate the multiple factors of the original family, encompassing the original family communication pattern, conflict resolution strategy, family cohesion, and family structure, as well as the propensity of attachment type, self-differentiation level, and self-regulation level induced by the original family, and how they exert an influence on adult romantic relationships.

The main structure of the paper is divided into two parts: Firstly, the relevant psychological theories, including attachment theory, family system theory, and social learning theory, are presented. Secondly, a literature review, analysis, and summary concerning the influence of attachment style, family communication, family conflict management, family cohesion, family structure, self-differentiation, and self-regulation on romantic relationships is conducted. Furthermore, this paper will highlight key findings, identify gaps in the current understanding, and suggest avenues for future research. Ultimately, this review seeks to illuminate how our early familial environments shape the intimate relationships we forge as adults, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of relational psychology and its implications for personal development.

2. Relevant Psychological Theories

2.1. Attachment Theory

The attachment theory is a psychological theory developed through the joint efforts of Ainsworth and Bowlby, primarily intended to expound on how the early parent-child relationships within the primary family mould an individual's emotional experiences, expectations of others, and patterns of interaction in interpersonal connections [1]. The theory encompasses three major attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant, each mirroring distinct patterns of interpersonal interaction. Ainsworth and Bell indicated that children with secure attachment are conspicuously distraught when separated from their mothers, but they promptly seek contact and rapidly regain composure when their mothers come back [2]. Secure attachment is frequently intimately associated with warm, supportive, and consistent parenting from parents, which nurtures trusting and healthy interpersonal relationships in individuals with secure attachment. Children with anxious attachment manifest acute anxiety and perturbation upon their mother's departure, and it proves challenging to console them even upon her return [2]. Anxious attachment may be related to inconsistent, unreliable, or neglectful parenting, which gives rise to dependency and the fear of abandonment. Children with avoidant attachment typically demonstrate indifference and detachment when their mothers leave and return as if they were indifferent to their mother's departure [2]. Avoidant attachment is often correlated with emotionally distant or cold parenting, which induces individuals to emotionally distance themselves from others and encounter predicaments in intimate relationships and communication during adulthood. Hazan and Shaver expanded this theory to the realm of adult romantic relationships, suggesting that the attachment style formed in childhood affects people's modes of interaction with partners in adulthood [3]. However, recent studies have questioned the binary classification of attachment styles, suggesting a spectrum influenced by changing life circumstances [4].

2.2. Family Systems Theory

Bowen put forward the family systems theory, which contends that the family constitutes an organic entity where family members interact among themselves [5]. The behaviours and emotions of each family member have the potential to influence those of others. Two key concepts of the family systems theory are closely related to the research presented in this paper. The first concept is related to the three crucial aspects of family function: communication, conflict management, and cohesion. Effective communication is significant for emotional expression, eliminating misunderstandings, and establishing a healthy family ambience. Conflict management focuses on how the family ought to handle and resolve differences. Family cohesion denotes the extent to which family members support one another, constituting the emotional bond formed within the family system. The second concept refers to the levels of self-differentiation and self-regulation originated from the original family system. Self-differentiation refers to whether a child can be psychologically separate from the family as he grows up as a member. For instance, a woman possessing a high degree of self-differentiation is more likely to be capable of sustaining her independent thinking and decision-making capacity when confronted with a conflicting choice between career aspirations and the anticipation of her early marriage from original family. Self-regulation pertains to the capacity of family members to sustain equilibrium within the family system when it encounters stress or undergoes change. For example, within a family context, even when the father experiences setbacks at work and is in a disheartened mood, he is capable of regulating his emotions and arriving home with a normal emotional status to interact with his family, without transmitting negative emotions to them. In conclusion, the family systems theory suggests that communication, conflict management, cohesion, and the self-differentiation and self-regulation abilities formed within the family system significantly influence interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

2.3. Social Learning Theory

Besides family systems theory and attachment theory, social learning theory offers valuable insights into how early family experiences influence romantic relationships. Bandura posits that individuals learn behaviours through observing and imitating role models [6]. Children acquire knowledge and skills by observing the mutual conduct of their parents in the marital relationship within the family, and such acquired behaviors will be manifested in their romantic interactions during adulthood [7]. By acknowledging these learned behaviours, individuals can identify negative patterns and strive for healthier relational dynamics, highlighting the significant impact of the family environment on adult romantic relationships.

3. Review of Literature

3.1. Attachment Style and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Research by Bretherton and Munholland indicated that the experiences of an individual's original family predict the type of attachment relationship they will form in the future [8]. Butzer and Campbell mention that individual attachment orientations significantly predicts relationship satisfaction [9]. In other words, the experiences an individual undergoes in their early primary family shape their attachment style, and we can predict their relationship satisfaction by using the attachment style. In the study conducted by Jarnecke and South, the researchers manifested that the quality of attachment between parents and children influences the attachment styles individuals develop in adult romantic relationships [10]. Their findings disclosed that individuals with secure attachment styles typically report higher levels of marital satisfaction, whereas those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles tend to report lower satisfaction. Betts also came to a similar conclusion, suggesting

that secure romantic attachments may contribute to forming and maintaining satisfying relationships [11]. In summary, an individual's attachment type plays a crucial role in acquiring and maintaining satisfactory romantic relationships. The formation of attachment type is closely linked to experiences in the individual's early primary family.

Additionally, Stanish remarks that parents with a relatively high degree of attachment security are more prone to convey positive and stable emotional and behavioural patterns in their interactions with their children for the development of a secure attachment style of children during their growth process and also makes them more likely to exhibit secure attachment features in romantic relationships [12]. To phrase it differently, the emotions and behaviour patterns transmitted in parent-child interactions are the key factors in the formation of attachment types, and it is necessary to analyse further the impact of parent-child interactions on attachment types and romantic relationships within the family system.

3.2. Communication

Communication is a part of family function. Many literatures have mentioned the relationship between family communication and romantic relationships in adulthood. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick divided family communication into two dimensions: conversation orientation, which refers to more open and expressive communication, and conformity orientation, which refers to communication that reinforces hierarchical relationships and conforms to parents' views [13]. Generous proposed a significant association between family communication patterns and romantic relationships [14]. The research shows that individuals from conversation-orientation families often report higher levels of sexual communication in romantic relationships. Moreover, Whittington and Turner mentioned that attachment tendencies statistically moderate the relationship between family communication patterns and romantic relationship satisfaction [15]. Their research results indicate that a more open and expressive family communication pattern is associated with lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance; conversely, a communication style that follows parents' expectations and emphasises hierarchical relationships is positively correlated with attachment anxiety. That is, more open and expressive communication within a family can reduce anxiety and avoidant attachment levels, increase the level of secure attachment, and thus achieve higher romantic relationship satisfaction. In addition, some studies have shown that attachment types also affect family function [16]. For example, secure attachment can freely express one's emotions and needs, forming a healthy family communication pattern. Unsafe attachment types, such as avoidant or anxious attachment, may lead to dysfunctional family communication. In other words, children nurtured with secure attachment characteristics in their original family are prone to possess higher levels of secure attachment in adulthood. This enables them to establish positive and healthy communication patterns with their marriage partners and improve the quality of their marriages, resulting in higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Generally, individuals brought up in a family with a conversation-orientation communication style are prone to exhibit higher quality and satisfaction in their romantic relationships when compared to those raised in a family featuring a conformity-orientation communication style. Healthy communication patterns are typically associated with secure attachment, improving the quality of romantic relationships, while dysfunctional communication stemming from insecure attachment can negatively affect relationship satisfaction.

3.3. Conflict Management

Conflicts are inevitable within families. Should family members be capable of calmly discussing appropriate solutions to avert the escalation of conflicts, it will not merely be conducive to

maintaining family stability but also enable children to learn how to manage conflicts and handle their relationships appropriately in the future. Gottman pointed out that low-quality relationships are frequently coercive [17]. Coercive often accompanies coercion, signalling dissatisfaction, instability, and potential violence between intimate partners. Utilising coercive strategies to resolve conflicts with romantic partners can significantly harm the relationship. Such coercive tactics often originate in the family context. Capaldi and Clark proposed that factors in early family environments, such as parenting styles and family conflict, can lead to aversive interpersonal behaviour in children, increasing the likelihood of developing coercive patterns in future romantic relationships [18]. That is, children acquire coercion from the parent-child relationships and the interactions between their parents in the native family, and this influence might persist during their growth and extend to their romantic relationships in adulthood. Indeed, research indicates that the parenting style adopted during adolescence can predict supportive behaviours and noncoercive actions towards romantic partners in adulthood [19]. Furthermore, Ha show that destructive parenting patterns during adolescence can predict coercive behaviours in adulthood [20]. These coercive behaviours not only lead to a decline in relationship satisfaction but also increase the likelihood of violence between intimate partners. In other words, deficient family upbringing not only has indirect effects on adolescent peer relationships but also has direct and long-term effects on their future romantic relationships.

Therefore, to understand the root causes of coercion, violence, and conflict in adult romantic relationships, it is necessary to study early family dynamics, emphasising the crucial role of parenting styles and family conflict in shaping interpersonal relationships.

3.4. Family Cohesion

The family systems theory emphasises the critical role that family cohesion assumes in romantic relationships. Parade has demonstrated that the extent of warmth bestowed by parents during childhood, mediated by family cohesion, is associated with emotional relationship satisfaction in early adulthood [21]. Reid explored the connection between perceived parental warmth in adulthood and romantic attachment, emphasising the significance of positive family environments in shaping romantic attachment beliefs [22]. This implies that individuals with robust and stable family ties are more prone to cultivate stable security attachment styles, which, in turn, can vigorously facilitate intimacy and effective communication within their romantic relationships. Furthermore, Rollins asserted that during adolescence, family cohesion exhibits a positive correlation with marriage yet a negative correlation with cohabitation [23]. Commonly, marriage is regarded as a more stable and profound form of romantic relationship. This indicates that individuals from families with enhanced cohesion are more likely to enter marriage and might encounter greater satisfaction within romantic relationships. The stability and emotional support furnished by robust family ties could assist individuals in feeling more secure and content in the marital context, thereby accentuating the critical role that family dynamics exert in molding romantic relationships. Nevertheless, their study also underlined the intricate interaction among family dynamics, family structure, and factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity. For a comprehensive understanding of the influence of family cohesion on romantic relationships, these factors must be considered.

In summary, enhancing family cohesion can lead to healthier attachment styles, ultimately improving relationship satisfaction among emerging adults. This reinforces the importance of nurturing supportive family environments to promote well-adjusted and fulfilling romantic relationships in adulthood.

3.5. Family Structures

From the perspective view of social learning theory, the structure of the family of origin holds the potential to exert an influence on individuals' romantic relationships during their adulthood. The quality of parental marriage can profoundly impact children's romantic involvement in adulthood by molding their belief systems. For instance, marriage represents a commitment within the legal and emotional realms. Whether the parents within the family of origin undergo divorce can result in variances in the children's cognitions related to commitment, which are acquired from the family of origin. The research conducted by Weigle divulged that, in comparison to those whose parents remained married, the offspring of divorced parents exhibited a lower level of trust toward their partners and a relatively diminished commitment to the relationship [24]. The study by Cui and Fincham demonstrated that the progeny of divorced parents was more prone to experiencing divorce in their own marital lives and harboured fewer negative sentiments regarding divorce [25]. In other words, they were more inclined to perceive divorce as a personal alternative rather than regarding it as a failure of the family unit or a contravention of commitment, as per the traditional viewpoint. Such a perception has the propensity to sway their decision-making processes when confronted with marital issues, thereby rendering them more likely to consider the option of divorce. Concerning stepfamilies, Stanish ascertained that within the family of origin, whether it be in the form of intact families or stepfamilies, differences existed in the family environment, parental relationships, and parent-child interaction patterns as experienced by the children, which were found to have an impact on the formation and development of the security attachment within their romantic relationships during adulthood, such as a lower level of trust in intimate relationships [12].

It can be seen from this that the family structure of the family of origin impacts people's romantic relationships. However, to a greater extent, this impact is caused by the differences in the children's perception of marriage brought about by the differences in the family structure of the family of origin.

3.6. Self-Differentiation and Self-Regulation

Bowen proposed that when adults enter romantic relationships, they have already formed a basic level of self-differentiation and self-regulatory [5]. The levels of self-differentiation and self-adaptation are influenced by the differentiation level of the family of origin, which has an apparent effect on the quality of future romantic relationships [26].

Skowron defines self-differentiation as the ability to maintain a balance between emotional connection to one's family and individual autonomy [27]. In the research of Holman and Busby, it is pointed out that self-differentiation is a way to break away from the negative influence of the family of origin [26]. It can connect past experiences with current relationships. This indicates that people with high self-differentiation can clearly identify their own emotions and needs and simultaneously are not readily influenced by the feelings of others. People with low self-differentiation, on the other hand, are readily affected by the emotional state of family members and have difficulty maintaining self-boundaries. Thus, within romantic relationships, elevated levels of self-differentiation are conducive to handling emotions within such relationships and maintaining a better quality of romantic relationships.

Adverse backgrounds and early experiences in the family can adversely affect romantic relationships, notably when an individual lacks strong self-regulation skills, leading to potential harm in intimate connections later in life. Hardy notes that the family of origin environment is associated with relationship self-regulation, which in turn serves as a mediating factor between familial dysfunction and marital satisfaction [28]. Research by Knapp, Norton, and Sandberg demonstrates that individuals with adverse family backgrounds exhibit weaker self-regulation in romantic relationships and are less likely to display secure attachment behaviours [29]. Hence, individuals with

high self-regulation levels can perceive relationship problems more objectively and address them actively, thus attaining higher-quality romantic relationships.

In summary, the family of origin plays a crucial role in shaping self-differentiation and self-regulation, which in turn affects romantic relationship outcomes. Enhancing self-differentiation and self-regulation levels can lead to healthier and more fulfilling adult relationships.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review demonstrates that the family of origin exerts a multi-faceted influence on an individual's romantic relationships. Individuals possessing distinct attachment style tendencies originating from their original family demonstrate varying degrees of satisfaction in their intimacy. The communication style, conflict resolution approach, family cohesion, and family structure within the original family shape the way individuals interact and believe in their adult romantic relationships. The levels of self-differentiation and self-regulation developed by the individual within the original family will exert an impact on the quality of future romantic relationships.

Despite the extensive research that has been conducted on the connection between one's original family and intimate relationships, the focus has primarily been on the impact that occurs once people are already in a romantic relationship, such as the quality of the relationship, the way it is conducted, and satisfaction with the relationship. However, the issue of how individuals select partners prior to entering a romantic relationship has received scant research attention, such as whether those from specific family structures have a propensity to seek partners with comparable or complementary growth experiences. Further exploration of this topic in the future could offer pragmatically significant insights for pre-marital counseling and education. Additionally, the majority of studies are deficient in long-term longitudinal follow-up, and the samples frequently originate from specific cultural backgrounds. Future research should not merely contemplate augmenting long-term longitudinal follow-up but also integrate a multicultural perspective to investigate how factors like gender, race, socioeconomic status, and culture interweave with family dynamics over time.

Notwithstanding the constraints of the present research, the impact of the original family on romantic relationships remains a worthy area for in-depth exploration. We can better understand and adjust behavioural patterns in intimate relationships, thereby enhancing relationship quality and satisfaction. Simultaneously, these studies can delve into the domains of marriage counselling, family therapy, and parent-child relationship education to explore the influence of family structure, communication styles, and parent-child relationships on individual development. This can help professional psychologists provide targeted advice and intervention measures for individuals and families.

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