EXPLORING THE THEORY OF RESILIENT COMMITMENT IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

by

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B.S., Brigham Young University, 2008
M.A., Southern Utah University, 2010
M.S., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2015

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how emerging adults (18-29 year olds) define commitment in romantic relationships and have created meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment they have witnessed. Twenty (10 men, 10 women) unmarried emerging adults were interviewed individually. Through the use of grounded theory four themes emerged to explain how emerging adults have constructed their understanding of commitment: complete loyalty, investment in the relationship, continual communication, and parental influence. From observing negative and positive examples of commitment, emerging adults learned to discern healthy and unhealthy characteristics of romantic relationships, are working to be different, and have learned what to do to make a committed relationship work long term including the sub-themes of unitedly persevere, prioritize the relationship, consider your partner, give substantial effort, have fidelity. These results extend our knowledge about the model of resilient commitment, and the critical purpose of meaning making. Implications for intervening with emerging adults to strengthen future romantic relationship stability are discussed.

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Approved by:

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Amber V. Vennum, Ph.D.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful wife KaCee and my four wonderful children, Taryn, Trevor, Landon and Carter. Their support and love sustained me throughout this project and inspired me to complete this research. I will forever be grateful to each of them. I also dedicate this dissertation to emerging adults everywhere who hope for a satisfying and sustainable romantic relationship even if their parents have divorced or there was conflict in their home.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Emerging adulthood (the life period between 18-29 years old; Arnett, 2000) is a time of life characterized by decision making in romantic relationships (e.g., Arnett, 2014; Crouter, & Booth, 2006; Fincham, & Cui, 2010). Although many emerging adults have experienced instability in their caregivers' relationships, there is substantial evidence that emerging adults continue to have a strong desire to marry, and that marriage remains an important goal (e.g., Carroll et al., 2009; Mahay & Lewin, 2007, Willoughby, Hall, & Goff; Arnett, 2014). Research by many family scholars indicates that marriage remains the gold standard and makes a significant difference for society and for the lives of children, providing individuals, couples, and families with the ability to cope more effectively with life's challenges (Marquardt, Blakenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012; Wilcox et. al, 2011).

Central to a establishing and maintaining a healthy marriage is the essential element of commitment (e.g., Robinson & Blanton, 1993). As explained by Stanley (2005) "commitment is at the core of a deeply fulfilling marriage" (p. 11). Carroll and colleagues (2009) found that emerging adults recognize the importance of commitment as a critical step in personal readiness for marriage, and one of the most important marriage readiness indicators. And yet, standing in the way of emerging adults' ability to form and sustain committed romantic relationships are a number of known risk factors (Hawkins, 2012). For instance, parental divorce and conflict (e.g., Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005), having many premarital sexual partners (e.g., Busby et al., 2013), premarital relationship violence (e.g., Johnson, Anderson, & Stith, 2011), pre-engagement cohabitation (e.g., Rhoades & Stanley, 2014), and premarital parenthood (e.g., Amato & Booth, 2001) are all factors that pose a potential threat to commitment formation.

The purpose of this study is to explore how emerging adults make meaning from the examples of commitment in romantic relationships that they have observed from their families of origin. There are a variety of reasons some emerging adults holding back from being in a committed relationship besides the "end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities" (Arnett, 2004, p. 6). It is clear from the literature that the meaning some emerging adults have made from the negative examples of commitment they have witnessed may prevent them from seeking a committed romantic relationship (e.g., Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011). Perhaps if emerging adults could learn to reframe the meaning of the relational adversity they have experienced and observed, this could improve the likelihood of future relationship health and stability.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Emerging Adulthood Romantic Relationships

The term emerging adulthood was coined by Arnett (2000, 2004) in order to describe the unique period in between adolescence and adulthood in industrialized countries that is characterized by freedom, spontaneity, self-exploration, and identity formation (Arnett, 2004; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). There has been an active debate among researchers if emerging adulthood is an actual life stage or whether it should it be defined as a process (Arnett et. al, 2011). As explained by Arnett 2004:

> This period is not simply an "extended adolescence," because it is much different from adolescence, much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really "young adulthood," since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not

made the transitions historically associated with adult status—especially marriage and parenthood—and many of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. (p. 3)

Arnett (2004, p. 7) highlights five distinguishing characteristics of emerging adulthood: the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the most self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.

Contemporary emerging adults view commitment, love, relationships, and sexual behavior much differently than in previous generations (Arnett, 2014; Arnett et al., 2011). As explained by Owen, Rhoades, Stanley & Fincham (2010) "one of the most significant recent changes is that there are no longer clear steps, stages, or statuses in dating relationships" (p. 653). The notions of dating, going steady, or other emblems of commitment have been replaced by "hanging out" and "hooking up" (Owen et al., 2010; Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2012).

Although some scholars have proposed that exploratory sexual behavior or "sowing wild oats" is an important component of youth development that allows young people to get promiscuous and impulsive behaviors out of their system, recent research suggests that these behaviors may come with a cost. For example, Busby et al. (2013) found from their sample of 2,654 married individuals that the number of sexual partners spouses had prior to marriage was negatively associated with relationship stability, sexual activity, and positive communication during marriage. These findings provided support for the benefits of sexual restraint (limiting sexual activity to a committed partner) as opposed to the idea of having many of sexual partners to determine sexual compatibility (Busby et al., 2013). Rhoades and Stanley (2014) found very similar findings through their research that: "What happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas, so to speak. Our past experiences, especially when it comes to love, sex, and children, are linked to our future marital quality" (p. 4).

Even with an abundant amount of empirical research indicating that marriage remains an important lifetime priority for emerging adults in the United States, emerging adults are choosing to delay marriage for a variety reasons (Arnett, 2004). The marriage rate (the number of women's marriages per 1,000 unmarried women) has decreased by nearly 60% since 1970 (Cruz, 2013), prompting a very active discussion among researchers about the causes and consequences of this trend (e.g., Lee & Payne, 2010; Willoughby et al., 2014). The literature clearly indicates that parental divorce can significantly increase the odds that offspring will see their own marriages end in divorce (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). In a study by Cui, Fincham, and Pasley (2008), they found that parental divorce and conflict reduced their children's relationship efficacy and later relationship quality. Consequently, emerging adults whose parents have divorced report lower relationship satisfaction, more conflict, and less commitment in premarital or dating relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Rhoades et al., 2012; Whitton et al., 2008). Cui and colleagues (2011) also found that divorce, or a conflictual parental relationship, can negatively influence emerging adults' attitudes about marriage and commitment.

Family of Origin's Impact on Commitment

Much has been written about the significant impact that family of origin relationships can have on children and their ability to function in future romantic relationships (e.g., Conger et al., 2000; Cui et al., 2011). A person's family of origin is where they first learn about the components of relationships, such as, love, honesty, respect, communication (Crittenden, 1997), attachment (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2011), commitment, and conflict (Weigel, 2007). For example, Weigel, Bennett, and Ballard-Reisch (2003) interviewed children of divorced or unhappy parents and found these emerging adults were more likely to report

learning that relationships are not permanent and should be approached with caution and were less likely to receive messages about the love and partnership required for an enduring marriage. Whereas children with happily married parents often report learning that dedication to one's partner and hard work are significant factors to the success of a relationship (Gardner, Busby, Burr, & Lyson, 2011; Weigel et al., 2003). The message that many adults stay in relationships due to constraints that make ending the relationship hard, not because they are happy, is also commonly received by children with divorced or unhappy parents (Weigel et al., 2003). Messages from friends, neighbors, and the media also play a role, but not be quite as influential as parental example (Sibley et al. 2015). While receiving messages from one's family of origin can influence one's life, it does not necessarily lead to a person believing and carrying out those messages.

Researchers have just begun to explore the meaning emerging adults make form those early messages and positive or negative examples of commitment in romantic relationships. Interestingly, Sibley, Springer, Vennum, and Hollist (2015) found that some emerging adults who made the transition to marriage used the negative examples of commitment they had witnessed as fodder for talking to their partner about their fears and what they wanted to avoid in their own relationship. Ironically, these discussions seemed to increase commitment as these couples were able to tackle these concerns in an open way (Sibley et al., 2015). This raises the question of what specifically distinguishes emerging adults who have experienced negative examples of commitment and still have the ability to believe that committed relationships are worthwhile and also sustainable.

Building a Theory of Resilient Commitment

Resilience can be defined as the capability to recover from adversity as a resourceful individual who is strengthened to face life's challenges (Walsh, 2006). Walsh (2006) explained the resilience framework is "flexible for application with a broad diversity of families facing a wide range of stressful challenges. It attends to the interaction of individual, family, and social influences and recognizes that there are many, varied pathways in resilience" (p. xi). Accordingly, I propose that incorporating resilience into our understanding of emerging adults' construction of commitment provides a framework for understanding how some emerging adults who have witnessed multiple negative examples of commitment are able to not only believe that establishing a committed relationship is worthwhile but that it is achievable for them, whereas others are not.

Although much research indicates that, on average, children are negatively impacted by divorce and relational adversity between caregivers, there are reasons to believe that a subset of emerging adults are able to be resilient in their belief of their potential to establish and maintain a committed romantic relationship (Sibley et al., 2015). A resilient outlook of commitment represents the culmination of many conscious, active decisions in which an individual chooses to be different from the negative examples of commitment they have observed. Instead of becoming disheartened and opposed to entering into committed romantic relationships, individuals that are motivated by resilient outlook of commitment feel empowered and believe in the viability and value of building commitment in romantic relationships. In this way, a resilient outlook on commitment can be conceptualized as a protective factor that may facilitate strong couple functioning (e.g., Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

Resilient commitment and existing commitment theories

The investigation of commitment originated from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and social exchange theory (Cook & Emerson, 1978). Later, investment theory (Rusbult, 1980) was developed in which commitment was seen as being based on satisfaction with the relationship, the quality of alternatives, and the amount of investment in the relationship. In addition, Stanley & Markman (1992) provided a meta-theory of commitment that made a distinction between constraint forces that make the relationship harder to end (e.g., lack of alternatives, shared housing) and dedication commitment (the desire to invest in and improve the relationship for both partners). More recently, the rise of diverse and ambiguous pathways to family formation has prompted the discussion of intentionality in the development of romantic relationships, ways to maximize relationship possibilities (Mikkelson & Pauley, 2013), and the risks of sliding versus deciding through relationship transitions (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Essential to understanding the development of a resilient outlook on commitment is recognizing how fundamental decision making is to healthy functioning during emerging adulthood. As explained by Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton (2010): "People slide into having sex. People slide into having children. People slide into dangerous relationships. In contrast to sliding, there are strong conceptual reasons to suggest that clear decisions generally build the most resilient intentions" (p. 253). Including a resilient outlook on commitment into theories of commitment formation offer a way to understand that emerging adults can and often do choose to be different than their family of origin and other negative examples of commitment they have observed. For example, Sibley et al. (2015) found that some newlywed emerging adults used negative examples of commitment as a way to understand what they did not want to do in their relationships. As explained by one of the participants in the study by Sibley et al. (2015):

> Their divorce totally made me a better person. Better son, eventually a better father, a better husband… it's not all rainbows and butterflies. If you want to be committed to marriage you have to constantly work at it and it won't always be easy once you say I do and come home from the honeymoon….Because of my parent's divorce I realize you can't just coast. …So, I think that there's a lot of ways it affected me, but as far as commitment it affected me a lot. It opened my eyes to work that needs to be put into it.

Accordingly, intentionality (making a conscious active decision) is an essential component to forming a resilient outlook on commitment.

Theoretical Model of a Resilient Outlook on Commitment

The theoretical model (Figure C-1) was created to conceptualize how emerging adults develop a resilient outlook on commitment. This model portrays one potential process by which some emerging adults are able to believe in the viability and success of committed romantic relationships, even after observing relational adversity (such as divorce or high parental conflict and relationship distress). This model is designed to help family educators and clinicians have specific areas on which they can focus with emerging adults to promote resilience in committed relationship development. The following concepts are central to the theory: positive and negative examples of commitment, individual resilience (self-esteem, self-efficacy, and internal locus of control) and meaning making. If individuals process their positive and negative examples of commitment, have strong individual resiliency factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, internal locus of control), and make constructive meaning from the negative examples of commitment they have observed, then it is highly likely they will believe that committed relationships are both worthwhile and sustainable. In the next several paragraphs I will outline this model by defining the concepts central to this theory of resilient commitment.

Positive Examples of Commitment

Positive examples of commitment represent successful romantic relationships that were exemplified by parents, grandparents, or family friends (Sibley et al, 2015). Positive examples of commitment are trusting, healthy, and stable romantic relationships free from infidelity and abuse (e.g., Nock, 1995). Although there may at times be disagreement between partners, there is not a pattern of high hostility. When there is disagreement or adversity, couples that represent positive examples of commitment exhibit the ability to resolves these issues. Positive examples of commitment provide a model of relationship success for emerging adults to follow in their own relationships **(e.g.,** Kapinus, 2005)**.** For instance, emerging adults may learn about the following: being supportive, empathetic, trust, sacrifice, how to resolve conflict, and the value of honest and open communication between partners (e.g., Gardner et al., 2011; Sibley et al, 2015). These positive examples of commitment may provide reassurance to emerging adults that romantic relationships can be successful and that they are worthwhile.

Negative Examples of Commitment

Like positive examples of commitment, negative examples of commitment may come from parents, grandparents, or family friends. Negative examples of commitment are unhealthy relationships emerging adults have witnessed in which there was conflict, instability, mistrust, infidelity, or abuse. As previously mentioned, exposure to high conflict and divorce can have a detrimental impact on emerging adults' ability to function in their own relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Rhoades et al., 2012; Whitton et al., 2008). According to Gilbert (2006), families often continue the same patterns of dysfunction through the generations. However, as emerging adults observe and recognize these negative examples of commitment it can also provide them

with an opportunity to personally change the family pattern of dysfunction in romantic relationships and choose to be different (Sibley et al., 2015).

Individual Resilience

There is a wealth of literature on individual resilience (e.g., Walsh, 2006) or hardiness (Kobasa, 1979). Specifically for emerging adults, Burt and Paysnick (2012) identified that the ability to plan ahead, delay gratification, and make positive choices were crucial skills displayed by resilient emerging adults. There are a number of different factors that may contribute to and promote resilience. However, in the literature a few factors that are especially prominent include: self-esteem, self-efficacy, and internal locus of control (e.g., Antonovsky, 1979, 1998; Rutter, 1985; Walsh, 2006). Through self-efficacy an individual is personally motivated and has the determination and belief that she has the ability to accomplish her goals (Bandura, 1977; Lightsey et al., 2014) and may lead individuals to cope more effectively when faced with adversity and not feel helpless (Rutter, 1985). An internal locus of control is a way of viewing the world that allows the individual to act and not merely to be acted upon (e.g., Levenson, H., 1973; Sellier & Avnet, 2014), exemplified by believing in one's ability to shape one's own experiences and future. I believe that the positive combination of the three factors of individual resilience are vital ingredients to personal success in romantic relationships.

Meaning Making

A fundamental element of this theory is the significance of meaning making. Meaning making is a concept that is highly related to individual and family resilience. As discussed by Rutter (1985) "A person's response to any stressor will be influenced by his appraisal of the situation and by his capacity to process the experience, attach meaning to it, and incorporate it into his belief system" (p. 608). This concept of meaning making grants an opportunity to

process and make sense of positive and negative experiences and is influenced by individual resiliency factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, internal locus of control).

There is a wealth of literature about what making meaning can do for individuals as they seek to overcome trials and adversity they have faced in life (e.g., Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Parks 2010; Parks & George 2013). For example, Tavernier & Willoughby (2012) discovered that meaning making can create positive adjustment when adolescents experience significant life-changing events. However, there has been a call for understanding how the phenomenon helps a person adapt to highly stressful events such as witnessing high parental conflict or divorce (Parks & George 2013). I believe that helping emerging adults make meaning of relational adversity that they have confronted can have a lasting impact and increase the likelihood of resilience in the future relationships they form.

The Present Study

The primary purpose of this dissertation was to qualitatively focus in on how emerging adults make meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment they have witness and how that meaning transfers into beliefs about the value and sustainability of committed relationships (see Figure C-2). In order to identify a process by which some individuals develop a resilient outlook on commitment and are determined to succeed in their romantic relationships I had the following research questions:

RQ1: How do unmarried emerging adults define commitment in romantic relationships and how have they developed those definitions?

RQ2: How do emerging adults make meaning of the positive and negative examples of commitment they have observed?

RQ3: In what ways do emerging adults want to behave similarly or differently in their relationships compared to relationships they have observed in their families of origin?

Chapter 3 - Method

A qualitative analysis of intensive individual interviews was used to explore how emerging adults are able to create meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment in their lives. Data was analyzed utilizing constructivist grounded theory approaches in order to emphasize "the participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32). Constructivists seek to understand the "world of meaning and action" of their participants "in ways classic grounded theorists do not" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 131). Constructivists also view data as constructed instead of discovered and see their analyses as "interpretive renderings not as objective reports or the only viewpoint on the topic" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 131). Exploring the data in this way can facilitate an emphasis on the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions and ideologies of the individual (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory was selected for this research study because it "enables not only the documentation of change within social groups, but understanding of the core processes central to that change" (Morse et al., 2009, p. 13).

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited via email from undergraduate courses in Sociology at Kansas State University who had participated in the K-State Relationship Survey during the Fall 2014 Semester. In order to maximize diversity of the sample, the only selection criteria for the participants was that they were unmarried and were between 18-29 years old (emerging adults). A total of twenty (10 male, 10 female) unmarried emerging adults were recruited and provided an incentive of $20 for their involvement. The sample consisted of 18

Caucasian participants, one African American participant, and one Filipino American participant. Male participant's ages ranged from 19 to 23 years with the average age being 20.5 years. Female participant's ages ranged from 18 to 22 years with the average age being 20 years old. Fifty-five percent of the participants were currently in a romantic relationship (10 with opposite-sex partners, 1 with a same sex partner). Eighty-five percent of the participants indicated that they had previously been in a romantic relationship. Of the 11 participants who were in romantic relationships nine were dating their partner exclusively and two were dating nonexclusively. Also three out of the 11 participants in romantic relationships were cohabitating with their partner.

Twenty percent of participants' biological parents were divorced and of the participants whose parents were married, 25% of the participants indicated that their parents had a conflictual relationship. Data was collected until data saturation was reached. As explained by Saumure and Given (2008): "Saturation is the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly constructed theory" (p. 195).

Procedures

Individual participants were interviewed for approximately one hour using intensive interviewing techniques according to the guidelines from Charmaz (2006, 2014). An interview protocol (see Appendix) was developed in order to ensure that each interview was conducted in a very similar manner and to provide structure to the interview technique (Creswell, 2014). The interviews began with questions to get to know each participant and build an atmosphere of openness and comfort in sharing stories about their personal life. This style of questioning is in line with the literature on grounded theory in which Charmaz (2006) said, "The combination of how you construct the questions and conduct the interview shapes how well you achieve a

balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements" (p. 26). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. After the interviews were conducted, the digital recordings were be sent to Transcribe.com for transcription.

Data Analysis

The process of analysis consisted of several steps. First, I listened to each interview at least twice prior to any data analysis. This allowed me to immerse myself in the participants' responses and provide a way to initially reflect on potential themes. I then began the coding process. Grounded theory coding is distinctive compared to other types of qualitative coding. As explained by Charmaz (2014):

> Grounded theory coding surpasses sifting, sorting, and synthesizing data, as is the usual purpose of qualitative coding. Instead grounded theory coding begins to unify ideas analytically because you kept in mind what the possible theoretical meanings of your data and codes might be. (p. 137)

Before and while I was coding I kept in mind the model representing the formation of a resilient on commitment and how the data fit within the model or was different than what was expected. Next, the initial coding phase occurred which included a careful word-by-word, line-by-line evaluation of the data. Charmaz (2014) describes this process as necessary "toward fulfilling two criteria for completing a grounded theory analysis: fit and relevance" (p. 133).

Elements of focused coding were applied to a fourth listening of the interviews to ensure that the most significant and/or frequent codes were highlighted. Focused coding was applied to make decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense in order to categorize the data "incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Additional understanding that was

learned about the participants and their understanding of commitment was written in memos on the side of the page and on separate pieces of paper in both the initial and focused coding phases. Charmaz (2006) clarified the importance of memo-writing when she said, "Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Memo-writing creates an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches" (p. 72). Through this process I will be able to collapse and sort each theme into categories and sub-categories.

The validity, or substantive significance, of the data was established through analyst triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Using a deductive method, two additional secondary coders (who received training to analyze the qualitative data) randomly reviewed and validated over half of the interview codes to assess the presence and salience of each theme identified. The secondary coders were not be involved in any of the data collection process to ensure a fresh and non-biased evaluation of the data. The primary researcher met with the additional coders frequently throughout the coding process to compare codes and come to a decision about which codes should be included. This lead to the ability to validate the presence, salience, and cohesiveness of each theme according to the data.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity offers the researcher the ability to put into context for their readers the lens from which they view their findings. Throughout the field of qualitative research that has been a call for more reflexivity and transparency regarding the role of the researcher in shaping the outcomes of their results (e.g., Mosselson, 2010). As explained by Daly (2007):

> Reflexivity is at the heart of qualitative inquiry. Researchers are engaged at all stages of inquiry, in a process of interpretation and meaning making that necessarily included their

own biography and social position. As a result, research questions are products of an interpretive process.

As a researcher it is important to acknowledge that I do come not into this research study unbiased. I strongly believe that commitment is vital to the success of romantic relationships. I believe that healthy marriages are vital for strong family functioning. A number of personal experiences have impacted my personal beliefs about commitment and I am very passionate about helping couples to be more committed in their relationships. I also strongly believe that people have the ability to be resilient and overcome trials and adversity they have faced in their lives.

Chapter 4 - Results

Through the steps of qualitative analysis 12 unique themes (see Table B-1) were identified that were organized into two distinct categories: the construction of commitment during emerging adulthood (four themes), and making meaning from positive and negative examples of commitment (three themes and five subthemes). The themes within these categories are numbered below.

Four themes were highlighted by emerging adults as they explained how they came to understand what it meant to be committed. The vast majority of the participants indicated that (1) *complete loyalty* was an essential part of commitment and that partners need to have a substantial (2) *investment in the relationship*. Interestingly (3) *continual communication* was identified as one of the most prevalent ways participants defined commitment. It was clear that participants felt strongly that be committed to a romantic partner meant that good communication between partners was a key element. For all 20 participants (4) *parental influence* was by far the most substantial means by which their definitions of commitment were constructed. Regardless of

how functional these emerging adults viewed their parent's relationship, without hesitation they generally acknowledged that their parents had played a fundamental role of their understanding of commitment in romantic relationships.

In this study three main themes and five subthemes were discovered in the way participants made meaning from the positive and negative examples commitment they have observed. The first main theme and one of the most noteworthy findings was that by observing a variety of healthy and unhealthy relationships the participants seemed to have developed a (5) *discernment of romantic relationships* by which they could identify qualities to seek and avoid in potential romantic partners. Secondly, nearly all of the participants stated that negative examples of commitment showed them "what not to do" in their own romantic relationships and that they were (6) *working to be different*. The participants explained that they wanted to avoid potential relationship pitfalls that could lead to undesirable outcomes.

Third, participants explained that by observing romantic relationships they were also (7) *learning what to do* and this theme was explicated by the five distinctive subthemes outlined below. The majority of participants described times in which couples they knew would (8) *unitedly persevere* through life's challenges which left a lasting impression that relationships can last even in the face of adversity. Participants also made meaning by observing how couples would (9) *prioritize the relationship* they were in, especially in comparison to other priorities such as work and recreation. Most of the participants stated that in order for relationship to thrive you must (10) *consider your partner* and invest (11) *substantial effort.* Finally, the participants expressed a desire to (12) *have fidelity* in their current or future romantic relationships.

The Construction of Commitment during Emerging Adulthood

I first wanted to explore how unmarried emerging adults defined commitment in romantic relationships and how they developed those definitions. Supporting the finding by Marston et al. (1998) that commitment is experiential and is experienced by each individual differently, each participant defined commitment in romantic relationships in their own way and the explanations of their definitions varied substantially. Underlying these contrasting definitions, though, were themes that fit with all of the participants' responses.

Complete Loyalty

A theme that clearly emerged was the importance of loyalty. Participants acknowledged that when a couple truly was committed in a romantic relationship they stopped "talking" to and seeking other potential partners and became more dedicated to the relationship. While not every participant used the word "loyalty' in their personal description of commitment, words that are synonymous with loyalty were used by all of the participants such as being faithful or trustworthy. As a male participant stated about how he defined commitment:

> I guess being faithful to that one partner and not seeing multiple people or expressing feelings for multiple people. I guess it's staying firm in the promises you made to be loving and supportive.

Many of the participants specified that being committed also meant being exclusive and willing to support and care for their partner. As a female participant whose parents had a rocky relationship, but remained married, explained:

> Two people who definitely love each other enough to stay with each other and not cheat, not be with anyone else, settle down, just do things for each other that you put their needs

> almost in front of your needs at some points, care for them, listen to them and understand them in a way that other people don't seem to understand them.

Another male participant whose parents were married emphasized the importance of being trustworthy when he explained the following:

> Being loyal to each other and trustworthy. If you can't trust somebody, to me there is no point of being with them. If you're not trusting them, you are freaking out when they say "Hey I want to go to the movies with my friends" or "Hey I am going to go out", whatever. For us, we trust each other, so we say "yeah go ahead, go have fun." We know we need our space from each other too. We don't want to be with each other 24/7 and driving each other nuts or anything like that. So just being trustworthy and loyal to each other. If you messed up just confess, don't hold anything in. Try not to at least. Just talk to each other, be honest.

It was clear during the interviews and while analyzing the data that these emerging adults felt strongly that complete loyalty was a necessary ingredient of commitment.

Investment in the relationship

During the interviews some of the participants expressed that although their parents have been through some difficult challenges their parents chose to remain committed to the relationship. A female participant accentuated this idea when she expressed the following about commitment:

> I definitely think commitment is staying together through the hard times. For instance, if you're in an argument, you try to solve those problems and work it out and not just yell and scream at each other and just get mad at each other and not work it out.

Consistent with the commitment literature (e.g., Stanley et al, 2006) many of the participants seemed to understand that being committed to a partner means to invest in the relationship and make active decisions together for the future of the relationship even when facing hardship and adversity. As one male participant whose parents were married stated:

> Cheesy as it is, for better or for worse, rich or poor kind of thing. You're going to have your bad days. So is she, and vice versa. But when they're having their bad day it's your job to be there for them. Whether you're on your own, having your own bad day. It's just putting the other selflessly before you. Just doing anything for the other person.

A female participant who parents seemed to have a strong marriage relationship explained that being committed included many various types of support:

> Being there for the other person, supporting them emotionally, physically, financially type of thing. Caring for them in any sort of capacity. Like when they're sick or when they just need someone to listen to them type of thing.

Some participants maintained that in order to be committed a person must be willing to give their whole heart and effort to the success of the relationship. In order to be fully invested in the relationship one male participant who parents were married said:

> Yeah, I believe a relationship is challenging and hard. I believe every day something will come up and each person has to be willing to give it 100%. I truly believe that if each person does not give it their best, it won't work. If one person is trying and one person is not, then it's not a happy relationship I don't think.

By being invested participants also discussed how this provided opportunities for partners to grow. This meant that regardless of challenges partners faced being committed support one another and work together for the future of the relationship.

Continual communication

A somewhat unexpected finding was the theme of continual communication. Repeatedly during the interviews emerging adults included communication in their definitions of commitment. They also provided many examples of couples they observed whose relationships flourished due to effective communication or withered from lack of communication or persistent fighting. An element that was central to this communication was that it needed to be continual. As male participant whose parents had struggled at various points in their marriage explained:

> You have to understand it's not going to be easy all the time. It's not going to be 100% smooth sailing every time. You and your partner have to both be aware of that. You need to work through that if you really do love each other. I think that's probably the most important. Communication is definitely a lost – I'm not saying it's a lost art in relationships, but it's becoming less and less. I mean, yes, there's texting, and, yes, I text my girlfriend a lot, but we still make time to talk on the phone, have face-to-face conversations, hang out all the time and stuff like that.

This statement captures what many participants said about communication. Regardless of the medium being used, couples needed to have the ability to frequently connect with each other. This finding is consistent with research by Gottman and Gottman (2006) who found that committed couples "pay close attention to what's happening in each other's life and they feel emotionally connected" (p. 3-4). For example, a female participant whose parents were married explained:

> I guess being there for the person, like you're able to talk to them, and they can talk to you. There are no outside people within your relationship. There's nobody that can tell you something about your relationship that your partner can't tell you.

An imperative part of communication in a committed relationship according to these emerging adults was that it provided a means to stay unified and on the same page. A female participant who parents were married but had a conflictual relationship stated:

> Well, I think you have to be honest as well. If something's bothering you, you can't just hide your feelings. That's something that would happen. My ex would be like – things would be great. Then out of nowhere, he'd be like 'I just don't know anymore,' or whatever. Then he'd be like 'I've been having these feelings for a while.' I'm like, 'Well if you've been having these feelings for a while, why didn't you say them when they started happening?' I think that's a good thing to actually have good communication between each other.

According to this participant it was vital for couples who are committed to be open with each other and willing to express how they are feeling.

Parental influence

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Sibley, 2015) parents play a fundamental role in the development of their children's understanding of what it means to be committed in a romantic relationship. All 20 of the participants in this study indicated that their biological parents had played an instrumental role in their personal construction of commitment. As underscored by female participant whose parents were married:

> Sometimes I do wonder how it came to be. How did I start believing in what I believe about commitment and what I think it takes to make a relationship work? But like I said many times, I think it's just through observing my parents in their relationship.

This was again accentuated by a female participant whose parents were married who said:

> My parents, definitely. They have a good relationship. They disagree and they're opposites in a lot of ways, but you can tell that they just love each other, I guess. You can just tell they're happy; that's a big thing.

Upon reflection, several participants were surprised by the large role their parents played in influencing how they came to understand what it meant to be in a committed relationship. Perhaps this was one of the first times in their lives that they had verbally made this connection. This was often a powerful moment during the interviews. As explained by a female participant whose parents were still married:

> Probably my parents had a bigger role in that than I realized. But my mom actually used to tell me that they probably wouldn't be together today if they hadn't had kids. When they first got married they waited about seven or so years to have me. And just they shaped a lot of who I am today…Almost in a way they taught me how to solve arguments and how to work together by usually always being willing to be like, 'we don't agree but let's still talk this out' type of thing.

All of the participants except for one female participant were able to articulate their personal definition of commitment. This particular participant felt like she had practically only observed negative examples of commitment throughout her life. Although her parents had remained married until her father passed away they were not faithful to their relationship. Both her mother and father had extramarital relationships and her parents had encouraged her to be very open with her sexuality. As explained by this participant regarding her definition of commitment:

> Commitment to me is – I don't really have a definition, I guess. Not that I have ever cheated on any previous relations with my boyfriends, but looking back I know I was in

> unhealthy relationships… That's probably another reason why I don't really know commitment because in my sophomore year at the community college I went to, honestly, I just slept around with a bunch of people. For me, commitment wasn't a thing. Even like if some guy and I said we were talking or whatever, I would still sleep with other people. That's why right now as of right now I am trying to figure out what commitment is… My oldest sister doesn't really know what commitment is either. That's what my boyfriend also brought up to me when we first started dating. He was like, 'Your family just sits around and talks about how fun it was when they were sleeping around and hanging out and stuff.' He was like, 'No one was committed.' That's where you learned it from because no one – and that's true, no one in my family sat down and had the sex talk with me. The relationship, the commitment talk with me it was just like go out and do it if you want to do it.

Making Meaning from Positive and Negative Examples of Commitment

Sibley et al. (2015) found that for some newlyweds, observing negative examples of commitment had been empowering and provided motivation to be different. I next explored the meaning unmarried emerging adults made from the positive and negative examples of commitment that they had observed and how that has guided their behaviors in and attitudes towards romantic relationships. Participants made meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment they observed by developing a "discernment of romantic relationships," "working to be different," and "learning what to do."

Discernment of romantic relationships

One of the most interesting findings from this study was that these emerging adults used the positive and negative examples of commitment they had witnessed to discern what

constituted a healthy and unhealthy romantic relationship. Although some of them certainly seemed to be struggling in their own relationships, one participant explained that he "knew a good romantic relationship when he saw it." By observing both positive and negative examples of commitment they became more aware of how romantic relationships function most effectively. They also developed the ability identify qualities they would want for themselves in a potential romantic partner, and what they would like to avoid. One female participant highlighted this when she said:

> I think by watching my parents and my aunt, for me it impacted my decision-making because I know what kind of traits to look for in a person, and I know how a person should treat you in a loving relationship. I think that's the important part. You should know what you want in a relationship. You should know what your limits are, and when you get to know somebody you should be comfortable with yourself, and comfortable enough to tell somebody that you're not comfortable with what they want or what they want to get from the relationship. I think it's just like knowing who you are, knowing how a person should treat you.

For some participants these observations made them much more selective in determining who they would allow into their life and who they would pursue as a romantic partner. For some participants viewing negative examples of commitment made them more cautious about romantic relationships. As another female participant whose parents had divorced observed:

> Then I think that also led to the reason I was selective because I knew that my mom had made a mistake more than once. While she got her kids out of it, and those were her greatest joys in life, she also got years and years of feeling lonely, pain and whatnot. So I

> think that just led to a lot of me being selective and focusing on long term versus whatever.

In each of these intensive interviews participants were asked specific questions to help them process the roles of both positive and negative examples of commitment. A few participants seem to favor positive examples as being much more beneficial for an individual to observe. A male participant whose parents were married explained:

> I feel like seeing those positive examples gives me better discernment on what is a healthy relationship and what is not. I especially see that in my friends who are from broken families, and they can't always identify whether or not the relationship that they are in is healthy or not because they have nothing to base that off of.

Participants who had generally only observed positive examples of commitment from their families of origin did not always seem to recognize the value in also observing negative examples of commitment. However, the majority of the participants in this study believed that it was highly important to observe both. As a female participant stated about her parents and the value of observing both positive and negative examples:

> Actually probably about 50/50, seeing the good part of their relationship and seeing the bad part of the relationship definitely helped me figure out what I want in the future and what I don't want in the future. Because I do want the good part of the relationship. I want a healthy, stable relationship like they do now, but I definitely don't want what they had five, six years ago, like at all. Not at all.

It seems that recognizing the value of negative examples of commitment is a process that may develop as a person gains experience in romantic relationships. This was underscored when a male participant whose parents had strong marriage explained:

> I think through most of my upbringing and being raised it was definitely positive examples, but I think at this point in my life the negative examples kind of help out a little more. I've already had the positive, but now I'm starting to see — even just living with my roommate and just seeing their relationship so up close, I just think it's good to be able to see all these kind of things before I really settle down and go for it again — but I guess overall the positive ones are more beneficial.

The ability to make meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment they had observed and to discern between healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships greatly varied among the participants. And yet all of the participants seemed to be to discern what they could learn from other romantic relationships. Although all of the participants could very easily categorize romantic relationships positively and negatively, the ability to truly discern did not seem to develop naturally and some participants seemed better equipped to accomplish this task of discernment. As it has been previously theorized, individual resiliency factors (see Figure C-1) may play a significant role in the ability of an individual to make meaning regarding romantic relationships.

Working to be different

The theme of "working to be different" represents the only theme that didn't specifically seem influenced by positive examples of commitment. In fact the very words "what not to do" were stated by several of the research participants. As they described the negative examples of commitment they had observed they recognized certain hazards and pitfalls in relationships that they personally wanted to avoid. In this way the negative examples of commitment had the potential to become empowering and motivating. One female participant had observed her mother's dependence on alcohol and extramarital affair, and had made the decision to be

different. Although her parents remained married this was a very difficult experience for her. She explained the following:

> I'm a lot more honest. I'm a lot more hard working. I'll do anything I need to be successful, basically. I know what I need to do and when it needs to get done. I know what I'm limited to and I know what I excel at. I think just knowing more about yourself allows you to be more successful and things like that. I don't know exactly what triggered my mind one day. I was just like, 'I'm never going to be like her.' I think it's just because I put up with her crap for so long and I saw what it was doing to my dad and my brothers, and I was just like, 'I'm never going to do this, ever, because it's wrong.' I think at that point in time was when I really grew up, really quick.

Some participants stated that negative examples of commitment allowed them to understand potential consequences that can occur. As a female participant explained whose parents had a very conflictual relationship:

> I understand the consequences of what can happen…I would much rather be in a safe, committed relationship where I know I could depend on one person at all times...I think it is just because of what I saw my mom go through or what my mom put my dad through, but I know what can happen if you aren't committed...Some people end up really happy with the person they were obviously unfaithful with someone else with. But, I also think in the back of your mind, you are always like, 'What if they do that to me?'

The word "consequences" was used frequently by participants during the interviews when they were talking about the repercussions of the decisions of some of the couples they had observed. This demonstrated that these emerging adults understood that there can be certain serious ramifications from the decisions they make in their romantic relationships. Consistent with

research about divorce (e.g., Cui et al., 2011), it also became evident that negative examples can impact the attitudes emerging adults have about commitment. A male participant who parents were married had friends whose parents had divorced but his friends decided to be different:

> They decided that they didn't want to be like that. They try to look for the underlying cause of what led to that. 'Why didn't they do this? Okay, I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to look for people like this.'

This particular participant explained that his friends were very introspective and that perhaps that was the reason they chose to view their parents' divorce as a chance to do something different. By understanding what not to do in relationships, it would seem that emerging adults could be better equipped when entering their own romantic relationships if they take the time to understand why some relationships fail.

Some of the participants expressed during our interview that they wished their parents had a more stable relationship. In fact all of the participants described a couple they knew in their family of origin whose relationship was often unstable. For example one female participant whose parents were married explained the following about her brother:

> My brother has a little bit of relationship trouble I would say. I don't think he's ready for a relationship. His relationships usually don't last very long. I think he has a poor taste in the partners that he chooses for himself because they usually come with separate issues on their own, so together with their issues and his issues it's kind of a toxic situation for both. I want to do things differently, because, he already has two kids by two different women. I don't want to be in that situation. I want to finish school and have a career. I think it's good to have stability in your life before you go and bring somebody else in on your plans.

This particular participant felt strongly that in order to be in relationship and succeed in it you first had to trust yourself and have stability in your own life. Many other participants echoed something very similar during own interviews. Another participant discussed throughout the interview how his parents were often unstable and would have constant fights with each other. He explained: "That's probably not how I'll approach things in my relationship. I don't want to have crazy yelling matches."

A male participant whose parents were happily married described couple relationships he knew in his extended family that lacked stability as well as relationships he had observed with some of his friends. He explained the following about their relationships:

> Seeing how they fight and bicker at each other all the time. I don't want to do that. Just saying that you love somebody one day, and then the next day 'Oh I hate her,' or 'blah blah blah,' or 'I hate him, blah blah blah.' To me it's just like, its one or the other; you can't go back and forth. At least that's what I think. I am all for trying to work things out, but if it's just not going to work for both of you, then part ways.

This participant highlighted the importance of making conscious, intentional, decisions to be committed one's partner. This participant also explained how confusing and heartbreaking it must be for a child whose parents have an unstable relationship. Having a stable relationship that was dependable and consistent was an important way these participants wanted to be different.

Learning what to do

By observing both positive and negative of examples of commitment participants learned what relationship qualities would lead to a more committed relationship. For some of these participants they had been paying close attention to various romantic relationships throughout

their lives so they would "know what to do" in the future. For example a female participant who parents were married explained:

> I like to learn a lot and learning how a specific couple or a person works. I can [say], like, 'Oh, I like this value that they have in their relationship. I would like to have that in my relationship,' or 'I don't like this value that they have in their relationship and that's not what I want to see in my relationship' type of thing. And kind of just taking little bits and pieces of things that you see that you like, and then making sure that you don't have the things that you don't like in your relationship. Different examples from different people in your life…you want to be in a relationship based off those things.

In particular these participants discussed that there were specific lessons they had learned and ways they hoped their own romantic relationships would be. Based on the data that was collected, "learning what to do" can best be illustrated in the following five subthemes: unitedly persevere, prioritize the relationship, consider your partner, give substantial effort, and have fidelity.

United perseverance

The participants in this study discussed both examples of couples who had persevered when faced with obstacles, becoming a stronger and more cohesive couple unit, as well as examples of couples who were not united and could not weather difficult circumstances. The majority of participants seemed to a have a profound awareness that committed relationships were not always easy and that they could expect challenges along the way. For example a female participant explained how her parents had overcome some difficult challenges together:

> I don't know, they kind of stuck it out and even though he's been deployed six times, they've always had lots of communication whether it be phone calls, letters, post cards,

> whatever it may be. After my sister was born, like six years after my sister was born, my mom got cancer. That was a huge thing for them because they were like, 'Okay, well what's going to happen?' I think them just being able to be there for each other through those hard times and even with my dad's deployments, them communicating with each other and always writing letters to each other reminding each other how much they love them and how much they miss them. They've always been those type of people. There were times I would think like, 'What's really going to happen? Are they going to stay together? Are they going to be able to stay together?' They pulled through and they're stronger than ever now. They've been a super, super huge influence on how I view my relationships.

These types of examples were compelling and persuasive evidence that the emerging adults in this study believed it is possible for relationships to succeed if partners are committed and focused on making their relationship work. In a way, observing these positive examples of commitment increased their confidence that they, too, could overcome hardships in their own relationships. The importance of this perseverance was again emphasized by a participant who said: "Enduring the hard times, if something comes up, that [a] person doesn't flee, but goes with them head-on into whatever they're facing." It was clear that the participants believed strongly that to be committed long-term partners needed to be united, stay strong, and persevere together.

Many of the participants stated that when they get married they hoped to do be married to the same partner for the rest of their lives. They seemed to recognize that they could choose to have positive influence on their future family and this became a motivating factor. As one of the male participants explained whose parents seemed to have a strong marriage:

> I don't want to be just like your typical Joe-off-the-street that's been dating or married to someone for ten years or five years and then got divorced and then have two kids or whatever, stuff like that. I want to set an example for people to look at, and go 'Oh, I want to be just like my dad, or I want to be just like my grandpa.' Just like how I am.

Prioritize the relationship

Another theme that emerged in the data was the significance many participants placed on making the romantic relationship a priority. This meaning was more commonly developed from the positive examples of commitment they had observed, although negative examples of commitment seemed to also influence their ideas of what it meant to prioritize the relationship. As one male participant said whose parents had frequent arguments:

> It's the difference of what you choose to make your priority. In all my positive examples, they choose each other as the priority, or their kids, or their family, and they make that the first thing in their life. In the negative examples, it's always choosing something else as the priority and it's always unhealthy when you're not able to put that person ahead of yourself.

Many of the participants stated that they knew couples in which partners put alcohol, work, friends, or recreation ahead of the relationship. As another male participant who parents where married illustrated:

> I think not making the other person a priority makes it difficult to be committed. So, putting a lot of other things before your romantic partner makes it seem as if you don't care as much and when it comes across that way it's difficult to be committed because it's difficult to show that person love. So, you're not being inclusive or faithful in the sense that you're picking other things as priorities over that person's needs and desires.

For some participants they recognized this was something they need to improve in their own romantic relationships. Other participants explained that because of the high regard they had for committed relationships, they believed it was important that they waited until they knew for certain they could make their partner a top priority. As a male participant whose parents were married explained:

> I talked about my past relationship and I didn't put it first in any way. I wasn't ready to prioritize someone else ahead of my own things…I'm more wary of entering a relationship where I can't make them a priority where I feel there are still other things I'm prioritizing right now. It's interesting, they me [positive and negative examples of commitment] both affected the same way. I think it's deterred me from entering a relationship until I can make the other person more important than my own things.

Participants created meaning based on the couples they had observed and the way they prioritized their relationship. The majority of the participants stated that their parents were most influential in their understanding of what it mean to make a romantic partner a priority.

Consider your partner

Another prevalent way participants wanted to behave similarly to their parents, grandparents, and others in their families of origin was by having consideration for their partner. This meant that participants wanted to be to loving toward their partner, spend time with them, and be willing to sacrifice for them. As one male participant whose parents were married explained:

> My parents were in med school out in Pennsylvania. My dad got a call one day saying, that my grandma had an aneurysm. He was like, 'Well, I've got to go to Kansas.' She goes, 'I'm coming with you,' without even thinking about it. Just, 'I'm coming with you.'

> That's the whole picking the other one up kind of thing. They did their 24-hour drive from Pennsylvania. That's when my dad asked her to marry him. That's what it's about. Just being there, being a best friend kind of thing. My parents definitely shaped, and crafted, my view of how to treat women and how to be committed and faithful and all that.

A female participant described how her parents were married and compassionate to each other and considerate to each other's needs:

> I think they're very compassionate towards one another. When my mom gets angry then my dad does all he can to make her feel better. Compassion and kindness...When she gets frustrated about things that happen in her family, he tries to calm her down and talk about it so she feels better.

Many of the participants often referred to their grandparents as specific people that they knew who were considerate of their partner. One male participant who parents had a conflictual relationship stated the following about the example of his grandparents:

> Both of my grandparents were married through their entire lives. I think I've seen sustainable, romantic relationships. It's difficult not to believe in it. It's valuable just because it gives you that one dependable person. It gives each person an amount of happiness and a feeling of support. Regardless of anything that happens, there's someone there believing in you and being there for you. Outside romantic relationships, I feel like it's easier to move away from being close. In a romantic relationship, you're more willing to try to make it work just because of the role the other person has in your life.

A good portion of the participants stated that they hoped that they could have a relationship last as long as their grandparents and hoped that they be as considerate to their partner in the future.

Give substantial effort

Although some of the participants had some very difficult challenges growing up in which their family was in flux, all 20 of the participants stated that they believed romantic relationships are sustainable. However, a few of the participants were uncertain if they personally had the ability and determination to sustain a romantic relationship. Substantial effort was something that the participants believed was vital for relationship to last. As one female participant whose parents were married explained:

> When you find somebody that you really care about, then yeah, they can last. They're hard and they're a lot of work, but I think when it's worth it, it's worth it. I definitely do think relationships are a lot of work. If you're willing to put in the time and the effort to make it work, then it can really last and can be something. You just have to put in that time and effort at the same time.

Even though this participant recognized that relationships require a lot of work, the benefit was worth the effort. This was sentiment was again captured by a male participant who parents had a conflictual relationship who stated:

> I definitely think that romantic relationships can last if you're willing to put the effort into it. Obviously if you don't try it's not going to end well, but if both parties are happy to be in the relationship then I think it could definitely be sustained.

Some emerging adults expressed a fear of not knowing if their partner will be willing to work as hard in the relationship. For example, a female participant whose parents were married explained:

> Most people, when they have problems, they're just going to walk away and not try to fix it. Sometimes the problems aren't even a deal breaker for a marriage but they still want to walk away just because they're looking for a way out of it. I think it's a positive sign that

you want to work through the issues. I think that shows that you're committed to the person, because it's easier to walk away from something than it is to try and fix it.

Unfortunately participants had observed their mother or father give up on their marriage which a substantial impact on their family. As explained by another female who indicated that her parents had a strong martial relationship:

> Yeah, I think it depends on how hard someone is willing to work and if both people are willing to work in the romantic relationship or not… I do believe that if two people put in the effort and want to stay in a romantic relationship then they can make that happen.

Substantial effort as a theme was repeatedly expressed as an essential element for a relationship to work, and the emerging adults in this study voiced a desire to put in the work.

Have fidelity

Fidelity represents a person's adherence to their duties or obligations and can also be thought of as being loyal in a relationship. Participants provided many examples of couples they knew who were not committed and lacked fidelity in their relationships and made statement of what they wanted to do differently. All of the participants stated that they hoped to have fidelity in their romantic relationships. As a one male participant whose parents were married explained:

> My half-sister, her baby's daddy I guess is the easiest way to explain it. We do not like him personally…just the way that he treats her, and he is not mature at all for his age. He is probably 27 or something like that. He would much rather go out with his friends, and do stupid stuff with his friends than take care of his kids or her. He is not committed at all. She finally realized that and she moved on. Not necessarily with someone else, but she moved past him. Its stuff like that irritates me, because I don't want to be like him, and to me that's not the way that you treat her. Even though she is my sister, I wouldn't

> want anybody to be treated like that. I mean even if you don't get along, for the kids' sake, for that, you also want to be there for your kid and for her. You know she is a single mother trying to do her best to keep afloat, but he is just not there.

During the interview this participant became somewhat emotional when describing the experience his half-sister has been though in her relationship. He felt motivated personally to be different from this negative example of commitment he had observed.

Alcohol had a negative impact on quite a few participants and their families. One male participant whose parents were married believed that if a person truly has fidelity, alcohol would not be prioritized over one's family:

> Yeah, so we had some really good family friends when I was growing and their dad was an alcoholic but I didn't know it for a long time when I was younger. He tried to get sober a few times but he always quit the program and his wife really wanted him to stop but he just didn't for a long time. So she'd kick him out and he'd go live with his parents or something. Then he'd come back. It was just a back and forth. I feel he didn't show a commitment to her because he wasn't willing to take the steps to get better.

Other participants had witnessed how infidelity and affairs can wreak havoc on a family unit. As one female participant whose parents had conflictual relationship illustrated:

> One of our closest family friends that I've known since forever, they were in Springfield, Missouri with us. My parents said they always seemed like they were so put together, so great together, never fought, never did anything and loved each other so much, and he ended up cheating on her with a younger girl and tore their entire family apart. They had two younger girls. That always made me very angry. I saw how much my mom ended up hating this guy because he ruined their family. The mom had to provide for herself and

> for her kids, had to make it work with them and lost so much money. She was a stay-at-home mom too, had to figure out how to make it work and all that kind of stuff. I saw her struggle so much with it and how he tore their family apart, how he wrecked it and just ruined it. He ended up moving in with the girlfriend that he was cheating with. Of course, that didn't last. They separated. They really didn't work. You think the love is there and you think it's all there, but you have to be, like I said, not selfish enough to make decisions like that. You need to be committed to the other person and realize, especially, because of the fact that you have kids together, you need to be even more so than just committed to each other. You need to realize that the kids are definitely the ones that need to be taken care of the most. You need to try to make it work for them.

Each participant during their interview made it clear that a personal goal they had for their own relationships was to have fidelity and it work hard to be committed to their romantic partner. A few participants again expressed concerns about their ability to do this based on their past behavior, but insisted that this was an important goal in their lives.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This study provided new insights to the study of commitment development during emerging adulthood and how making meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment (see Figure C-2) can potentially foster resilience in relationship outcomes. First, the results of this research support the findings of Sibley et al. (2015) on how emerging adults construct their definitions of commitment in romantic relationships to an unmarried sample. Overall, the themes of complete loyalty, investment in the relationship, continual communication, and parental influence are all findings that can be found in the literature on how emerging adults define commitment (e.g., Sibley et. al 2015; Weigel, 2003). Second, the results

of this study enhance what we previously understood about how emerging adults make meaning from the positive and negative examples they have observed and develop a resilient outlook on commitment.

Unlike the model in Figure C-1, the newly revised resilient commitment model in Figure C-3 now includes several components previously unacknowledged. Consistent with the findings by Sibley et al. (2015), the positive and negative examples of commitment experienced by emerging adults' families of origin were highly influential. In addition, almost all of the participants of the present study stated that their own romantic relationships played a vital role in their understanding of commitment. Many participants were able to recognize times in which their own relationships were positive or negative examples of commitment and what they could learn from them. Participants also found the positive and negative examples of commitment demonstrated by their friends to be influential. Future research is needed to examine how emerging adults make meaning from their experiences in their *own* romantic relationships and what leads to increased intentionality in their future relationships. Using the theoretical framework of sliding versus deciding (Stanley et al., 2006) for example would provide opportunities to examine how past decision making behavior in romantic relationships influenced meaning making processes. This research could also examine if emerging adults could make positive meaning from the unplanned decisions (sliding) they had made, and if they were able to learn important lessons from those experiences to apply in future romantic relationships.

Some of the findings in this study may be unique to these particular individuals due to emerging adults' perceptions of societal expectations and norms around the development and sustainability of romantic relationships. For instance, the majority of the participants in this study

seemed to be strongly opposed to divorce and were fairly religious. Perhaps there are strong cultural undertones that heavily influence the meaning that emerging adults make from observing positive and negative examples of commitment. As Park (2010) explained: "In addition to immediate social environments, the broader culture in which individuals are situated may exert effects on individuals' meaning-making processes" (p. 292). This research study provided some indications that the inclusion of cultural norms could be of great value and could impact the meaning making processes of emerging adults as they make sense of examples of commitment that they have observed. Cultural norms has been added to the revised resilient commitment model to explore in the future. Future research studies should explore how cultural norms may be impacting the meaning in individuals make from positive and negative examples of commitment.

It is important to note that all of the participants in this study were unmarried and may not necessarily be completely able to manifest their "resilient outlook of commitment" as behaviors. According to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, people who view themselves as efficacious in performing certain tasks or engaging in certain behaviors will be more likely to persist in making their goals a reality. In this situation, a resilient outlook of commitment includes the belief that committed relationships are worthwhile, sustainable, and personally attainable. However, it is not until a committed relationship is formed that this belief about commitment can become actual actions that sustain commitment in a relationship. Thus, it requires the committed relationship itself to truly experience and understand resilient commitment to its fullest. Thus, resilient commitment is a commitment to a romantic relationship that is resilient in the face of forces that may encourage instability or lack of effort and intention.

Although all of the participants in this study indicated that committed relationships were worthwhile and sustainable, not all participants fully believed in their own ability to succeed in a

romantic relationship. Just as with the original model of resilient commitment (see Figure C-1) individual resiliency factors are a fundamental part of making meaning out of the positive and negative examples of commitment. However, in the new model, individual resiliency also contributes to emerging adults' belief that they can personally achieve their vision of a healthy, committed relationship. The formation of a resilient outlook on commitment requires many conscious, active decisions in which an individual chooses to learn from the examples they have witnessed.

It would be interesting to investigate in the future if strong individual resiliency factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, and internal locus of control) would make emerging adults more likely to believe they could "work to be different" from the negative examples of commitment they had witnessed or make a reality in their own relationships that include the aspects of healthy committed relationships they had observed. Future research could also study if resiliency factors promote an emerging adult's desire to "learn what to do" to make their romantic relationships succeed. While we do know the family of origin can have a significant impact on emerging adults and their ability form, function in, and maintain romantic relationships (e.g., Conger et al., 2000; Cui et al., 2008), there is still much to learn about how emerging adults respond to negative examples of commitment. Future research could continue to investigate the relationship between these meaning making themes and individual resiliency factors.

The additional concepts now included in the revised model of resilient commitment (see Figure C-3), deepen our understanding of the process that facilitates an emerging adults' ability to not only believe that romantic relationships are worthwhile and viable, but also personally attainable. The expanded understanding of the positive and negative examples of commitment, the impact of cultural norms, and the inclusion of resilient outlook of commitment strengthen the

theory of resilient commitment and provide many additional research avenues to explore in the future.

Clinical Implications

This study provides many implications for clinicians, educators, and other professionals. Accordingly, if the family of origin truly is where emerging adults first learn how to define commitment in couple relationships (e.g. Weigel, 2007) there is much to be said for the conversations educators, clinicians, and other professionals should be having with emerging adults about the messages they received from their family regarding commitment. Clinicians should be more mindful about how emerging adult clients may have developed their definitions of commitment in couple relationships, and how they have made meaning from the examples they have observed. Clinicians can encourage emerging adults to be more mindful of the positive examples they have observed and the lessons they can learn from relationships that have failed.

Clinicians could also examine how their emerging adult clients have been able to make meaning from their past romantic relationship experiences. For instance clinicians could explore with clients specific instances and past behavior in romantic relationships which demonstrated commitment to their partner. Clinicians could also help emerging adults recognize times in which they should have been more committed to their partner and what they can learn from these experiences. Clinicians should also explore potential cultural messages emerging adults may have received about romantic relationships and how they should function.

Many of the participants indicated that they used the examples of commitment they had observed to discern what they should seek and avoid in a romantic relationships. I believe one of the greatest struggles emerging adults have is learning what to do in relationships in order to help them succeed. In order to do so they must successfully filter through many examples from

family, friends and others to grasp what allows a relationship to function best. The subthemes that fell under "learning what to do" (unitedly persevere, prioritize the relationship, consider your partner, give substantial, and have fidelity) provide a formula of commitment that may be beneficial for relationship educators to explore with emerging adults. By teaching emerging adults about qualities that can strengthen commitment in couple relationships, they can make more informed and intentional decisions in their romantic relationships.

In their own personal development emerging adults should examine how their definitions of commitment and what they are doing to make meaning from the positive and negative examples they have observed. They should consider how they have been influenced throughout their lives by observing couples in romantic relationships and discern what qualities they want to incorporate and avoid in their own romantic relationships. Emerging adults can be empowered by understanding the theory of resilient commitment and recognize ways in which they can become more congruent with their goal of having a healthy, committed relationship that can be sustained. Emerging adults can also be provided with the hope that if they "learn what to do," work hard in their romantic relationships, and stay committed they can overcome negative patterns of behavior they have observed from their family of origin and friends.

Limitations

While this study provided important and rich data regarding how emerging adults develop their personal understanding of communication, there are several notable limitations. The first limitation of this study is the sampling methodology. Because participants were recruited through convenience sampling, it is possible that participants who chose to take part in this study were more inclined to discuss commitment and romantic relationships than other emerging adults may be, implying that commitment may be something they pay attention to

more than the average population. Second, the homogeneity of the sample is a limitation. For example the sample had small representation of ethnic minorities that was almost entirely made up of Anglo individuals, attending a mid-western university. While the aim of grounded theory is not to generalize to a broader population (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), further examination of the applicability of the model of resilient commitment with diverse populations is essential for validating its utility. Thirdly, while all of the participants of this study were within the emerging adult age range (18-29 years old), there needs to be a better representation of 24-29 year old emerging adults in future research. Perhaps the way 24-29 year olds construct commitment compared to younger emerging adults is less reliant on their parental influence for understanding commitment, and more reliant on past relationship experiences and friends.

Future Research

Although many researchers (e.g., Park and George, 2013) have created assessments for measuring meaning making, currently there are no scales that measure the process by which attitudes and beliefs about commitment are developed. A commitment meaning making scale could provide clinicians and family educators with a tool to help clients process how they developed their definitions of commitment and how this has been influenced by their family of origin, past relationships, friends, and societal expectations. This scale could also help individuals and couples recognize ways to modify or adjust their personal beliefs about commitment.

Conclusion

The results of this study have important implications for theory, research, and practice. The themes that were generated through this grounded theory approach deserve further investigation. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore how emerging adults define

commitment in romantic relationships and have created meaning from the positive and negative examples of commitment they have observed. This study substantially adds to our understanding about the theory of resilient commitment and the factors that allow emerging adults to develop a resilient outlook of commitment. Researchers need to become more aware of how negative examples of commitment can potential foster positive outcomes. These results extend our knowledge about the critical purpose meaning making in regards to a personal understanding of commitment and how meaning making is influenced by several different factors. The theory of resilient commitment can be empowering for emerging adults, and provides professionals a framework for intervening with emerging adults to strengthen future romantic relationship stability.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

1. Please begin by stating your name, your age, and year of school you are in.
2. Where did you grow up? How many siblings do you have?
3. Are your parents married? How would you describe their relationship?
4. Are you currently in a romantic relationship? How would you describe your relationship
5. What is your definition of commitment in a romantic relationship?
6. Who or what has been influential on your personal understanding of what it means to be committed in a couple relationship?
7. Why do you believe some emerging adults (individuals 18-29 years old) are postponing marriage?
8. What do you personally believe about the sustainability and value of romantic relationships?
9. What influences your beliefs and ability to obtain and maintain a romantic relationship?
10. On a scale of 1 to 10 how confident are you that you can succeed in your romantic relationships with 1 being not confident and 10 being very confident? Why did you score yourself that way?
11. Can you think of people in your life who have been a positive example of what it means to be committed to a romantic partner? What is their relationship like? How do you know they are committed?
12. How have observing positive examples of commitment personally influenced your decision making in romantic relationships?
13. Can you think of a couple in your life who has been a negative example of what it means to be committed to a romantic partner? In what ways have their decisions been different than the positive example you have observed?
14. How have observing negative examples of commitment personally influenced your decision making in romantic relationships?
15. On a scale of 1-10, how much control do you believe you have on the way your romantic relationships turn out (1 = no control, 10 = complete control)? Why did you score yourself that way?
16. What advice would you give to an individual who is struggling to be committed in their relationship?

Appendix B - Table B-1

Table B-1

Inductively Developed Categories and Themes

Construction of Commitment

1. Complete Loyalty
2. Investment in the Relationship
3. Continual Communication
4. Parental Influence

Meaning Making

5. Discernment of Romantic Relationships
6. Working to Be Different
7. Learning What To Do
    a. Unitedly Persevere
    b. Prioritize The Relationship
    c. Consider Your Partner
    d. Substantial Effort
    e. Have Fidelity

Appendix C - Figures

Figure C-1 *Original Resilient Commitment Model – A Model for Understanding the Development of Commitment in Emerging Adults*

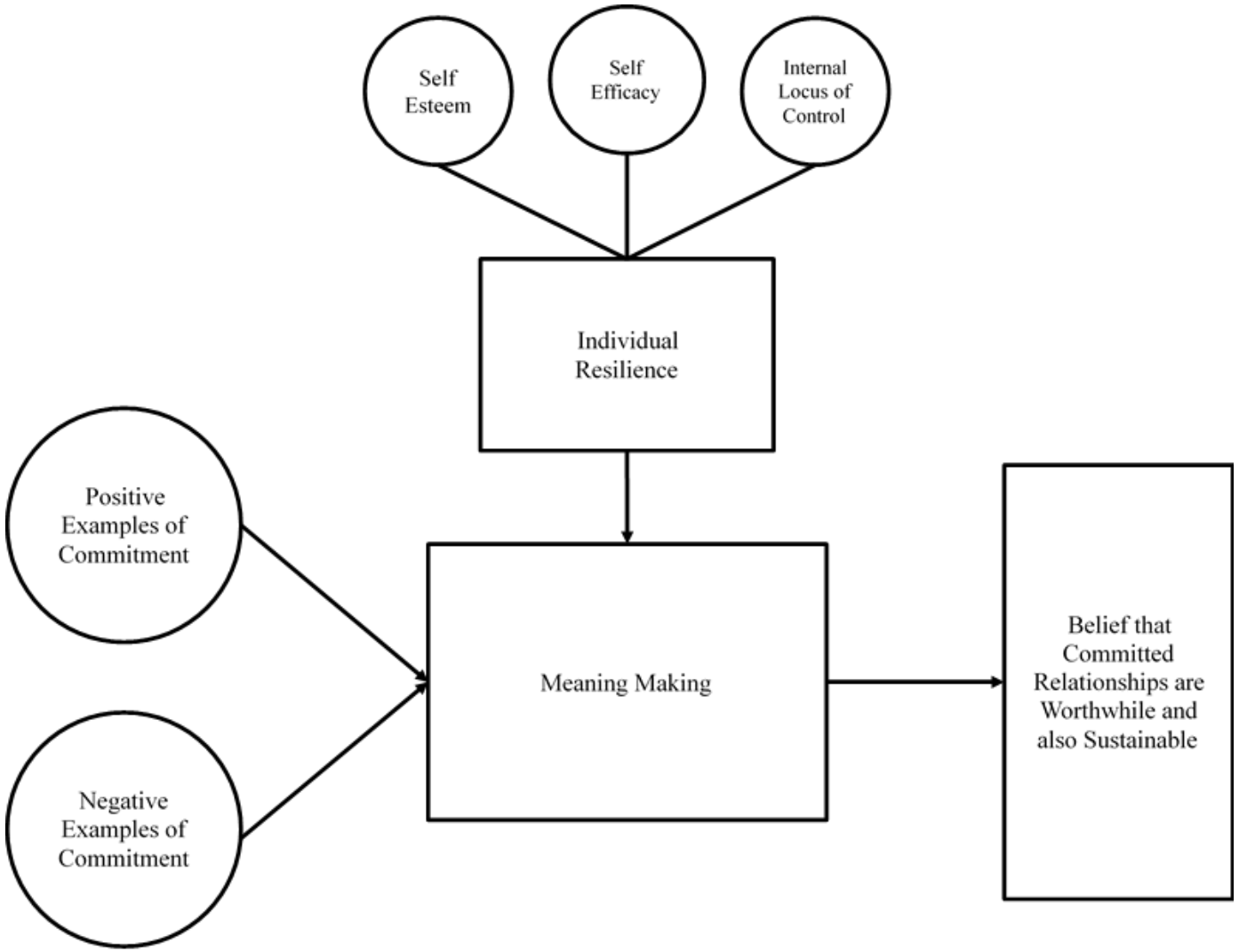

Figure C-2 *Portion of the Resilient Commitment Model that is the Focus of this Dissertation*

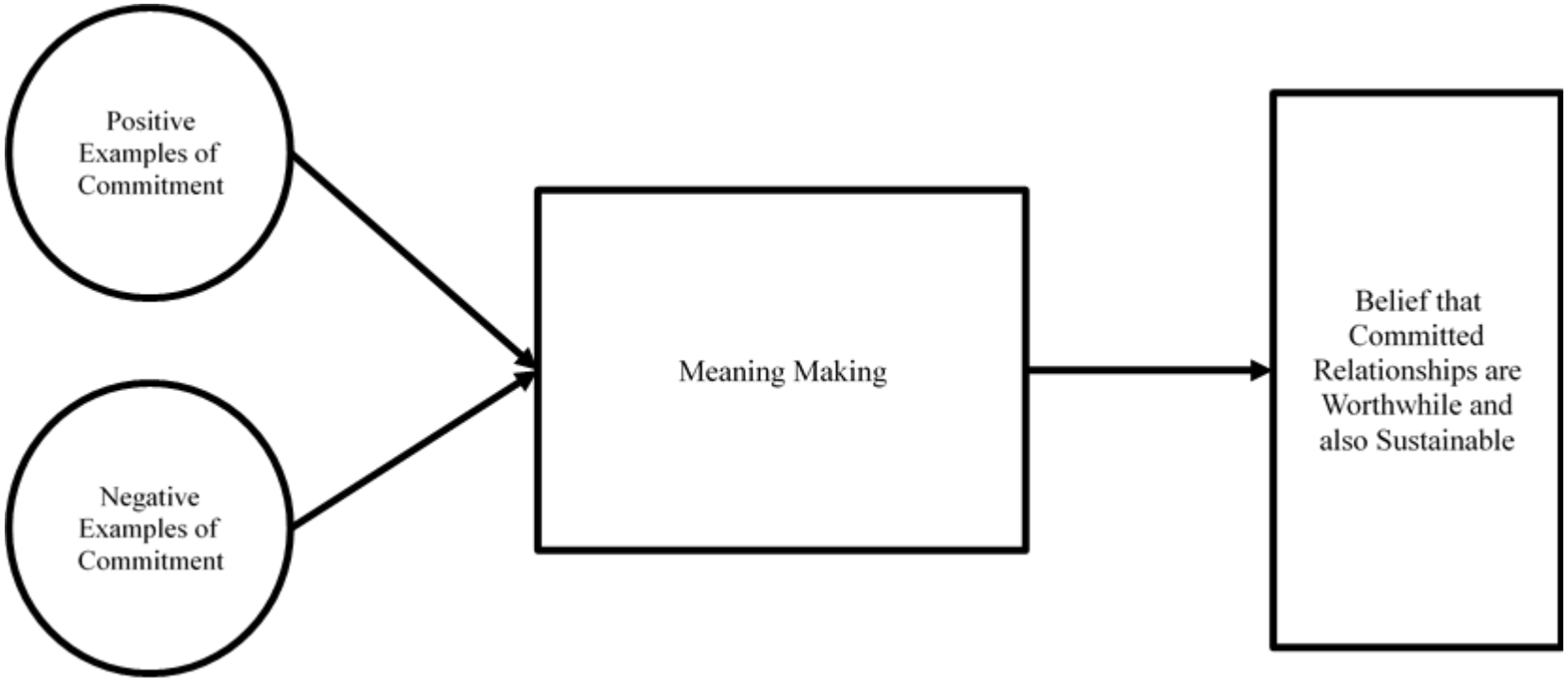

Figure C-3 *Revised Resilient Commitment Model – A Model for Understanding the Development of Commitment in Emerging Adults*