

How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways: Parenting During Adolescence, Attachment Styles, and Romantic Narratives in Emerging Adulthood

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In this longitudinal study, a quantitative and qualitative examination of the associations among parent–child relations, adult attachment styles, and relationship quality and theme in romantic narratives was conducted. Parenting and adult attachment style were assessed through questionnaires, whereas overall quality of romantic relationships (regard and importance), intimacy, and romantic story theme were examined with a life story approach (McAdams, 1993). At ages 17 and 26 years, 100 participants completed a series of questionnaires and also, at age 26, told a story about a “relationship-defining moment” with a romantic partner. Parent–child relations when participants were 17 years old were related predictably to all three attachment styles. About 70% of the sample told romantic stories with a “true love” type of theme. Associations between parent–child relations when the child was 17 and this type of theme in the story told when the participant was 26 were mediated by a more secure (and a less avoidant) attachment style when the participant was 26, as predicted. The implications of these findings for links between attachment models and the life story are discussed.

Keywords: narrative, adolescence, emerging adulthood, parenting, attachment

The search for intimacy in close relationships is said to begin in early adulthood (Erikson, 1950); however, the development of intimacy in romantic relationships is believed to be influenced by the way individuals were raised by their parents (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, 2004). One of our purposes in the present research was to examine the associations between parenting in adolescence and general adult attachment styles (secure, avoidant, or anxious; Fraley & Waller, 1998) at age 26. Second, we examined how these variables were related to the types of romantic relationship narratives that emerging adults told at age 26.

Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development

Developmental theorists such as Freud and Erikson sought to establish a model trajectory along which humans develop into social beings. Expanding on Freud’s early psychosexual theory, Erikson (1950, 1968) advanced a broader theory of psychosocial development that charts the process of personality development across the life course. He proposed that personality develops over the life span through orderly stages in a gradual progression. Though Erikson argued that development occurs in stages, these

stages do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, each stage is related to all the other stages and exists in some form from birth, even if the critical issue of a particular stage is not addressed until later life. Healthy development at each stage is said to be based on the proper resolution of the preceding stages.

According to Erikson (1950), there are eight stages of development that make up the typical life course. The sixth stage of development, which occurs in early adulthood, centers around the resolution of the crisis between intimacy versus isolation. While Erikson (1968) believed that true intimacy could only be attained if an individual had established (or was near establishing) a well-formed sense of identity, he recognized that identity development was not necessary for sexual intimacy to occur but that “true and mutual psychosocial intimacy” (p. 135) with a close other could only be achieved when an individual was certain of his or her sense of identity. Resolution of this stage typically involves successful acquisition and maintenance of close relationships and the establishment of a sense of mutuality through caring for others (Erikson, 1950). The inability to achieve intimacy results in painful feelings of isolation and self-absorption, as well as a lack of feelings of love. Individuals who fail to achieve intimacy may be fearful of losing their sense of identity by becoming intimate with others (Erikson, 1968).

A related perspective on development of the self is the narrative approach (McAdams, 2001). Just as the process of developing a sense of personality and the self is a lifelong process, the development of an individual’s life story occurs in tandem development of a sense of self. Erikson (1963) believed that narratives were part of every individual’s development and proposed that it was part of human nature to develop one’s own life story. McAdams (1993, 2006) has elaborated on this idea and suggested that life stories, which are continually being revised as individuals encounter new

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experiences, serve to define who individuals are and to consolidate their ever-changing identities. While identity and intimacy have been extensively studied (e.g., Kacerguis & Adams, 1980; Montgomery, 2005), the explorations of the individual's narrative accounts of these constructs have been less widely researched, and the links between such individual life narratives and traditional measures of development have only recently begun to be explored (e.g., Mackinnon, Nosko, Pratt, & Norris, in press; McLean & Pratt, 2006).

Additionally, recent research on attachment has indicated that the childhood experiences may play a role in the development of intimate and romantic relationships in adulthood. More specifically, it has been found that the parenting styles that parents adopted when raising their children and the associated parent-child bond that is formed, have strong and long lasting effects on their children's adult relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, 2004; Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005). Much of this work has been derived from models of parenting and attachment style.

Parenting Style

Research indicates that patterns of interactions that parents adopt with their children influence the children's later development (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001). Baumrind (1971) conducted seminal research into prototypic styles of parenting and identified three distinct types of parenting: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive, all three of which can be characterized along two broad dimensions, warmth and strictness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Authoritative parents were high on control and demandingness, as well as on warmth and responsiveness, maintaining a fine balance of both warmth and strictness while parenting. On the other hand, authoritarian parents were extremely restrictive and controlling of their children, required strict obedience, and were low on nurturing. Last, permissive parents, while responsive to their children's needs, allowed them to make their own decisions about activities, set few limits, and made few demands of their children. Authoritative parenting has consistently been shown to be the most beneficial type of parenting, particularly in North American samples (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994).

More generally, warm and supportive parenting has been related to healthy romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. Research has shown that parental relationship qualities exhibited during children's adolescence, including qualities that characterize authoritative parenting such as trust and children's closeness with parents, are positively related to children's higher quality romantic relationships in young adulthood (e.g., Dinero et al., 2008; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001).

Attachment Theory

How can this link between early family parenting experience and romantic relationships in young adulthood be understood? Bowlby (1973) proposed that young children create "working models" of their relationship with their parents that serve as guidelines or prototypes for future close relationships, including

friendships and romantic relationships. Children's internal working models provide a "set of conscious and/or non-conscious rules for the organization of information relevant to attachment" (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985, pp. 66–67) based on patterns of caregiver responses to their requests and needs. Secure prototypes for understanding future close relationships are provided by sensitive and responsive attachment figures in childhood (Griffith, 2004). In contrast, insecure prototypes, including anxious and avoidant types, are provided by either an inconsistent (anxious) or complete lack of (avoidant) caregiver response (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Securely attached children tend to exhibit greater autonomy and more effective communication in the parent-child relationship and are easily comforted after separation. In contrast, anxiously attached children often exhibit protest or objection behaviors when reunited with the parent, and avoidantly attached children exhibit detachment or separation behaviors from the parent on reunion (Bowlby, 1973).

Over the last two decades, a growing number of studies have focused on attachment theory as a framework for investigation of romantic relationships (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Dinero et al., 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As adolescents and young adults develop close romantic ties, the representations of close relationships with childhood caregivers have an impact on how they both perceive and behave with their romantic partners (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer, 2004; Vicary & Fraley, 2007). Specifically, young adults who report possessing secure working models of attachment with caregivers are more likely to develop a secure attachment with their romantic partner (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Simpson, 1990). Securely attached individuals report having more satisfying romantic relationships, in which they were easily able to trust and feel close to others, and experience more positive emotions and less negative emotions in the relationship. They also report being better able to maintain high levels of trust and commitment to their relationships over time (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1994; Simpson, 1990). However, these positive patterns are reversed for both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Anxiously attached adults report more insecurity about their partner's commitment and a wish for closer ties, whereas avoidant adults are more likely to report a preference for more distance.

Various ways of measuring attachment exist, including Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four-category grouping, in which dismissing and fearful avoidant styles are separated out, and the two-dimensional approach used by Fraley and colleagues (1998, 2003). In the current study, consistent with research conducted by Simpson (1990) and with earlier models of childhood attachment (Main et al., 1985), we used a three-category grouping (i.e., secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure anxious) to assess attachment style.

Romantic Relationships and Narratives

While the role of parenting, and attachment have been studied extensively with standard questionnaire measures, there was very little research into how adults' personal life stories relate to these traditional assessments. The stories people tell about their romantic relationships and how they relate to variables such as parenting and attachment could prove quite interesting. The rich data obtained through examination of romantic life stories may offer a

more in-depth look at the relationships between narratives and important developmental variables. In addition, perceptions of romantic support systems and attachment figures may be strongly linked to how individuals conceptualize, learn from, and retell their romantic experiences. In the context of romantic relationships, the life story perspective may contribute substantially to psychologists' understanding of the underlying mechanisms that play a role in the development of healthy, secure relationships. McAdams (2001) and others (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006) have conceptualized identity in modern cultures as based on a personal life story. Moreover, McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) have argued that personal life stories can play a critical role in sustaining aspects of the self's growth and development. Certain types of life stories, for example, have been suggested to help individuals retain their commitments under difficult life circumstances (e.g., to maintaining generative concern for others; see McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). In the present case, a life story about a romantic partner that emphasizes his or her special or unique status and qualities ("true love") may help to transform one's views of the relationship through time. We thus sought to explore how views of the romantic partner expressed in stories might be linked to parenting and attachment variables, as well as to relationship measures, and whether there were potential connections between traditional models and the narrative life story framework in this domain. Such ideas seemed plausible, given the findings from the marital literature that demonstrate how types of couple narratives early in a marriage can be predictive of future relationship development (e.g., Holmberg, Orbach, & Veroff, 2004; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadia, & Ortega, 1993; Wamboldt, 1999).

The Current Study

Previous research has shown that parenting and attachment patterns in adolescence are related to the experience of romantic relationships when children reach young adulthood. In most studies, investigators have examined these relations using retrospective accounts of the parental relationship. No known studies exist in which relations between parenting and romantic relationships have been examined prospectively across a period as long as a decade. Most important, these relations have never been examined in relation to narrative life story accounts of adults' romantic relationships.

Therefore, in the present study, we had three broad goals. First, we obtained reports of parenting and family patterns, representing the environment in which participants were reared, from adolescents at age 17 and examined these reports in relation to questionnaire measures of (general) attachment styles obtained from participants at age 26. Second, we appraised the relation of parenting during adolescence and attachment style to the quality of the romantic relationship (relationship importance and regard, intimacy) as rated from relationship stories told by participants at age 26. Third, we described the global themes of the romantic narratives that participants told at 26, and we explored the links between the type of story themes in the narratives and the various family parenting and attachment questionnaire measures in order to understand how narratives and relational self-development in this domain might be related.

Nonnarrative Hypothesis

One nonnarrative hypothesis was proposed in the present research.

Nonnarrative Hypothesis: A positive relation between a healthy parent-child relationship and later secure attachment and a negative relation between a healthy parent-child relationship and later insecure attachment (either anxious or avoidant) were expected.

Narrative Hypotheses

Two types of narrative hypotheses were proposed in the current study, including predictions related to overall relationship quality (i.e., regard for the partner and importance of the romantic relationship) and ratings of relationship intimacy, as well as predictions related to story theme (i.e., qualitative characterizations of story types).

Narrative Hypothesis 1: A positive relation between a healthy parent-child relationship when participants were 17 years old and better relationship quality (greater partner regard and relationship importance) and intimacy reflected in romantic relationship narratives told when participants were 26 was proposed.

Narrative Hypothesis 2: More secure attachment would predict higher levels of relationship quality and intimacy in romantic narratives, and more insecure attachment styles would predict lower levels of relationship quality and intimacy in romantic narratives.

Story Theme Predictions

Four story types were identified in thematic coding, including true love, relationship building, independence, and break-up (which will be discussed in more detail later). The following four hypotheses were proposed in relation to these story themes:

Theme Hypothesis 1: True love and relationship-building stories would contain higher levels of rated relationship quality (relationship importance and regard, intimacy), while stories of either independence or break-up would contain lower levels of rated relationship quality.

Theme Hypothesis 2: More positive parent-child relationships in adolescence would predict young adults' more frequent use of narratives of true love or relationship building, while less positive parent-child relationships would predict more frequent use of stories of break-up or independence.

Theme Hypothesis 3: More secure attachment ratings would predict more frequent stories of true love or relationship building, and more insecure attachment style ratings would predict more frequent stories of break-up or independence.

Theme Hypothesis 4: Finally, on the basis of our model of relations between parent-child relationships and attachment style and between attachment style and romantic story theme, we hypothesized that a more secure, or less insecure, attach-

ment style would mediate the relations between parent–child relationship ratings when participants were 17 and the use of true love or relationship-building romantic stories when participants were 26.

Method

Participants

The data from the current study are based on a longitudinal assessment that spanned a 9-year period (from age 17 to 26 years) and four waves of data collection (occurring when participants were 17, 19, 23, and 26). In the current study, the longitudinal relations between data collected when participants were 26 and the parent–child relationships participants reported when they were 17 were explored.

For the first wave, participants were recruited through 16 high schools in central Ontario, Canada. Eight hundred and ninety-six students (544 girls, 352 boys) volunteered to take part in the longitudinal study. The majority of participants were juniors (mean age = 17.4 years, $SD = 0.80$), White, and born in Canada (88%); reported speaking English at home (82%); and reported having average to above-average family incomes (94%). At all four waves of the study, participants filled out a variety of measures, including scales assessing family parenting.

The fourth and most recent wave was conducted when participants were age 26; the sample consisted of 100 individuals (68 women, 32 men). In this wave, participants were asked to take part in an extensive interview in addition to completing a survey package. At the time of the fourth wave of data collection, 70% of participants reported being in a “committed romantic relationship,” and about 15% were parents. Ninety-eight percent had completed high school, 74% had completed a college or university program, and 19% had enrolled in or completed a graduate program. Concerning the education levels of participants’ mothers and fathers, respectively, 86% and 84% had completed high school, 44% and 48% had completed a college or university program, and 7% and 13% had completed graduate school. Participants in the age-26 round did not differ from nonparticipants on gender, age, reported high school grade average, emotional adjustment self-reports (e.g., depression, self-esteem), or family parenting quality as assessed at age 17 (see Dumas, Lawford, Tieu, & Pratt, 2009, for more details).

Procedure

For the initial wave conducted when participants were 17, the adolescents filled out the surveys in a classroom and received \$2 for their participation. For the second (age 19), third (age 23), and fourth (age 26) waves, participants were contacted by phone and were asked to fill out another survey package. In the fourth wave, participants were asked to meet with a trained researcher to complete an in-person interview in addition to completing the survey package. Those participants who were not able to meet with the researcher could complete the interview over the phone. Each interview session took approximately 1.5–2.0 hr and was conducted at a university in Ontario.

During the interview session, participants were asked to tell relationship narratives, along with a variety of other stories. They

were instructed to talk about three “relationship-defining” memories or events, one with a parent, one with a same-sex friend, and one with a romantic partner. Order of these three narratives was counterbalanced. The participants were told to give as much detail as possible in recalling this event. After the interview, participants completed a survey package that included measures of adult attachment. In exchange for their participation, participants at age 26 were given a \$50 honorarium.

Tasks and Measures

Only the specific measures used in this study are reviewed here.

Background information. At age 17, participants reported their gender, high school grade averages, rating of family income, and parent educational attainment. At age 26, they reported their age, relationship status, and level of education they had attained. Among those who reported being in a committed romantic relationship, the length of the relationship ranged from 3 months to 12 years, with a mean of 4.48 years.

Relationship status. Participants were asked at age 26 whether they were currently in a committed romantic relationship or not. They were given a score of 1 if they indicated they were currently in a relationship and a score of 0 if they indicated they were not currently in a relationship. It seemed very likely that being in a current relationship would be linked to the content and type of narratives told by participants. We thus wanted to include this variable in the analyses.

Perceptions of parent–child relations. When participants were 17, multiple measures of parenting style and family patterns of behavior were administered. We combined these measures in order to create an overall parent–child relations index. We standardized participants’ scores from the authoritative parenting scale adapted from Parenting Style Scale by Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, and Dornbusch (1991), the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD; Morris, 1990), and the Parent Interaction Inventory (PII; Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005); we then aggregated the scores to produce an overall measure of parent–child relations developed for this study. Cronbach’s alpha for this three-item aggregate measure was .84.

Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of both strictness and warmth or responsiveness (Lamborn et al., 1991). Perceptions of parents’ levels of strictness (six items) and warmth (10 items) as assessed by the adolescents were standardized and aggregated to form an overall authoritative parenting measure (Lamborn et al., 1991). On a scale of -4 (*very strongly disagree*) to $+4$ (*very strongly agree*), participants were asked to indicate how applicable statements such as “My parents TRY to know where I go at night” (strictness) and “My parents spend time just talking with me” (warmth) were in reference to their own parents. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha levels for the age-17 wave were .80 for the strictness scale and .87 for the warmth scale, indicating high reliability.

At age 17, participants completed the 12-item General Functioning subscale of the McMaster FAD (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop; 1983). This subscale provides a global assessment of family health in terms of relationship functioning and emotional communication. Participants’ scores on each item of the FAD range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) on a 4-point Likert scale. An example item is “We are able to make decisions

about how to solve problems.” Cronbach’s alpha for the FAD in the current study was .92, indicating high reliability.

At this age, participants also completed the 18-item PII, indicating on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*a great deal*), how much they discussed certain areas of their lives (academics, family issues, future career plans, religion, moral values and politics) with their parents, how much they enjoyed discussing these topics with their parents, and how much influence they felt parents had regarding these areas of their lives. Cronbach’s alpha for the PII in this study was .84.

Adult attachment style. At age 26, participants completed a survey consisting of three multisentence statements that contain descriptions of three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious (based on Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Participants were asked to read each statement and then circle the number that best represented how they felt on a continuous scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), that was adapted from Hendrick and Hendrick (1989). For example, the description corresponding to a secure adult attachment is “I find it relatively easy to get close to others, and I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.”

Narrative Coding

Twelve participants were excluded from the present analyses. Three participants provided a romantic narrative that did not fit into any of our story theme categories; some of these were not focused on a relationship at all. Another nine participants could not think of a romantic relationship story to tell or reported that they did not date and were therefore excluded from subsequent analyses. Therefore, a total of 88 of 100 participants provided romantic relationship narratives that could be used in the final analyses that we report.

Participants told a romantic relationship narrative and were instructed to try and focus on what happened, where it happened, how long ago it happened, who was involved, what they were thinking and feeling, and the impact the experience had on them as a person (following the general procedures of McAdams, 1993, for eliciting personal life narratives). In the instructions for the narrative, participants were asked to describe an important relationship-defining event from a romantic relationship, a moment or experience that clearly expressed their current feelings about the relationship.

In preliminary discussions, we identified constructs that were relevant to the hypotheses (i.e., relationship variables such as intimacy) and then conducted open coding (e.g., Patton, 2002) on an initial subset of 30 narratives to describe story themes, with all themes emerging out of these relationship stories recorded, and commonly reoccurring themes noted. Four such themes (discussed in more detail in the Story Theme section) were extracted. The first author and second author then established a coding scheme that was used in subsequent reliability coding and analyses. From the remaining sample, 22 narratives were randomly drawn and then coded independently by these two raters and used for reliability. Any inconsistencies or disagreements about coding of this subset of narratives were discussed and resolved by both coders. For the remaining narratives, the primary coder’s score was used. The procedure used in coding all of the narratives, and a description of

each coded variable will be discussed. Using the subset of 22 narratives, two independent raters obtained a correlation of .93 for regard, 1.00 for importance, and .91 for intimacy. We assessed reliability for story theme using Cohen’s kappa, obtaining a kappa of .90 for the current sample.

Regard for partner. Level of regard for partner was scored on a linear system ranging from 0 to 2, with higher scores indicating a higher level of partner regard as reflected in the narratives. A score of 0 was given to narratives reflecting general lack of thought or consideration for the partner or a general sense of ambivalence or distrust of the partner, lack of respect for the partner, or a great sense of independence from the partner and the relationship. A score of 1 was given to narratives reflecting moderate consideration of the relationship partner and a moderate sense of independence from the partner and the relationship. Finally, a score of 2 was given to narratives reflecting high levels of connection to the partner or a generally high level of admiration and consideration for the partner.

Importance of the relationship. Similar to regard for partner, importance to the relationship was assessed and coded on a linear system ranging from 0 to 2. A score of 0 was given to stories reflecting a lack of dedication to the relationship and a general lack of care or thought toward the relationship. A score of 1 was given to stories reflecting the relationship as comparable in importance to other aspects of the story teller’s life. Finally, a score of 2 was awarded to stories containing statements that indicated the relationship was a top priority.

Intimacy. Narratives were scored based on McLean and Thorne’s (2003) conceptualization of intimacy. Stories containing statements of emotional or physical distancing or of the issue of separation as a struggle were given a score of 0. Closeness stories, including statements reflecting the desire for warm, close communication within the context of positive or negative relationship events, were awarded a score of 2. For those stories that did not convey much information in favor of either the separation or closeness dimension of intimacy, a score of 1 was awarded. Some of the stories could not be coded for these three dimensions because their content was too ambiguous. We excluded 25 stories reflecting regard, 22 reflecting importance, and nine reflecting intimacy from the analyses.

Correlations showed that all three of the romantic relationship variables (regard, importance, and intimacy) were highly positively related (lowest $r = .70$). Partner regard and relationship importance were conceptualized as very similar and were therefore aggregated to form an overall mean “romantic relationship quality” variable. Intimacy, although empirically positively correlated with regard and importance, was conceptualized as a somewhat distinctive construct and as a central one within the Eriksonian theoretical model. It was therefore retained as a separate measure and was not included in the aggregated scale for analyses.

Story Theme

We coded overall theme of the story using an open-coding procedure as described earlier (following Patton, 2002). Four story themes emerged from this process: break-up (stories of a relationship ending), independence (stories in which the narrator expresses the desire for independence in the relationship with the romantic partner), true love (stories of realization that the partner is “the

one” and visualization of a future together), and relationship building (stories that discuss the forward progress of a relationship). The vast majority of stories (over 95%) reflected one of these four story themes.

The following is an example of a true love narrative that was given a score of 2 for relationship quality and 2 for intimacy:

My wife’s name is “M,” and we had a pretty accelerated courtship, I guess. We’d been spending a lot of time together. . . . We became really good friends, but at the end of the semester, I was, like, all right, we might have something going here, so we decided to try it out . . . and she’s from Saskatchewan and I’m from here, so it was long distance. . . . Anyway, I was, like, here’s a woman that I can respect without having to remind myself she’s intelligent; let’s see how far we can go with this, because that’s important, equality. Anyway, she flew out here to visit in June and spend almost 2 weeks, and now I don’t know what your view of falling in love is, but I was trying to figure out if I was falling in love. We ended up talking about it while she was here. . . . By the end of the day, we were, like, yeah, I think we’re falling in love; we kind of just decided, so that was kind of the turning point, and from then on, it tangibly changed the substance of our relationship, and we knew that there was a future.

Here is an example of a break-up narrative that was scored a 0.5 for relationship quality and a 1 for intimacy:

She was 2 years younger than me. She was my sister’s friend . . . and we just hooked up; it was supposed to be kind of a summer fling, and then I’d be back in college. It ended up being 3 years. . . . She had broken up with her last boyfriend and kind of lost all her friends in the process [and] so had no one, came into my group of friends, and started dating me, so now all her friends are my friends. The relationship between us was more of a Jedi Padawan–type relationship. . . . She basically just kind of took on my, not necessarily personality, but whatever I was into, and I kind of made a clone of myself, I would say. Eventually, the relationship went sour; we’d kind of go in circles . . . and then one night, she’d brought up the same fight, and I was just like, “You know what? Enough is enough. I’m not saying, ‘You’ve got a valid point,’ and every time I tell you, ‘Okay, I’ll try and do better,’ and then we’re back here and I’m obviously not doing better, so there’s no point in continuing.” That relationship I look on as very much the idea of . . . guy takes malleable girl and basically molds her to what he wants her to be. And that didn’t work out so well, so now I’ve got to come up with another one.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The total sample for this study consisted of 100 participants who were interviewed at age 26 during the fourth wave of the study and provided complete data. We conducted quantitative examinations of the relationships between parenting and attachment using the full sample ($N = 100$), while excluding nine individuals who did not tell a story (and three individuals whose stories could not be coded; $N = 88$) from analyses involving the romantic narrative. Gender differences were also examined. The overall descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 for all of the variables examined in this study. The theme most prevalent in participants’ romantic narratives was true love ($n = 52, 59.1\%$), followed by independence ($n = 15, 17\%$), relationship building ($n = 11, 12.5\%$), and break-up ($n = 10, 11.4\%$) themes.

The various study measures were examined in relation to demographic and background measures, including participant age in years at last testing, high school average grade reported at age 17, father’s completed education level, and students’ reports of family income at age 17. None of these measures was significantly related to any of the narrative or nonnarrative measures of the current study, and so these demographic measures are not considered further in the analyses. We also conducted an analysis of whether a “codable” story had been told, which indicated that those who told such a story ($N = 88$) did not differ from those who did not on any of the nonnarrative measures of the study (i.e., parent–child relations at 17, attachment styles, current relationship status [committed or not], or gender).

Gender

Although no specific hypotheses were proposed, we conducted five t tests to examine differences in parent–child relations, adult attachment ratings, and status in regard to being in a current relationship as a function of gender. There were no significant ($p < .05$) gender differences on any of these dependent variables. Chi-square analysis showed that 24.1% of men told relationship-building stories about romantic partners, compared with 6.3% of women, which was a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1) =$

Table 1
Range of Scores, Minimum Scores, Maximum Scores, Mean Scores, and Standard Deviations for All Continuous Variables

| Measure | N | Score | | | | |
|--|----|-------|---------|---------|------|------|
| | | Range | Minimum | Maximum | M | SD |
| Perceptions of parent–child relations | 88 | 10.94 | –5.20 | 5.73 | 0.39 | 2.58 |
| Relationship status (committed or not) | 88 | 1.00 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.76 | 0.43 |
| Length of current romantic relationship (in years) | 75 | 11.75 | 0.25 | 12.00 | 4.48 | 3.18 |
| Secure attachment | 88 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.64 | 1.06 |
| Avoidant attachment | 88 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.39 | 1.24 |
| Anxious attachment | 88 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.10 | 1.14 |
| Intimacy | 87 | 2.00 | 0.00 | 2.00 | 1.54 | 0.74 |
| Relationship quality (regard and importance) | 66 | 4.00 | 0.00 | 4.00 | 3.27 | 1.31 |

5.97, $p = .02$.¹ No other narrative variable showed any significant gender differences.

Nonnarrative Hypotheses

Correlations were conducted between parent–child relations and attachment styles to address our first set of hypotheses. The associations with being in a committed romantic relationship were also assessed (see Table 2).

Consistent with the hypotheses, and as found in previous literature (e.g., Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001), good parent–child relations reported at age 17 were positively related to level of self-ratings of secure attachment at age 26 and negatively related to ratings of avoidant attachment and ratings of anxious attachment. However, parent–child relations at 17 were not significantly associated with being in a committed relationship at age 26 (see Table 2). Attachment styles were related to being in a committed relationship, as might be expected from previous research findings. Being in a committed relationship was positively related to secure attachment style and negatively related to both anxious and avoidant styles, as indicated in Table 2.

This pattern of results suggests reasonable support for the general model outlined in the introduction, with earlier positive parent–child relations tending to predict more secure attachment styles in young adulthood, which, in turn, were linked to a greater likelihood at this key developmental period of forming and maintaining long-term romantic relationships. These quantitative findings replicate previous results (e.g., Dinero et al., 2008; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001) but are based on longitudinal evidence regarding parenting patterns that extends these prospective findings over nearly 10 years.

Story Relationship Quality Hypotheses

The second set of hypotheses focused on the narratives of romantic relationships. Here we expected that ratings of young adults' life stories about experiences with romantic partners would be linked to parent–child relations during adolescence and would reflect something of the quality of attachment style that had been established. Table 3 shows correlations that address these hypotheses. Parent–child relations at 17 were modestly positively related to ratings of intimacy in the romantic stories but did not relate significantly to relationship quality, contrary to our hypotheses. However, all three of these narrative ratings were substantially positively related to whether the participant was currently in a

Table 3
Correlations Between Narrative Ratings and Various Measures of Parent–Child Relations and Attachment

| Variable | Intimacy | Relationship quality |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| Parent–child relations at 17 | .19 [†] | .14 |
| Committed relationship at 26 ^a | .40* | .59* |
| Secure attachment rating | .13 | .16 |
| Avoidant attachment rating | –.29 [†] | –.38* |
| Anxious attachment rating | –.14 | –.13 |

^a Biserial correlation (committed relationship = 1, no relationship = 0).

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

committed romantic relationship. Not surprisingly, current romantic status and experiences seemed to have a rather substantial link to the kinds of stories that young adults recalled and told (see Table 3), with those in a committed relationship telling stories that showed higher levels of intimacy and relationship quality. Relationship quality and intimacy as reflected in the romantic narratives were consistently negatively related to a more avoidant attachment style but did not show significant relationships with anxious or secure ratings, though these correlations were in the predicted directions (see Table 3).

Story Theme Hypotheses

Hypotheses regarding theme of the story were examined next. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with theme (true love, relationship building, independence, and break-up) as the between-subjects factor and overall relationship quality and intimacy as the dependent variables. Results revealed a significant main effect of story theme, $F(3, 61) = 24.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .55$, for relationship quality, and $F(3, 83) = 10.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .46$, for intimacy. Tukey's B post hoc tests revealed that true love and relationship-building stories did not differ, but this set contained higher level of overall relationship quality ($p < .001$) and intimacy ($p < .001$) than independence and break-up stories, which did not differ from each other.

We next examined parent–child relations at 17 and the three attachment styles at age 26 to see whether there were differences in these measures as a function of the four themes evident in romantic relationship narratives and to describe the pattern of relationships among these variables. A multivariate analysis of variance on these four dependent measures revealed a main effect of story theme, Wilks's lambda, $F(12, 214.60) = 3.55$, $p < .001$. Follow-up one-way ANOVAs were conducted, with story theme (break-up, true love, independence, and relationship building) as the between-subjects factor for each of the dependent measures. The analysis for parent–child relations at age 17 did not show a significant effect of story theme, $F(3, 84) = 2.08$, *ns*, though the patterns of means suggested that those who told break-up or independence stories tended to score lower on this measure, as expected (see Table 4). However, results revealed that there were significant differences in attachment style as a function of theme

Table 2
Correlations Between Parent–Child Relations, Current Relationship Status, and Attachment

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|------|------|------------------|-------|-------------------|
| 1. Parent–child relations | 1.00 | .10 | .26 [†] | –.28* | –.18 [†] |
| 2. Committed relationship ^a | | 1.00 | .32* | –.46* | –.36* |
| 3. Secure attachment | | | 1.00 | –.69* | –.32* |
| 4. Avoidant attachment | | | | 1.00 | .40* |
| 5. Anxious attachment | | | | | 1.00 |

^a Biserial correlation (committed relationship = 1, no relationship = 0).

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

¹ We entered gender as a covariate in the key narrative analyses to examine any systematic differences, but it did not change the pattern of results found. Therefore, gender was dropped from the reported analyses.

Table 4

Means, Standards Deviations and One-Way Analysis of Variance Results for Stories About True Love, Relationship Building, Independence, and Break-Up by Various Dependent Measures

| Variable | Story type | | | | | | | | F |
|--|-------------------|------|-----------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|------------------------------|
| | True love | | Relationship building | | Independence | | Break-up | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | |
| Relationship quality (regard and importance) | 3.88 _a | 0.40 | 3.67 _a | 0.82 | 1.92 _b | 1.51 | 1.33 _b | 1.75 | $F(3, 61) = 20.65, p < .001$ |
| Intimacy | 1.84 _a | 0.46 | 1.45 _a | 0.69 | 1.07 _b | 0.92 | 0.90 _b | 0.88 | $F(3, 83) = 10.65, p < .001$ |
| Parent-child relations | 0.91 | 2.47 | 0.18 | 3.20 | -0.61 | 2.37 | -0.62 | 2.76 | $F(3, 84) = 2.08, ns$ |
| Secure attachment | 3.83 _a | 1.00 | 4.09 _a | 0.83 | 3.00 _b | 1.03 | 3.10 _b | 0.99 | $F(3, 84) = 4.31, p = .007$ |
| Avoidant attachment | 1.96 _a | 1.06 | 2.27 _a | 1.10 | 3.53 _b | 1.22 | 3.00 _b | 0.94 | $F(3, 84) = 9.26, p < .001$ |
| Anxious attachment | 1.84 _a | 0.91 | 2.09 _a | 0.94 | 2.20 _a | 1.12 | 3.30 _b | 1.25 | $F(3, 84) = 5.45, p = .002$ |

Note. Means with same subscripts are not significantly different at least the .05 level. Means with different subscripts are significantly different at least the .05 level.

for each of the attachment measures. People who told stories about independence and break up were more likely to score high on the avoidant attachment style than those who told true love or relationship-building stories ($p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$). People who told independence or break-up stories were also less likely to rate themselves as secure ($p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$) than those who told stories involving the other two themes, while those who told break-up stories were particularly likely to rate themselves as anxious compared with others ($p < .01, \eta^2 = .16$; see Table 4).

These analyses suggested that narrative theme was linked to attachment styles as expected. Furthermore, the patterns that emerged in terms of means in these sets of analyses indicated that break-up and independence stories were generally distinctive from the true love and relationship-building stories in several ways. Indeed, true love and relationship-building stories together seemed to form the dominant pattern in this sample (>70% of all stories). True love in particular seemed to be the prototypic romantic story among these young adults. Relationship-building stories seemed similar to true love stories, though perhaps less intense in their relationship language. In addition, these stories seemed to describe relationships that were of shorter duration. We therefore decided to treat these two broad story theme groupings (true love and relationship-building vs. independence and break-up story themes) as distinctive outcomes in exploring predictions from participants' personal and family characteristics. In particular, we sought to explore a model in which parent-child relations at 17 were predictive of the type of romantic story theme outcome at age 26 through the mediation of attachment style. Because being in a committed current relationship was so clearly linked to many of these narrative variables (as shown in the correlational analyses; see Table 3), its role as a possible mediator was explored as well.

To do this, we tested mediation as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) using a series of binary logistic regression models. Two models were tested for each analysis. The first model excluded the presumed mediating variable, and the second model included the mediating variable (e.g., Nordin, Knutsson, & Sundbom, 2008). Sobel tests were also performed for each mediation model. Parent-child relations were not significantly associated with anxious attachment, and therefore this variable did not fulfill the requirements laid out by Baron and Kenny (1986) to be a mediator. Thus,

this variable was not further analyzed in the mediation models reported next.

Parent-Child Relations, Attachment, and Story Theme

We conducted two binomial logistic regressions to examine whether attachment style mediated the relationship between parent-child relations and type of story told (i.e., true love and relationship-building stories vs. independence and break-up stories). One of the two attachment styles (i.e., secure and avoidant) was entered as a potential mediator in each equation. Results indicated that as anticipated for both models (involving secure and avoidant attachment), attachment style fully mediated the association between parent-child relations and story theme, as the significant relation between parent-child relations at 17 and story theme type at 26 was reduced to nonsignificance when each of these styles was entered (see Figures 1 and 2, for secure and avoidant, respectively). Refer to Table 5 for these results. The Sobel test confirmed the significance of these mediation patterns (see Table 5).

Attachment, Relationship Status, and Story Theme

We conducted three binomial logistic regressions to examine whether relationship status (i.e., in a committed relationship or not) mediated the relationship between attachment style (i.e., secure,

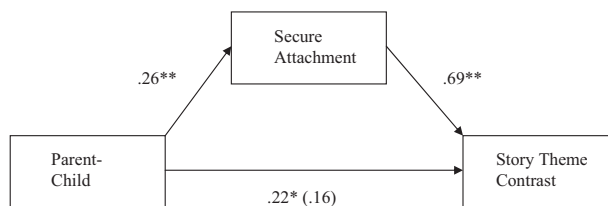


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between parent-child relations and story theme as mediated by secure attachment. The standardized regression coefficient between parent-child relations and story theme, with avoidant attachment (in parentheses) controlled. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

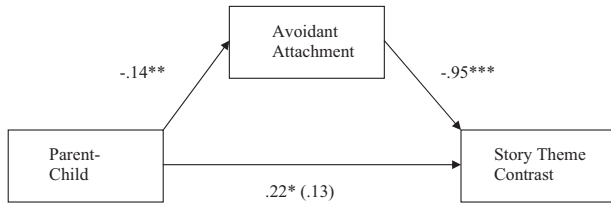


Figure 2. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between parent-child relations and story theme as mediated by avoidant attachment. The standardized regression coefficient between parent-child relations and story theme, with avoidant attachment (in parentheses) controlled. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

avoidant and anxious) and type of story told (i.e., true love and relationship-building stories vs. independence and break-up stories). Results indicated that for secure and avoidant attachment, relationship status was only a partial mediator, as the relation between these attachment style ratings and story theme remained significant even with relationship status entered in the equation. However, relationship status fully mediated the association between anxious attachment and story theme, as the significant relation between anxious attachment and story theme type was reduced to nonsignificance when relationship status was entered. The Sobel test confirmed these mediation patterns (see Table 6). Thus, even when relationship status was controlled, secure and

Table 5
Models of the Mediating Effect of Secure and Avoidant Attachment Styles on the Relationship Between Parent-Child Relations and Story Theme Contrast (True Love & Relationship-Building Stories vs. Independence & Break-Up Stories)

| Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Parent-child relations | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | 1.24 [1.03, 1.50] | 1.17 [0.96, 1.43] |
| B | 0.22 | 0.16 |
| SE | 0.10 | 0.10 |
| p | .02 | .11 |
| Secure attachment | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | | 1.99 [1.22, 3.24] |
| B | | 0.69 |
| SE | | 0.25 |
| p | | .006 |
| Chi-square test | 5.38 | 13.54 |
| Sobel test | | 1.95* |
| Parent-child relations | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | 1.24 [1.03, 1.50] | 1.14 [0.92, 1.41] |
| B | 0.22 | 0.13 |
| SE | 0.10 | 0.11 |
| Wald test | 5.07 | 1.47 |
| p | .02 | .23 |
| Avoidant attachment | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | | .41 [0.26, 0.65] |
| B | | -0.89 |
| SE | | 0.24 |
| p | | <.001 |
| Chi-square test | 5.38 | 22.22 |
| Sobel test | | 2.23* |

Note. CIs = 95% Confidence intervals; SE = standard error. * $p < .05$.

Table 6
Models of the Mediating Effect of Relationship Status (Committed Relationship vs. Not) on the Relationship Between Secure and Avoidant Attachment Styles and Story Theme Contrast (True Love & Relationship-Building Stories vs. Independence & Break-Up Stories)

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Secure attachment | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | 2.13 [1.33, 3.43] | 1.96 [1.10, 3.51] |
| B | 0.76 | 0.67 |
| SE | 0.24 | 0.30 |
| p | .002 | .02 |
| Relationship status | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | | 18.34 [5.60, 66.49] |
| B | | 2.91 |
| SE | | 0.66 |
| p | | <.001 |
| Chi-square test | 10.99 | 34.67 |
| Sobel test | | 2.62* |
| Avoidant attachment | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | 0.39 [0.25, 0.61] | .42 [0.24, 0.74] |
| B | -0.95 | -0.86 |
| SE | 0.23 | 0.29 |
| p | <.001 | .003 |
| Relationship status | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | | 14.89 [3.99, 55.55] |
| B | | 2.70 |
| SE | | 0.67 |
| p | | <.001 |
| Chi-square test | 20.74 | 39.73 |
| Sobel test | | -3.05* |
| Anxious attachment | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | 0.56 [0.37, 0.85] | 0.75 [0.45, 1.24] |
| B | -0.58 | -0.29 |
| SE | 0.21 | 0.26 |
| p | .006 | .26 |
| Relationship status | | |
| Odds ratio [CIs] | | 16.76 [4.75, 59.18] |
| B | | 2.82 |
| SE | | 0.64 |
| p | | <.001 |
| Chi-square test | 7.87 | 30.37 |
| Sobel test | | -2.62* |

Note. CIs = 95% Confidence intervals; SE = standard error. * $p < .05$.

avoidant attachment significantly predicted different story theme patterns in these analyses.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was two-fold: First, we examined the associations between parent-child relations as reported in adolescence (age 17) and adult attachment in emerging adulthood (age 26) using a set of standard questionnaire measures. Second, and more novel, we collected narrative data to explore the relationships among earlier parenting, adult attachment styles, and the characteristics and themes of romantic narratives told at age 26 about a specific relationship-defining experience from individuals' personal life stories (e.g., McAdams, 2006).

Parent–Child Relations and Attachment

Results from this longitudinal study were based on data collected over a 9-year time span and allowed for an extended examination of how parent–child relations during adolescence were related to later adult attachment styles and relationships. The results from the first portion of this study supported previous research highlighting the potential importance of parent–child relations for subsequent secure adult attachment (e.g., Fraley & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Those who reported having benefited from positive parent–child relations at age 17 also were more likely to report a secure adult attachment style at age 26. In contrast, those who reported more negative parent–child relations at age 17 reported a more avoidant attachment style at 26. While the data only address the association between adolescence and young adulthood, these findings seem to lend support to the notion that child–caregiver models may carry through into adult attachment systems (Bowlby, 1979; Main, 1995; Roisman et al., 2005). At the very least, quality of parenting when participants were age 17 coherently predicted their attachment styles at age 26, and these prospective findings over this extended time period add to the research literature on this topic.

In order to successfully move forward into the intimacy stage of development, adolescents and young adults may require not only the opportunity to explore their environments but also access to a warm caregiver and a secure base (Mikulincer, 2004). Perhaps, for adolescents, having a warm reliable caregiver whom they can go to if need be enables them to develop a sense of comfort and confidence in social relationships. Knowing that they can rely on others may translate into a more secure attachment in romantic relationships throughout adulthood. Positive parent–child relations may benefit adolescents by allowing them the opportunity to explore their environments while reassuring them that there is a support system if needed.

Narratives: Overall Relationship Quality (Importance of the Relationship and Regard for Partner) and Intimacy

In an effort to better understand the nature and possible role of romantic relationship memories, we looked at the associations between romantic life stories told by participants and their parent–child relations and adult attachment styles. At age 26, participants took part in an extensive interview and told stories about a relationship-defining moment or event in reference to a personal romantic relationship. Each narrative was coded for quality of the relationship (conceptualized as varying in regard for the romantic partner and importance of the relationship), as well as level of intimacy described within the story.

Correlational analyses in the current study showed that parent–child relations reported when participants were 17 were not significantly associated with measures of the quality of their relationships (partner regard, relationship importance) at age 26 but were modestly positively related to higher levels of intimacy as reflected in their romantic relationship stories, as hypothesized (see Table 3). One interpretation might be that communication skills that are taught, reinforced, and encouraged by effective parents during their children’s adolescence are transferred by the adolescents to their later romantic relationships and result in the ability to reflect

on and retell stories that depict greater levels of closeness (e.g., Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001).

Among the attachment styles, one significant relationship was found: avoidant attachment was related to ratings of the quality of romantic relationships from the stories. More specifically, avoidant individuals reflected lower levels of relationship quality as expressed in their narratives. Again, referring to attachment theory, avoidant people may be less inclined to commit themselves emotionally to a romantic relationship (indeed, they were less likely to be in such a relationship in this study, as shown in Table 2) and therefore may not experience or reflect on intimate bonds as often in their narratives. However, it was somewhat surprising that secure attachment was not related to these aspects of life stories (nor was anxious attachment). It is likely that general attachment styles are only modestly related to romantic relationships, and these are only somewhat likely to be captured in stories about a specific event that may be recalled in a romantic narrative. Nevertheless, the relations to avoidant attachment found in these narratives are quite coherent and support other evidence that this attachment style is particularly striking in its limited expression of closeness and reliance on others (e.g., Rholes, Simpson, Tran, McLeish Martin, & Friedman, 2007). The following is an example of an independence narrative told by an individual who rated high on the avoidant scale:

It would be my husband. When we first started dating—we were maybe dating a year—we were away at school; we didn’t live together, but we were basically living together . . . and so we were seeing each other every day, and he was my first real boyfriend, so it was kind of too much because I was used to just doing everything on my own. I remember saying to him, “Okay, we need to not take a break but just not see each other every day, like not wake up with each other, go to school together, have dinner together.” And he took that to heart and, was like, “You’re breaking up with me,” and he thought we were breaking up, and I was, like, “No, we just need to slow down,” and I think from that, that’s how we are today. We—he does his hockey thing, I do my ringette thing, he’ll go play golf. We do stuff separately, and I think it’s from how we started our relationship.

Story Theme

Strikingly, the majority of stories told reflected a theme of true love (nearly 60%), followed by stories about independence, break-up, and relationship building (each about equally frequent in our sample). It makes sense that these stories would contain major themes of true love, given that participants were asked to tell a romantic relationship story that likely primed them to answer in a way consistent with such a love story. Such stories fit the North American cultural prototype of romantic relationships and were elicited during a developmental period when romantic partnership issues are particularly salient in young adults’ lives (Erikson, 1968). Personal life stories are often at least partly appropriated by the individual from such cultural materials (e.g., McAdams, 2006).

A smaller number of stories focused on the theme of relationship building in this sample. This theme appeared to be similar to the true love story but described a somewhat earlier phase in the development of the relationship, and a somewhat more limited terminology was used concerning issues of commitment. However, approximately 30% of the stories told by our sample reflected themes of either independence or break-up, despite participants’

being asked to tell a romantic relationship story. This finding is intriguing and shows that at least some people chose to tell romantic relationship stories that were not necessarily simple love stories. But what factors predict the telling of these different stories?

In fact, a noteworthy relationship emerged among the participants' parent-child relations at age 17, attachment style at age 26, and the type of romantic story told. In particular, more positive parent-child relations were related to the likelihood of telling stories of true love or relationship building, while less positive parent-child relations were related to telling stories of independence or break-up. Attachment style played an important mediating role in these relations, with secure attachment mediating the association between parent-child relations and the tendency to tell true love or relationship-building stories (or avoidant attachment mediating the link between parent-child relations and independence or break-up stories). From these findings, it appears that while perceptions of parenting at age 17 predict what kind of romantic relationship story individuals choose to tell almost 10 years later, this effect may be largely dependent on individuals' general attachment styles (see Table 5). Apparently, then, current attachment styles have some power to predict perceptions and recollections of personal romantic relationship experiences in the life story, while these attachment styles themselves are derived in part from earlier family experiences. These observations are of course consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and suggest at least some potential narrative involvement in this pathway of some level of developmental continuity. This link between individuals' attachment style and life stories elicited about their romantic lives sheds further light on how influential the attachment system is and extends current findings based on traditional attachment measures to include a new assessment method, the romantic narrative life story, based in a different framework, the life story model (e.g., McAdams, 2006). These life narrative findings thus can be seen to provide somewhat independent support for the attachment framework.

We conducted a key secondary analysis to examine the predictive effect of current relationship status (i.e., whether participants indicated that they were in a committed relationship or not) on the association between attachment style and story theme. Findings suggested that relationship status plays an especially important role in narrative for more anxiously attached styles, while maintaining a less prominent role for either securely attached or avoidantly attached styles. It appears that for more anxiously attached individuals in particular, being in a committed relationship may act as a buffer and may also encourage or enable these people to have a higher likelihood of experiencing, and subsequently recalling, events related to positive, true love stories in romantic relationships, as opposed to stories of break-up or independence.

It is also important to note from the analyses in Table 6 that an association still does exist between secure and avoidant attachment styles and the type of romantic story told, even when current relationship status is taken into account. The relation between story theme and attachment might simply have been the result of whether or not people were in a committed relationship, which clearly was linked to type of story told, and might have fully explained these effects. However, this alternative hypothesis of the links between secure or avoidant attachment and romantic narra-

tive theme is not consistent with the present findings, indicating that there is something more about these styles than simply their link to current romantic relationship status that predicts to the type of romantic narrative told. Regardless of one's current relationship situation, attachment style seems to mediate distinctive ways of telling the romantic story in young adulthood.

This empirical story so far told begs the question of whether telling true love narratives about one's romantic life may be especially supportive in maintaining such romantic connections over time (e.g., Veroff et al., 1993). McLean et al. (2007) and McAdams (2006) have both argued that the life story may provide resources that can help to sustain or change individuals' behaviors, actions, and self-conceptions. It would be interesting to explore this notion through longitudinal research focused on how distinctive romantic stories and couple behaviors interact and predict developments over time in a relationship. Some research on couple relations has already done this (Holmberg et al., 2004; Veroff et al., 1993), suggesting that couple narratives can predict aspects of relationship development somewhat coherently. It is also important to note, however, that constructing true love stories might have both negative as well as positive consequences, should they, for example, encourage immature adolescents to stay in relationships that might prove unhealthy for them in the long run. While Holmberg et al. (2004) reported that couples' positive stories of their courtships and weddings at first predicted short-term marital happiness, highly positive views of these events told after several years were actually linked with less marital satisfaction, especially for wives. Holmberg et al. suggested this was a reminiscence phenomenon, characterized by an overly romanticized view of the past when the present was no longer so positive. Certainly, at least, this finding is evidence of the complexity of relations between romantic stories and couple adaptation and interaction over time, and more longitudinal research on the relations between both narratives and behavior over time would be important to address this issue.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the current study demonstrated, as anticipated, that more positive parent-child relations in adolescence were related to a more secure attachment style (and to lower levels of insecure styles) 9 years later. Moreover, attachment styles were coherently related to overall quality of the romantic relationships as measured from romantic life narratives.

Perhaps most intriguing, a coherent relationship existed between parent-child relations, general attachment styles, and the themes of the romantic stories, coded independently and based in quite different methods and procedures. This suggests that while parenting during the adolescent years is very important to healthy development, the ensuing adult attachment style may lie at the core of an individual's relational development as well as the acquisition and consolidation of the romantic self, as suggested by romantic attachment models (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). How an individual relates to romantic experiences and the types of lessons learned and retold also may be strongly linked to how he or she perceives his or her romantic support systems and secure bases. These findings may be particularly useful in clinical and therapeutic settings in helping health practitioners to better tailor couples therapy to incorporate aspects of attachment theory (e.g., Wam-

boldt, 1999). Understanding romantic relationship stories from this perspective may further illuminate the mechanisms that influence how people construe their intimate relationships and may help to encourage further research on the possible role of romantic life stories in adult relational development.

Some of the limitations present in the current study could be addressed in future studies. For example, the adult attachment measure used in this study consisted of only three statements, each one describing one of the three attachment styles presented by Hazan and Shaver (1987). While this measure has been validated and shown to reliably assess a general attachment style (e.g., Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989), measures specific to romantic attachment in particular would be useful for examinations of the variables in this study. In addition, while we used the three-category model of attachment in the current study, future work would benefit from use of the now more commonly used four-category model presented by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Second, this Canadian sample was drawn from a range of backgrounds but was still relatively homogeneous, and consequently caution should be exercised in terms of generalization to people from other cultural and social class backgrounds. Also, the analyses in the current study were based on information from those participants who were willing to tell a story. While 9% of the sample did not tell a story, these participants did not differ on any of the early quantitative measures from those who did. It thus seems unlikely that there were major selection biases in the present study. Additionally, as noted, there was no evidence of selective dropout based on any major study variables from age 17 for our longitudinal interview sample at age 26 (Dumas et al., 2009). While there was a low retention rate for this final wave, this is to be expected for a longitudinal study spanning more than 9 years and requiring participation in a long and demanding interview protocol at age 26. Follow-up with participants was challenging due to incomplete contact information or change in address or location, resulting in the 11% retention rate in the final wave of data collection.

While there are limitations to the current research, the results from this study provide initial insight into a burgeoning area of developmental research and allow for a more in-depth and open-ended examination of people's representations of their romantic relationships. Combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the findings are particularly important, given the overall limited level of research on romantic life story narratives to date. Although the current study is correlational in nature and cannot therefore demonstrate causality, the data do suggest that there is utility in exploring the romantic aspects of the life story with such a relationship narrative approach and that prior parenting and adult attachment styles are linked in predictable ways to how individuals tell love stories during young adulthood. In particular, these young adults' adoption of a standard, prototypical Western narrative of romantic experience, the true love story, was reflective of the various elements of traditional questionnaire measures of attachment and relationships. Just as life stories of the individual may underpin, or even constitute, a sense of developing identity (McAdams, 2001), access and use of a type of narrative of romantic relationships may reflect or even dynamically influence key aspects of a developing sense of intimacy. Further research on romantic life stories and their links to more traditional models of attachment and intimacy development seems well worthwhile.

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