

“I feel more confident in myself and my decision”: A Study on the Lived Experiences of Family
Approval among emerging adult Black Women

by

Preshous Benjamin

B.S., Grand Canyon University, 2019
M.S., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Applied Human Sciences
College of Health and Human Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

An impactful and brave milestone is solidifying a long-term relationship and choosing to introduce them to one's family of origin. Family approval when introducing a new romantic partner is a phenomenon that has been captured in limited contexts. Although these contexts are important, it can be helpful to see how family approval can impact Black women emerging adults. As this population is in the process of shifting into a new phase of life as a couple, it is worth observing how they manage this transition and family approval while engaging in committed relationships. An interpretive phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to achieve this goal. Life course theory was the leading theory of this study. The sample included nine emerging adults aged 24-29 who are in a committed relationship and have experienced some form of family approval. It was found that emerging adults can have a positive experience if transparent communication is present and their confidence in their decision-making is increased, further creating a positive experience in the stage of emerging adulthood. Clinical and research implications are also presented.

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to Black emerging adult women everywhere, along with my parents, sisters (we're all emerging adults!), brother-in-law, consistent source of support, Rawn, and my late great-grandmother, Dr. Viola Brunson. Black ladies, my work is not done getting our voices out there! Mom and Dad, thank you for answering my phone calls, your support, and prayers. Siblings, thank you for seeing me as "Dr. P" before I even made it here! Boaz, thank you for your curiosity about my work, as it helped me to stay grounded. Rawn, thank you for constant check-ins regarding my self-care and rest! Grandma, thank you for setting the example of being the first PhD in our family—I brought it back!

"Therefore, do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward" – Hebrews 10:35

"I'm not perfect, but I'm willing. I don't get it, but I'm willing to try" – "Drink Offering" by Naomi Raine

Chapter 1 - Statement of the Problem

An important and challenging transition is forming a long-term romantic relationship and introducing this new partner to the family of origin. When choosing a romantic partner, there can be the desire for one's family of origin to be accepting of their romantic partner, as a sign of love and solidarity. Yet, there is growing research that seeks to find out what the process of family approval looks like within couple relationships and what contributing factors can play into family approval (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Bryant & Conger et al., 1999; Cao et al., 2019; Felmlee, 2001; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006; Miller et. al., 2021). Family approval is the concept where a family of origin (individuals with whom they grew up or were raised by), is accepting of an identified family member's new romantic partner (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Cao et al., 2019; Felmlee, 2001; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006; Miller et. al., 2021). There is a concern about whether the love and solidarity of the family of origin can play into the continuation or dissolution of the romantic relationship.

Although there has been research on family approval and how it can be defined, there is limited research on the lived experiences of family approval and the process of its navigation, specifically within emerging adults and further, within Black women (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Buunk et al., 2008; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Felmlee, 2001; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006; MacDonald et al., 2012; Shulman et al., 2009). Although there are a few goals within this study, the primary goal was to learn from the lived experiences of the process of family approval within committed relationships. This goal was achieved through completing nine semi-structured qualitative interviews with Black females using interpretive phenomenology to create categories and themes around the forms of family approval and how they impacted the participants' romantic relationships. This study intends to expand current research around family approval,

emerging adulthood, Black women and relationship quality in multiple ways. First, we will examine how emerging adults define their family of origin. Second, this study will shed light on how emerging adults receive their values or beliefs from their family of origin, how important those values and beliefs are to them and how they apply them to their romantic relationships. This research can provide more insight into how emerging adults tend to allow the values, morals, or beliefs of their family of origin to dictate the direction of their romantic relationships and how family approval or disapproval impacted their life or their romantic relationship.

Life course theory posits the idea that there are developmental milestones that an emerging adult meets during their transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2014; Elder et al., 2003). This theory supports the assumption that although emerging adults are attempting to forge their own path, there is a chance that they could still follow the path laid out for them by society or the history of their family (Elder et al., 2003). As this study seeks to learn more about the experience of family approval this theory offers insight into how this phenomenon can be experienced by emerging adults at this stage in their life.

This study can contribute to the field of family studies, relationship education, the unique population of Black women, and couple and family therapy. Contributing to these fields can increase the information we have about family processes and increase awareness of diverse family processes that may not be represented or lack representation in current research. The concept of “social network members” (i.e., parents, siblings, and/or friends) can be expanded to look at specific populations, such as both college-age and non-college-age emerging adults, while also focusing in on primarily the family of origin and how those members play into the romantic relationships of these emerging adults. Furthermore, as the field of relationship

education continues to grow, information from this study can be applied in numerous ways, including classroom and clinical implementation.

Using a qualitative approach, I would like to understand the essence and living phenomenon of family approval in romantic relationships among later-staged emerging adults. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to focus on the lived experiences of the phenomenon of family approval among emerging adult Black women through interviews while allowing for the flexibility to be open to other themes that may arise. Furthermore, previous qualitative studies have examined this topic and the process of integrating new romantic partners with biracial couples; however, there continues to be a gap in our understanding of the process of family approval during emerging adulthood, a time of romantic relationship development and establishment (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Cao et. al., 2018; Miller et. al., 2021).

This study will advance what is known about how emerging adults practice the integration of a new romantic partner with their family of origin and their ability to differentiate from their family of origin as they progress in their new romantic relationships. This information can offer greater insight to researchers to learn more about family approval and how different populations experience family approval. Clinically, these results may inform additional interventions on how to help emerging adults differentiate from their family of origin, while also integrating a new romantic partner into their extended family.

Chapter 2 - Theory and Literature Review

Life Course Theory and Family Approval

As the primary population for this study is emerging adults, it is important to have a theoretical rationale as to why this population is highlighted in comparison to others. Life course theory highlights this aspect, where the lives of the individuals within the family unit are linked together and are not independent of one another. This theory supports the idea that as emerging adults transition into this new phase of their lives, they begin to recognize how linked their lives are with those of their family of origin and how they intend to maintain that link going forward in the context of their romantic relationship. In the context of family approval, if there is approval that is present, how does it impact the linked life that the emerging adult has with their family of origin. On the contrary, if the emerging adult continues to link their life is there is disapproval that is present. Furthermore, life course theory supports this notion as emerging adulthood consists of “age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history” (Elder et. al, 2003). The social institutions that are highlighted could be tied to what they have learned from society, while history is what was learned from their actual family of origin. As the emerging adult learns these patterns growing up, there is a question about whether the emerging adult will continue those patterns or end them altogether. Family approval can be tied to the adoption or complete disregard of these beliefs, meaning that there is a chance that the emerging adults’ family may not approve if they choose to disregard the beliefs and patterns that the family practices. This course further highlights the fact that there are life events that take place at specific stages, including coupling and separating from one’s family of origin (Elder et. al, 2003). As a result, this theory aids in the deeper exploration of the specific process within the transition to emerging adulthood from being single to a partner, and all that transition entails to

make it successful. Life course theory includes five features of emerging adulthood, and those include the age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities.

The age of identity exploration is the idea that during this phase of life, emerging adults are continuing to solidify and form their identity. Initially, identity formation began in adolescence; however, now, with greater opportunities to explore identity in work or romantic relationships, the depth of the individual begins to increase, meaning they are becoming more dynamic in their identity (Arnett, 2019; Erikson, 1968). When one is in the time of adolescence, identity formation can occur through the influence of peers, participation in extracurricular activities or interests that capture the adolescent's attention. As the move into emerging adulthood develops, these characteristics begin to increase in intensity. As opposed to extracurricular activities, it can be the job that the individual holds (Arnett, 2019). This can be a job that allows the individual to "start from the bottom" and work their way to the top. Further, there is the decision of how to obtain their "dream job" and whether it is their *sole* identity or just a part of it. Peer relationships can intensify to more serious romantic relationships (Arnett, 2019). If the individual has had experience in dating, they may begin to move to more serious, committed relationships that could lead to marriage and expanding their family. In the context of family approval, the family of origin of the emerging adult could potentially influence how they further solidify their identity. For example, if their family believes that one's job is their primary source of purpose and identity, they may push the emerging adult to go to school for a job with high value or encourage them to only engage in romantic relationships with someone that holds a job with high value or can support it. Another example is that if the family is more traditional, upon completing school or reaching this stage of life, they may encourage the emerging adult to

see that marriage is their next step, whether they are ready for it or not. If these values are consistent with family history, one can infer that there would be a greater push from the family of origin for the EA to align with what has been done before.

The age of instability is defined as the period where the attempt to solidify oneself in the roles that they desire, is not as smooth as they would like it to be (Arnett, 2019). As EA's may be moving towards solidifying themselves in the occupation they are longing for or their romantic relationship they desire, they may have difficulty in reaching these developmental milestones (Arnett, 2019). For example, an EA may decide to go to college because that is what they were told they were to do. Although they may be experiencing freedom away from home, they may not want to actually be in school as they do not know that they want to do for the rest of their life. In some circumstances, the EA may decide to drop out due to the uncertainty or their parents may decide not to fund their schooling if the EA is not going to be productive about it. On the other hand, they could decide to enter the workforce, military or a lower stakes form of education until they decide what they would like to do. When it comes to romantic relationships, perhaps the EA has a high school sweetheart, and they are left with the decision of whether they stay together in college doing long-distance or break up so that they can "experience other people". There is the opportunity to see how the relationship can grow stronger or if it has reached its time. In other instances, maybe the EA' decides to move in with their significant other and they end up getting a pet together. There is the period of adjustment of living with their significant other, attempting to make ends meet paying for their residence, while maintaining the health of their pet on their own. In the instance of family approval, the support and role of the family of origin can play a role in how the EA manages this phase of instability. They could potentially step in and help, or they could stand back and encourage them to learn. As a result of this phase,

families of origin could be even more skeptical of the EA entering into or solidifying a romantic relationship due to the instability that is already present.

The age of self-focus offers the idea that this phase allows EAs to focus on themselves primarily. Where school or parents began as the driver of the EA's decisions, this phase expresses that the EA makes their decisions on their own (Arnett, 2019). If the EA decides to attend graduate school, it is their decision on whether to have a structured schedule or an unstructured schedule. If the EA lives on their own, they can decide when or whether they will spend time with their family. Since most EAs are not married or have children, they have the freedom to determine how to manage their time and their life without the influence or considerations of others or responsibilities. Depending upon their relationship with their family of origin, they may ask specific members for advice on how to manage various aspects of their life. If the relationship is strong and healthy, then the EA may be more open to asking and receiving advice, whereas if the relationship is more draining or enmeshed, then they may be less likely to receive or ask for advice. This is where family approval comes into play. If the EA has become more comfortable in their decision-making, whether making it on their own or asking for help, they may have the ability to still make their own decisions amid receiving advice from their family of origin. On the other hand, if the EA is not comfortable with making decisions, they may do whatever their family of origin advises them to do, whether it is what they want to do or not.

The age of feeling in-between is very similar to the age of instability—some EAs do not completely feel like they are an adult (Arnett, 2019). In some instances, EAs may find themselves away at school, living on their own, while simultaneously receiving financial support from their parents. Others may find themselves married or having their first child, while

attempting to manage those new responsibilities while working their first real job. There is the feeling of not being a complete “adult” due to the distinct characteristics of adolescence (Arnett, 2019). When it comes to family approval, if an EA is heavily struggling with this feeling of in-between, one can assume that they may lean more into the recommendations or reactions of their family of origin towards their romantic relationship. For example, say a 24-year-old is in graduate school and their parents are *heavily* involved in their finances, which gives the parents more power regarding major decisions the 24-year-old makes. This hypothetical 24-year-old introduces their parents to their new significant other, and this individual is also a graduate student whose parents are heavily involved in their lives financially. One would imagine that, due to the amount of power and the role the parents have, if they are disapproving of the new significant other due to the significant other needing the same support as their child, the 24-year-old may not push back against them as they do not want to lose their parents’ support. As the EA is managing this stage of being in-between, they are learning to manage responsibility as it becomes available to them, and in this instance, it is their romantic relationship.

The last age is that of possibilities. This period of an EA’s life is full of opportunities that may not have been awarded to them until the exit from adolescence. For example, the opportunity to live away from home on their own without being forced to do their laundry at a specific time, eat whatever they want, whenever they want, or even stay over with their significant other if they want. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to create the life that they want to live. “Regardless of their family background, all emerging adults carry their family influences with them when they leave home, and the extent to which they can change what they have become by the end of adolescence is not unlimited” (Arnett, 2019). When it comes to family approval, EAs are allowed to either receive, disregard, or learn more about the influences

that their family has on their life, and specifically, their romantic relationships. As this time is limited, this response to family approval is going to be a determinant of how their phase into middle adulthood is going to go.

Life course theory also highlights the concept of recognizing the historical context of the individual and how that impacts the decisions that they may make regarding their life going forward (Elder, 1998). For Black women, entering emerging adulthood is consistent with the typical developmental milestones of emerging adulthood and has some unique characteristics, especially now in the 21st century. To begin, Black women who are in the stage of merging adulthood are deciphering whether to attend college, enter a romantic relationship, or live at home (Arnett & Brody, 2008; Brown et al., 2023; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Black women are also learning more about how their racial-ethnic identity further impacts their path (Brown et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2009; Reynolds et al., 2017, Way et al., 2008) along with their overall well-being (Brown et al., 2023; Chao et al., 2012; Gibbons et al., 2010; Pascoe & Smart, 2009). Consistent with emerging adult development, Black women further learn how their relationships with their family of origin are continuing to change as they engage in decision-making on their own (Reynolds et al., 2017). As these women are learning to live life on their own, they are taking more ownership of their romantic relationships, ranging from online dating or meeting potential significant others via social media (Byrant et al., 2010; Ramirez & Bolaños-Carpio, 2025).

Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood is known as a time of opportunity, confusion, and disorientation (Arnett, 2014; Balswick et al., 2016). It can also be a time of sifting through and reflecting on one's childhood as one transitions into adulthood (Arnett, 2014). During this sifting, emerging

adults do their best to balance the newfound opportunities of attending school, pursuing a career, or even committing to a romantic relationship; it can be quite difficult to balance all of these options (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Looking specifically at the formation of romantic relationships, most of the information that emerging adults receive comes from the family of origin; however, as they get older, they learn from society or their own experiences, their ideas around romantic relationships can begin to shift (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Micucci, 2009). As this shift takes place, emerging adults can find themselves individuating from their families of origin to further embrace their newly solidified romantic relationship (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007). An important question is what the process of individuation looks like and how it occurs. This study seeks to learn and observe how emerging adults engage in this process with their families of origin.

Black Women and Romantic Relationships

Black women and romantic relationships have a unique dynamic. Some believe being in a romantic relationship with a Black woman is great, as they are perceived to be strong, educated, wise, and beautiful. In other instances, being in a romantic relationship with a Black woman can be described as not ideal due to various stereotypes including being sexually promiscuous, overly bold and “Mammy” or servant-like (Ashley, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hearne et al., 2020; Jerald et al., 2017; Mgadmi, 2009; Simone, 1947). These misrepresentations of Black women were passed down and perpetuated throughout history with the intention to discredit Black women in comparison to white women in particular and in other political or social spheres (Harris-Perry, 2011). With that, one can infer that the experience of Black women in romantic relationships dramatically varies. Black women have faced enormous pressures against them regarding who they can or cannot be with and how they must look (*Loving v Virginia*). It was not

until the late 1960s that Black women were allowed to date or marry any man who was not of the same race as her. With that, there is the idea that the person a woman marries, especially a Black woman, is a representation of her and her family. Therefore, there can be additional pressure to marry someone who meets the standards of their family and, most importantly, themselves. For example, if the woman came from a prestigious family, there could be the expectation that the man she dates is of the same or greater prestige. On another note, there can be a balance of love and their aspirations. As women alone tend to have this balance to struggle, it is Black women who tend to struggle the most (Brown, 2020; Hearne et al., 2020; Monterrosa, 2021; Raley, 1996). There is the desire to have an education, be financially stable, and have independence; however, there are times when the intersection between these three and companionship never really meets (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). As a result, when they do intersect, there is a greater hope that they will integrate smoothly (Council, 2021). There are times when a Black woman is seen as intimidating due to her standards or independence, and so they can be faced with the decision to either settle for someone who does not meet those standards or remain single until they meet someone who truly complements them. This reasoning is because there is the belief that Black women either lack the ability to handle a successful career, health, *and* a companion, or that it is simply frowned upon (Boyd et al., 2021; Clarke, 2011; Pemberton et al., 2025). With these pressures already present for Black women, one can only imagine what the pressure of family approval or disapproval can impact their journey of romance.

Family Approval and Romantic Relationships

Family approval can be known as the acceptance or positive perception of one's family of origin concerning their new romantic partner's life. Family approval was originally described as "perceived network involvement," which includes one's friend group or social circles (Felmlee,

2001; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). However, the current study focuses on family approval that includes the individual family members or caregivers with whom the individual grew up. Highlighting life course theory, the EA's parents (and siblings at times) can be the main source of family approval, and their forms of approval can be expressed in various ways. There can be verbal forms of family approval that are expressed as concerns, such as "They don't look like us," "How will they fit in," or "What about this tradition" which can be tied to unique aspects of the family of origin (Bell & Hastings, 2015). Some forms of non-verbal approval can be observed as not speaking to the individual's romantic partner or other members of the family of origin acting in a similar manner, or potentially unrightfully investigating the romantic partner (Bell & Hastings, 2015). If the individual holds the romantic relationship in high regard, they will keep the relationship intact regardless of whether their family approves. On the contrary, if there is a low commitment level to the romantic relationship and a high commitment to the family of origin, it would not be surprising if the individual allows the family approval of the parental and sibling subsystems to dictate the future of the relationship (MacDonald et al., 2012).

Family of Origin and Romantic Relationships

One's family of origin can be described in various ways. It can include one's parents, siblings, or even those that may not be biological family. The current study focuses on the family of origin, specifically one's family members or caregivers that the emerging adult grew up with or was raised by. While looking at the family of origin, it is important to look at the role a family of origin can play in one's romantic relationship. For example, some studies have sought to explore the specific relationship between parents and their children in relation to the child's romantic relationship. One specific study found that the foundations of a parent's relationship with their adolescents will translate into their later adolescence and emerging adulthood (Shultz

et al., 2023). Further, the parental relationship with the adolescent can play into the child's romantic relationships in the future (Shultz et al., 2023). This means that specific members of the family of origin can play a central role in romantic relationships as they progress through life.

Family Values in Relation to Romantic Relationships

Finances

There are many important areas of family life and values that may contribute to the overall assessment and perception of a new romantic partner or a family member. The first area we consider is finances. In some families, finances are important because they are tied to the family's legacy and the sustainment of future generations (Dartey et al., 2024; Serido et al., 2015). In other instances, money can be valued as it can offer stability in the way that the family lives, meaning that if the economy were to take a negative turn, then the way that the couple manages their finances will allow them to not be negatively impacted regardless (Dartey et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2017). In other instances, finances can offer a form of status and that can be a great source of value for some families. Finance is one of the greatest forms of concern within couples and families; thus, it makes sense that it can be a major value within couples and families (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011; Dew et al., 2012; Mao et al., 2017; Papp et al., 2009). If there are differing forms of values in relation to finances, this can play into whether a family approves of an individual family member's partner that they have chosen (Mao et al., 2017; Serido et al., 2015). For example, a husband may value money for stability (i.e., values having substantial savings), whereas the wife may value finances for the status and prestige that it can bring (i.e., spending money on tangible outward expressions of wealth). Although the couple may be accepting of differing values of finances in their romantic partner their families of origin may or may not approve. The wife's family could disapprove of the husband as they believe that

the primary value that finances hold is status and could believe that the husband grew up poor based upon the husband's value of saving money.

Racial and Cultural Differences

Couples today look a lot different than couples that were present decades ago, which is why it is important to recognize cultural or racial differences within couple relationships and how that can play into the forms of family approval that they may receive. Looking at racial differences, forms of approval and the lack thereof have been present for a long time (Biegel, 1966; Duke, 1992). Specifically, it was not until the late 1960s that interracial relationships were legally allowed to occur (*Loving v Virginia*). Although at the time, the concerns were about maintaining anti-miscegenation statutes and violating the fundamental right of marriage (*Loving v. Virginia*, 1967). Family members of an older generation (or younger) could try to perpetuate these ideas, which can result in disapproval of the new partner that was chosen—specifically for Black women. Major concerns could be how the couple would be viewed or treated, along with the treatment that the children would receive and whether the partner of another racial group would be able to understand a racial group's values and culture that differs from their own (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Miller et al., 2021). Implicit racism and discrimination exacerbate challenges in the family approval process. An example of this could be an Asian man introducing his family to his African American female fiancé for the first time. Both of their families could express concerns about how their varying racial identities could play into their romantic relationship (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Miller et al., 2021), and how the two cultures contrast with one another. If one of the partners were to culturally identify with a group that is more individualistic rather than collective, as an example, their families of origin could be concerned about how those family values would clash with one another. Forms of family approval could be tied to how

families of origin feel as though the core values that they hold will be accepted by the new partner that is being introduced.

Religion

Religion can be observed as one of the most important values of families. It drives how they interact with the world and how they view it (Klingenberg & Sjo, 2019). Furthermore, some religious practices can affect how a couple operates within their own relationship (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Petts, 2016). How a couple may manage finances, relationships with those outside of their relationship, and other aspects of their lives can be guided by religious practices (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Petts 2016; Wheeler et al., 2024). Differences in religious beliefs can play a part in whether one's family of origin is more approving of the new romantic relationship (Schrodt, 2021). On the other hand, if the couple has the same religious values, this could increase the chances of experiencing approval from their family of origin. For example, if two individuals were to both practice Islam, the chances of their families of origin being more approving of their romantic relationship is much higher than if one partner were to practice Islam and the other did not.

Politics

Politics can be like religion, meaning that it shapes perceptions and worldviews. In the case of politics, it is choosing to maintain a form of governing that aligns with the values that the family already holds. Moreover, politics are much more than an organized view of government leadership, it affects how people think of others and conceptualize problems and life. Perhaps most importantly, political parties in our polarized country also create in-groups and out-groups, us and them, often with fairly hostile and negative views of the other party (Easton & Holbein, 2021). It is this form of prejudice that can play into a greater judgment of whom the family

accepts, interacts with, and even separates themselves from (Easton & Holbein, 2021; Shafranek, 2019). Since morals and values are heavily tied to politics, one's position in politics can play into choosing a partner like them (Alford et al., 2011; Easton & Holbein, 2021; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Klostad et al, 2013; Stoker & Jennings, 2005). However, the romantic partner may have a different political orientation than the family they are newly meeting. If the political views align across the new couple and the family, then there can generally be greater chances of one's family of origin approving of their chosen partner; however, if the political views vary, there can be greater concern as to what the chosen partner values in comparison to the new potential family (Gordon et al., 2024; Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Klar et al., 2018; Zuckerman et al., 2007). For example, if a woman comes from a generally Republican family and her partner is from an actively Democratic family, one can imagine that the woman's Republican family would not approve of her boyfriend if he is a Democrat.

Integration

Highlighting the concept of “life course” and “timing of life events,” integration is one's ability to create a bridge between what they have already experienced in a previous phase of life and join that together with the present. “Integration is engaging with the norms of the dominant culture while maintaining one's native culture” (Bush & Price, 2021). This concept can also apply to this unique phenomenon of family approval. The “dominant culture” can be described as the individual's life experiences, whereas the “native culture” can represent the individual's family of origin. “For integration to occur, the dominant culture must accept the notion that culturally different people can be accepted and respected in society at large”—in other words, as the individual is differentiating from their family (dominant culture), they can recognize that there can be some aspects of their family of origin (native culture) that can be practiced and

accepted, while still maintaining a healthy relationship with the family of origin (Berry, 2009, p. 367). The reverse is true, that if the family of origin (dominant culture) could learn that they can be more approving of the individual's new partner (native culture) even though they may differ.

The Present Study

The goal of this study is to observe and learn how emerging adults make sense of family approval or disapproval from their family of origin within their committed romantic relationships and how it plays into the quality of their romantic relationship and their connection to their family of origin. Specifically, this study will help answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the experience of family approval among Black female emerging adults?
- 2) What information do Black female emerging adults receive about romantic relationships from their family of origin?
- 3) How do Black women experience the transition into emerging adulthood and family approval?

Chapter 3 - Method

The lead researcher used qualitative methods, specifically interpretive phenomenology analysis, to inquire about the lived experiences of Black female emerging adults who have experienced family approval/disapproval and how their family of origin impacted their romantic relationship. Interpretive phenomenology was chosen for this study as it allows the researchers to gain a deeper sense of the phenomena and how they occur within the emerging adult population (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). This form of phenomenology further allows the researchers to be able to learn more about how the participants make sense of their committed romantic relationships and family approval, as they are experiencing these two events simultaneously. This study's results can add to the literature surrounding family approval and provide clinical and educational implications.

Reflexivity

Thus, it makes sense for the researcher to have a more emic and ontological perspective when it comes to the research approach. The emic approach looks to the unique culture or group as the expert, while the researcher is the one who is learning from this group, meaning, the participants will be the experts in their experience, and the researcher will be learning how they experience this phenomenon. The researcher intends to inquire about the lived experiences and does not want to be the expert in the interview that will be conducted. It further allows the researcher to take a back seat and be somewhat immersed in the participants' experience. The coding team consisted of three coders (including the primary author). They each identified as female, two identified as Black, and the other identified as white. One is a fourth year PhD student, one is a third year PhD student, and the other is a first-year master's student, all in the field of Couple and Family Therapy.

Participants

The sample for this study included Black women ages 24 to 29, in committed relationships with their romantic partners for at least three months. These Black women included in this sample have been in a romantic relationship and have experienced some form of family approval or disapproval. Although the age range of 24-29 is the later stages of emerging adulthood, I wanted to ensure that the participants were at a maturity level to be able to recognize family approval while adding to the literature of this age group that is often overlooked (Gilmore & Meersand, 2023). Of the participants, two were married, while the remaining seven who were dating had been together between two to six years. All the participants were in heterosexual relationships. The majority of the women who participated experienced some form of family approval; however, there were three who endured the journey of disapproval and approval simultaneously. Although the initial goal was to conduct about six semi-structured interviews, a total of nine interviews were completed. There was a large number that wanted to participate, so a waitlist was created. Those who were unable to participate in this specific study were asked if they would like to be contacted for future studies, and they all agreed. The majority of the participants came from a two-parent home, while one participant had a parent who was deceased. Participants had an average of three siblings, and most were the middle child, while the remaining were either the second or oldest and had one sibling who was deceased.

Jessica met her husband at a camp, and they ended up connecting on Facebook. They will be celebrating five years of marriage this May. Em met her husband by accidentally leaving her phone at a restaurant and they connected on social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) and have been dating for two years. Ally and her boyfriend met on the internet and have been dating for four years with a brief pause after the first two years of dating. Angel met her husband through

Facebook, and they have been together for three years. Pinky met her boyfriend in college, and they have been dating for two and half years. Beatrice met her boyfriend in college, and they have been together for 6 years. Dani also met her boyfriend in college, and they have been dating for four years. Flower met her boyfriend at an event, and they have been dating for three years. Brenda met her boyfriend in high school and after her family had moved, they ended up reconnecting years later to social media. They have been dating for six years.

Sampling Strategies

There were two strategies that I used for participant collection. The first was using the Kansas State University student body for convenience sampling and utilizing snowball sampling. Participants were recruited from those expressing interest from flyers posted in the Justin Hall, announcements via the Kansas State virtual newspaper, and social media posts on Instagram and Facebook. Snowball sampling was used to include specific student organizations on campus to reach those that meet the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria for this study included English-speaking Black women who have been in a committed relationship for about three months, were between the ages of 24 to 29, had experienced some form of family approval or family disapproval that had greatly impacted them, and they had the willingness to participate in an interview for the study. A screening process of the participants was done using a survey that was administered when they initially expressed their desire to participate. If the participants did not meet the requirements for the study, they were thanked for their desire to participate and encouraged to share with anyone else they believe would be able to participate in the study. The survey was listed as a Qualtrics survey as a QR code on a flyer that was placed around campus in buildings that house the individual departments, and the digital student newspaper as an announcement, as other studies are

promoted. A post was made on social media to help recruit Black women as well. A homogenous sample allows us to learn of the true essence of the lived experience of family approval, which is the rationale for only including Black participants

Interviews and Interview Guide

After receiving the informed consent from the eligible participants, I scheduled a Zoom meeting and recorded the meeting and had a transcription of the meeting. Recordings were made with a HIPAA-compliant Zoom account to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The interviews were slated for 60 to 90 minutes to allow ample time for the participants to share the full essence of what they've experienced without being rushed. After the interview had ended, the recordings were saved as a password-protected file, only to be opened when transcribing and coding. Following the completion of the discussion section of the study, the files will stay locked after three years, then they will be destroyed. The research participants were compensated for their time via gift card, \$25 each.

Qualitative interviews helped achieve the goal of assessing the lived experiences of these individuals and hearing how they worked through their encounters with family approval. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask pre-prepared questions while offering the flexibility to ask follow-up questions or clarify a question if needed (Smith, et al., 2009). As mentioned before, to ensure that the participants meet the inclusion criteria, they completed the pre-screening survey before receiving the informed consent. The pre-screening or inclusion criteria survey questions are the following:

- 1.) How old are you?
- 2.) Do you identify as a Black woman?
- 3.) Have you ever experienced family approval within a romantic relationship before?

- 4.) Has this relationship impacted you in a major way (i.e., change in perception of romantic relationships, relationship with family or self, impacted, mental health impacted etc.)
- 5.) If chosen for this study, would you like to participate in an interview to share your experience?

If the participant met the inclusion criteria requirements and was willing to participate, then they received informed consent and were scheduled for their interview. This information ensured that I was learning more about what their lived experience of family approval was like for Black women and how this experience has impacted their lives. Questions for the interview include:

- 1.) How did you both meet?
- 2.) How long have you been together?
- 3.) Who would you consider to be your family of origin (those you grew up with)?
- 4.) How do you describe the concept of family approval in your own words?
- 5.) What core values does your family of origin hold?
- 6.) What has been your experience of family approval within your romantic relationship?
- 7.) How was family approval (or disapproval) of your romantic relationship shown in your family of origin?
- 8.) How did this (dis)approval make you feel? How did it make you feel about the relationship?
- 9.) What was helpful and unhelpful to you in handling the family approval?

These interview questions offered the chance to build upon a concept or idea that might not have otherwise been considered, as well as the opportunity to dive deeper into the ideas that already emerged within the conversation. Additionally, if there needed to be further questioning

to improve clarification, the semi-structured format allows for flexibility to do so. For example, if a participant is sharing a unique aspect of their culture or family of origin, semi-structured interviews allow for additional curiosity to be present to ensure that it is being presented well in the study.

To ensure the validity of the process, the researcher used participant validation, sequencing of methods, and multiple coding to ensure the legitimacy and authenticity of the study. Receiving validation from the participants happened organically, as a conversation in the interview as a clarifying question or sharing with them the themes that I heard them share during the interview, to ensure that I am fully capturing their unique experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The participant validation that was utilized in this study was member checks. This allowed the researcher to check in with the participants to ensure that their stories were being represented correctly (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This was done throughout the study, including thorough reflective listening during the interview. It is important to ensure that this research design is created strategically to make sure that the member checks and check-ins flow with the interview and do not feel awkward during the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During the interviewing process, I maintained a research journal to document my personal experience throughout the process and position the preliminary questions to be introductory, while the interviewing questions were much more in-depth to be specific to the participant's experiences, allowing for within-methods sequencing in the study (Carl & Ravitch, 2021; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Data Analysis Plan

Prior to analyzing the data, I downloaded the transcriptions of the interviews that Zoom created. To begin the analysis, I first cold read the transcripts, which allowed me to naturally see how the codes could be identified as potential categories (Creswell, 2013). IPA coding suggests

that one first reads the transcripts to group the sentences or statements together that relate to one another while capturing the essence of the lived experience (Creswell, 2013). From there, those clusters of codes were broken down into a few words or phrases that still encompass the experience (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, the final round included further condensing, to where the codes are now, one word that summarizes the experience. This process helped to determine the themes that were constructed (Creswell, 2013). This in total included a minimum of three rounds of going through the transcripts and coding. Additionally, dialogic engagement helped me to intentionally converse with trusted members of my research team about the progress and process of the study, while staying within the scope of the study. To ensure that we followed this process correctly, the coders and I placed the codes in the codebook and discussed them as they emerged. While continuing to engage with the research team, multiple team members coding allowed additional accountability for reflexivity as well as consistency of coding. Having a research team allowed me to see if we were all creating the same codes and comparing the themes that we all found. As there was a research team that came with their positions or intersectionality concerning the study, I had an awareness of this throughout the study.

Positionality

As I have experienced my own form of family disapproval that ended in the dissolution of my relationship, my experience does not define every couple's experience. However, this experience encourages me to want to learn more about the experiences of others and learn how to help other couples and families manage this phenomenon. Without this awareness, I could have subconsciously proposed that most couples who experience some form of disapproval would all end in dissolution, which would not be correct. Staying aligned with interpretive phenomenology, it is important that I undergo as much reflexivity as possible so that I can ask

myself, “What do I now know or see that I did not expect or understand before I began...” (Benner, 1994, p. 101). My firsthand experiences can play into my participation and role as lead researcher, and a statement of my positionality can help decrease the chances of disruption or validity in the study. An awareness, self-reflection, and expression of my positionality before the study can help increase trustworthiness in the results.

I identify as a 27-year-old, heterosexual Black female who has an invisible disability, being completely deaf in the right ear. I further identify as a non-denominational Christian, whose highest form of education is three years in my PhD program, and I am unmarried, in a dating relationship. What connects me to the study is that I experienced both family approval from my family of origin and disapproval from my significant other's family. Specifically, his family disapproved of us dating as I was perceived to be “too good” for him or “out of his league.” As a result, the relationship ended in dissolution. Additionally, I have a sibling who is married to someone who is of a different ethnicity than her, and they both experienced family approval from their families of origin and their romantic relationship is progressing well. Professionally, I have degrees in the areas of counseling and marriage and family therapy, while teaching within a conflict resolution program. There is a chance that my questions could be therapeutically grounded while assessing the individuals’ abilities to manage conflict within their relationship concerning the approval of their family of origin. I would need to ensure that I am primarily gathering information for the goal of the study, as opposed to offering best practices related to therapy or conflict resolution. With that, during the interview process, I maintained a journal to document my personal experience throughout the process and position the preliminary questions to be introductory, while the interviewing questions would be much more in-depth to be specific to the participant's experience, allowing for within-method sequencing within the

study. The journal allows me to have my own personal process of interviews, as I would need to sift through my personal reactions from my personal experience as well as the experience of hearing the story from each couple and how I managed the dialogue.

Chapter 4 - Results

There was a total of 16 various themes (see Appendix D) that were highlighted from the 10 questions asked in the interviews and three research questions for this study. Specifically, the identified core values that originated from the EA's family of origin included religiosity, honesty, and respect. Common definitions of family approval included acceptance, support, and validation. The common themes for the experience of family approval included acceptance of differences (or lack thereof), resistance, open-mindedness, and trust. The primary themes for the expression of family approval included acceptance, open conversation, non-verbal, mixed reactions/expressions, and integration. Consistent themes for the impact of romantic relationships included confidence, connection, and relief. The primary themes for the impact of the EA included confidence, mixed emotions, and validation. The consistent codes for concepts that were helpful in managing the family approval included support from their significant other, open communication, and collaboration. Lastly, the consistent themes for concepts that were unhelpful regarding family approval included fear, lack of transparency, and conflict. Each of these themes encompassed the answers to the research questions for this study.

Experience of Family approval among Black Women

Before beginning to dive into the experiences of family approval, it is important first to learn how these ladies define family approval in their own words. *Acceptance* was the first of the top three themes that the participants highlighted, following *validation* and *support*. For "Em" this form of acceptance was tied to support from all who were involved: "Family approval is acceptance and support that a person receives from your family regarding their choices, actions, or relationships," and Dani shared the same experience.

Okay, let me say this way, okay, family approval in my own way.... means, let me see, kind of acceptance of both parties, maybe supports in terms of relationship, in terms of lifestyle, in terms of values and beliefs to which the party is accepted. Okay. this is how we need it to be. If there's a [lot of] approval, I think everything will work out well.”

Meanwhile, “Angel” described the form of acceptance as a form of consent: “Oh, I think it's purely a consent of the family. I think it's purely...like, I said, just like it's purely a consent of the family to do and don't of any behaviors or characters.”

Other participants like “Flower” used “validation” and “support” to describe family approval:

I feel family approval refers to... talking about acceptance, support, validation stuff like that that comes from my parents and my siblings So I feel mostly just getting their validation and their support, like they should accept whoever I'm with. So, it's about feeling if my family is comfortable with my partner, or they're not comfortable with him.

These specific definitions, directly from the EAs themselves, give further insight into how the EAs perceived the approval or disapproval of their romantic relationships. One can infer that if family approval is present, the experience would embody the specific definition that the participants described.

As mentioned before, the codes for the experience of family approval included *support from one's significant other, acceptance of differences (or lack thereof), resistance, open-mindedness, and trust*. From a portion of the participants, it was found that there was an

acceptance of differences. One participant, “Jessica,” shared how the differences between the ethnicities of herself and her husband eventually led to acceptance:

With his family, there was some animosity. His mom didn't particularly like me at first because I was Black. My husband was amazing, he said, ‘If you continue to be disrespectful to my girlfriend/fiancée, I will stop talking to you. I love her. She's important to me, and she's more important to me. End of story’, She still has her moments, but she's a lot better than what she was when we first were together.

“Beatrice” had a shared experience as “Jessica”; however, with her boyfriend and the focus was more on how they communicate and understand one another:

So you know, in terms of like language from, you know, we both are from different backgrounds, ethnicity. So in terms of like communication like how we communicate with each other, my dad wanted to know more about how we communicate, and if his background will definitely affect mine in terms of communication, trying to at least balance the whole to get us to see if it will work out.

Another participant, “Em” had a similar experience of the *acceptance of differences*, except that it was related to her spirituality:

The most surprising aspect is he is actually a Muslim, and I'm a Christian. So actually, when I brought him home, my dad said he actually had no issues with me getting married to a Muslim. And my mom, too. But other members of the family were actually like no... My uncle and my cousins like they don't want me to get married to a Muslim.

For “Flower”, even though she initially experienced *resistance, trust* and *open-mindedness* were aspects that helped ease her feelings of overwhelm:

Of course it was a lot at first, it was overwhelming where eventually my family came to see him for who he is [significant other] is kind, he's caring, and he's a supportive partner, and they've grown to appreciate his unique perspectives and experiences. And I think, for now they've learned to trust him as a member of our family...

Thankfully, there were those who had received approval from their family of origin with ease, like “Brenda”:

So they didn't disapprove of my relationship, since they really know this person from the root. So the approval was just given so easily because they knew about us being friends from childhood. So that was it. It wasn't hard. Yeah, it wasn't hard for my parents to like, give me a go ahead into the relationship. So it was something easy. It was an easy approval from them.

From these responses, it was found that family approval was present for the participants and that their journeys to receiving the approval were vastly different and specific to the family of origin. With that, it is important to observe what information was received from the EAs regarding romantic relationships during this approval process.

Information Received from Family of Origin about Romantic Relationships

Although no specific questions were asked about what information the EAs received from their family of origin around romantic relationships, this information was gained through the expressions of the family of origin's approval or lack thereof. For example, “Jessica” and “Beatrice” learned that there should be important considerations when it comes to romantic

relationships, specifically from their fathers: “When my husband asked my father if he could marry me, my dad, you know, said yes, and just gave a few stipulations, and he followed them because he respected my dad, and he wanted to know that he cared about his daughter. At first, when I told my dad about him when I was like trying to give information regarding the family background, how he behaves, what he does, and that is God-fearing, you know, parents, you know, parents try to make sure what you're doing is good”. “Pinky” had a unique experience, where she learned firsthand how her parents’ view of *how* she was treated in a relationship was tied to the future of a relationship:

I can say it's been smooth. Yeah, it's been smooth. My parents love my boyfriend. Yeah, it was about a year ago and he, you know, hit me. No. So it was an argument. It led to something else, and he hit me, though not very, very hard. But when I, when I told my parents, they were very, very disturbed and angry, and even, my Dad said something that if he was to keep doing that to me, you know, I better walk out of the relationship, and because he's not gonna have someone bully me because of relationship. So I think now just the only time I can remember, they didn't disapprove him... I told him that I needed to talk to his mom, because I know his mom very well. She's a woman that doesn't like something like that. His mom, you know, she respects a woman, the opinions of a woman. And I, you know, requested to talk to his mom, and I also involved my mom, and we talked through it... So it took some time for them to, you know...give that approval.

From these experiences, there was an awareness that their parents had specific considerations for their significant other, and if he did not meet these considerations, then there

would be even greater concern. Jessica and Beatrice both received considerations from their fathers around their romantic relationships and they had love interests that did not present any concern at any point. For Pinky, the approval of her boyfriend changed when his actions towards her became negative and harmful. Pinky's family let her know that their approval will change just as his actions did as they care about her safety and well-being.

Another example of considerations relates to culture and the importance of being able to honor one's culture, even though they both may differ from one another. This created a longer journey to approval for "Flower":

Getting my family's approval wasn't always easy. Of course, it's not always easy in the beginning. When I first introduced [significant other] to my family, they had some concerns. My mom, in particular, was worried that [significant other] wouldn't understand or appreciate the values we hold. I don't know if he did something when they met in the beginning. I really cannot really understand why she would feel that way, but after he left, she expressed her concerns to me, but she didn't tell me what caused her to have the concerns. She said that he might not appreciate our values, and she was also concerned that he might not be able to relate to our experience...

Trust was a concept that "Dani" learned, primarily that it is needed not only amongst her family of origin and her boyfriend, as well as trust between her and her boyfriend. *Trust* was needed amongst all the parties involved to ensure that their romantic relationship could smoothly progress further in the future and that there would be patience and understanding to promote clear communication.

Trust everything was just there. I feel it's helpful, because if we are now following this process in the future, we will [won't have any] challenges or difficulty [had we not known about it earlier]. So I think everything is just going moderately and perfectly well. And there's also patience and understanding [of] both people, parties-- people understand each other. There is patience... [to] make it clear, and everybody will just understand.

“Flower” learned that open and honest communication about relationships can be helpful with the family approval process while ensuring that her perspectives and thoughts are being heard and seen:

My parents being able to talk openly and honestly with my family, being able to talk openly and honestly with me about their feelings and concerns and expectations. It was actually helpful. It made us able to clear the air, address some misconceptions, and actually walk through our differences and I feel my family's willingness to listen. Of course, my dad was willing to listen. Although my mom was a bit tough at first, so I feel his willingness to listen. and they were willing to listen to my perspective, and also consider my feelings.

These experiences reinforced to the EAs that regardless of *receiving approval (or the lack thereof)*, they can recognize the information about romantic relationships that they have received from their family of origin, as well as learn any new information based on the experience.

Experience of Emerging Adulthood and Family Approval

When observing the essence of the experience of emerging adulthood and family approval, it is helpful to first notice the core family values that are present and how these values

were adopted by the emerging adult during the experience of family approval. One of the biggest values that was observed was *religiosity*, and it was because of these common core values between the EA and their significant other that the FOO was approving of the relationship. Jessica shared, “Faith, because we are a Christian family”. Em expressed, “We as Christians, we have value for our God, that is Jesus Christ. and also, we believe in going to church and praying, and also asking for forgiveness from Jesus Christ”. Angel noted, “My family, we are a religious family. I came from a religious family. We are ambassador of the family. As such we have to portray a good image of the family. That's what I'm trying to say. Yeah. Christianity.” Finally, Pinky summarized all the responses in agreement, “We are connected by spirituality and faith that we they are kind of people who are very spiritual, and you know. So especially my mom, she is a very spiritual woman. We are Christians”. As this was a big core value, it is understandable as to why this was a key indicator of whether the ladies would receive approval from their families.

The next biggest value was *respect*. This was a value that the FOO practiced together to express approval and was used to respond to the approval or lack thereof. Angel reflected, “Respect and dignity. We respected each other and we always try to be honest with each other, and we say so many, so many things with each other.” Pinky acknowledged, “There's kind of mutual respect I have for my parents, and they also respect my and side.” Beatrice noted, “Yeah, you know, as a Black family, you know, normally we always stand out. Well, we [distinguish] ourselves because we are known for respect”. Flower reflected, “Family value is actually very important to me, because that's how we were raised. There's respect, there's loyalty, and there's honesty, there's transparency.” Brenda explained:

Okay, the values we [show] is respect, the respect we give to each other. Yeah, the dignity we give to each other, and also like not trying to like trying to get everyone along in everything we find ourselves doing, and also one of the values to it's no secret you try to like.

Following the value of respect was *honesty*. This value was paired with the ability to communicate the approval or disapproval of the romantic relationship by the family and helped give the EA the ability to understand the reasoning for the family's type of approval. Ally shared, "The core values basically love truthfulness and honesty". Angel also shared, "We always try to be honest with each other". In addition to respect and religiosity as core values, Pinky added, "Honesty is one of them". Including respecting family members, Dani explained, "If we are out there, we should be honest and being accountable for what we are doing, and we should have integrity out there". While expressing her importance of family values, Flower listed, "There's respect, there's loyalty, and there's honesty, there's transparency". Brenda reinforced the value of honesty in her family and stated, "Also, one of the values to it's no secret you try to like. Tell your family what's up, what you're up to, what you're doing, and all of that."

As the EAs are receiving family approval, they are also experiencing the age of emerging adulthood, which is the time when they are practicing the ability to accept this "age of possibilities" and practice decision-making on their own (Arnett, 2019). This phenomenon is the breeding ground for the EAs to lean into this developmental milestone. Jessica leaned into this developmental milestone by exploring the possibilities of boundaries and decision-making:

I didn't really care if he approved of my husband or not, experiences in childhood, color coordinating at church, still don't care about his opinion... His opinion of what I was doing in my life wasn't concerning me; So, I had wanted his own

approval as a kid for a long time, and I got a point in my own life. I just didn't want anymore. I didn't care. And if he didn't like him, I was like, I don't care. I really don't. I still don't. But you know I, my older brother, understands that I don't play like I don't play that. So, you're not going to be disrespectful to my husband while I'm standing there. If you wanna, you know, do it in your own way behind my back. Talk to other people. Sure, I can't stop you from doing that, but while we're standing there, you will respect him, and I don't care and if you can't do that, then, we'll have a conversation, and it won't be a fun conversation...because [my husband] really cares about what my family thinks about him, but I don't want him to ever think that would choose them over him like if in any case like I would always choose him if they decided one day that they didn't like him anymore.

Em realized that while making her decision, it was important to ensure that her boyfriend respected her family's culture and her, even though their cultural histories differ from one another.

My family wanted someone who could respect cultural history and culture. So, I should make sure that I get somebody who will actually value me for who I am, and who will have respect for and care for me, and also for my family.

Ally explored the possibility of her family, specifically her father, expressing positive regard towards him by their actions, specifically if some family members have a personality where they may have a harder time accepting the relationship.

The interaction with him was completely on a very good level. And yeah, my dad is sometimes [weak], but of course, he interacts with him very well, so I can see

the interaction between the parents and him is okay. He came and we had dinner, and my dad asked him if he had been treating me well. And first it was a kind of a jokingly operation and others laughter, and I explained to them that he's been doing a very good job taking care of me, and they have nothing to worry about.

During this experience, the act of leaning into the “age of possibilities” was practiced through introducing their significant other to their families and being hopeful of the responses of their families of origin. Some participants were more at ease in comparison to others, and it was apparent in what they shared in the interviews. Angel immediately knew that her parents approved of her husband through their verbal and non-verbal expressions:

Their physical appearance, the way they talk to my husband, the first day I introduce him to them. And the way they carry him along. The first day I introduced my husband to them, my parents was like, I mean, my father was like ‘you are now my son, the way I gave birth to my daughter. You've turned to my son today, that I'm giving my daughter to you as your wife. So ever since then, I've been seeing my husband as their own son, and they give advice to us, and they always check us. Check up on us to know how we are doing. So, they were so happy because my husband was the kind of person that gave joy to anyone he came across. So, they were so excited.

On the contrary, Jessica experienced disapproval from some of her siblings and her husband’s family members as well. But it was her husband’s family that impacted her the most, as she wanted all of them to be a family together. She realized her role in the situation, even though her desire was different.

It was very, you know, up and down for a long time. No talking, talking, getting in arguments, no talking, talking, getting into arguments, no talking, and I didn't understand that I felt like some sense of a responsibility that I had to like. Bring them all together like me coming into the family. But that's not my responsibility, and I let that go a long time ago.

Em had the opportunity to find that taking the step to introduce her boyfriend to her family, it could have a result and that her family ultimately wanted her happiness at the end of the day, “It made me feel happy, supported, excited, encouraged, loved They care about my happiness over their cultural/religious beliefs, Felt like more like part of the family”. Ally was able to learn that she can meet a man who loves her for who she is *and* have a family that approves of him. This outcome had a great impact on her.

It made me feel special, and of course anyone could feel special. So, it made me feel special and made me knew that he loved me because of whom I am, and if my parents had already welcomed him, then definitely, this is the type of man that they like they want me to be with. So, it made me feel very good.

Leaning into the developmental milestone of decision-making, the EAs were able to recognize whom they were willing to allow to be a part of this process and how that impacted them in this age of instability. Angel came to the realization that introducing her husband to just their family brought peace and inferred that if any other individuals were involved, it may not have been as peaceful:

It's nice, it feels good bringing someone to the family, and your family is being affected; there's peace. At least you have you don't have to be bothered about someone that maybe, maybe some somebody somewhere else not approving your

marriage. It makes me feel strong, and which makes me feel, know how important I am in my family, and I came to know that everyone is happy.

Even though Pinky experienced mixed forms of approval and disapproval due to a violent miscommunication with her boyfriend, she was able to learn that her parents will put her safety before anything and that if there is anything negative that happens, they all can heal and come around.

It made me feel I kind of then I have secure parents. I have parents who look out for me. It impacted me positively, because maybe now you know, since I realized that, or he thought my boyfriend thought I was, you know, seeing someone, and hence that was the reason for the romantic violence.

Beatrice found that this decision was wise as she was able to not only receive approval from her own family but from her boyfriend's family as well. Moreover, it allowed her to be able to strengthen her connection and communication with her family:

And also, yeah, it also gives me that sense of belonging to another family outside my own family, and it builds that strong connection of unity and happiness and harmony between us. So that's what I see. And also, it helps to strengthen our relationship and also gave us good communication.

Flower was able to see how her positive decision-making increased her mental health overall, including her *confidence*, stress, and anxiety. This allowed her relationship to become more solidified as well:

It increased my confidence to actually see where this is headed... confident in myself and my decision. It reduced stress and anxiety, because when you're constantly thinking about what your family would say, that's a whole lot of stress.

It also made me have a deeper connection with [significant other]. We are free to share a lot of things, and we're very open.

Brenda learned that she could trust herself and her decision-making skills. She had this ability because she could recognize what was beneficial for her and what to consider in future choices:

The approval from my family makes me stable, makes me okay. That definitely, I know what I'm doing for myself. I know who is best for me. I know the person I'm looking for. Then I have to focus on some other things that I know to be effective for me or beneficial for me in the future. The approval from my family makes me stable, makes me okay. That definitely, I know what I'm doing for myself. I know who is best for me. I know the person I'm looking for.

These experiences portray the notion that the experience of family approval while being in the stage of emerging adulthood can reinforce the feelings of instability, hope of possibility, and confidence in one's decision-making skills. Although the experience was dysregulating at times for some participants, others were able to have very positive experiences that impacted them in a great way and further solidified their romantic relationships, some to the point of marriage. With this wealth of information that was received, it is imperative to be able to see how this awareness can be applied in other aspects, such as in the clinical setting.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The current study sought to learn more about the experiences of family approval amongst Black women who are in the stage of emerging adulthood. Participants described what the experience was like for them, how approval (or lack thereof) was expressed, along with how this experience impacted them and their romantic relationship. Many of the participants shared that it was a positive experience and that they felt even more confident in themselves and their romantic relationship. Others shared that this experience showed them how much their family wants to support them and the lengths that they would go to express that desire. Lastly, for those who experienced mixed forms of approval, it was found that transparent communication between both the emerging adult and the family of origin was helpful in further understanding the concerns and perspectives that were present.

Making a Positive Impact on Emerging Adulthood

Many participants shared that their experience of family approval was mostly positive. This positive experience helped them to feel more confident in themselves, their decision-making, the course of their romantic relationship, and in their relationship with their family of origin. This supports the idea that family approval can contribute to a positive impact on the experience of emerging adulthood, even though it can be known as the time of instability and identity formation. This is consistent with the several tenets of emerging adulthood that Arnett expresses, including the age of identity formation, instability, and possibilities (2019).

Confidence was shared multiple times by the emerging adults. This confidence was a positive alternative to the feelings of instability, as they made the decision to introduce their significant other to their family of origin. This confidence had the opportunity to come under the scrutiny of judgmental siblings, overly concerned parents, and immediate family members who

just wanted the emerging adult to be happy. It was an act of bravery for the emerging adults to choose to make this decision, and the boldness of some participants to be able to decipher who and whom not to include in this experience, based upon their character. If the emerging adult may have been younger (an adolescent), there is a chance that they might not have either cared about the risks of introducing the new significant other or cared too much about the risks to where they choose not to introduce them, depending upon their relationship with their family of origin (Conger et al., 2000; Siqueira, 2013). As one of the main goals of this phase is to take steps to solidify their romantic relationship, the emerging adult mustered the confidence to make this decision.

Participants demonstrated strength in making decisions. As this is the stage where the emerging adults are doing their best to solidify their identity, the decisions that they choose to make are more crucial and defining as opposed to when they were mere adolescents (Arnett, 2019). These decisions have the potential to set them up for the next major stages of the course of their life. With that in mind, it is no wonder there was concern around making these decisions and at times, receiving guidance from trusted individuals such as their older siblings or a trusted family member. Having such a positive experience practicing this skill further solidified the emerging adults' confidence in themselves and their romantic relationship.

The course in romantic relationships of the participants further offered a positive experience regarding emerging adulthood. Remaining consistent with the developmental goals of this stage, knowing that their family of origin was responsive to their new romantic partner further let the emerging adult know that they chose the right person (Arnett, 2019). For some participants, knowing that their significant other was able to be patient amid the process, accepting the emerging adults' families' expression of approval or lack thereof greatly impacted

their view of the relationship. Even when there was disagreement with a portion of the experience or mixed approval, the couple was able to have transparent conversations with one another about how it was impacting them one-on-one as well as with their families of origin. It is because of these positive experiences that the emerging adults end up solidifying their relationships even further, some leading to marriage.

There is the hope that as the emerging adult is navigating this experience, there is helpful guidance from their family of origin to ensure that the new relationship is in the best interest of the emerging adult. This consideration of the best interest of the emerging adult was expressed throughout all of the interviews and is consistent with current literature. Emerging adults shared that there were concerns about whether their significant other shared the same religious beliefs, cultural values and whether those practices could be integrated into the current family values that were present. Current literature shows that these concerns are quite common amongst individuals that are planning to solidify their romantic relationships (Bell & Hastings, 2015; Miller et al., 2021; Shrodt, 2021).

Concerns around finances and politics were not major areas of concern regarding family approval or information received around romantic relationships. One can infer that the reason is that the most common family values identified in this study did not include finances and politics, but rather how one another is treated, spoken to, how they are to present themselves, and a belief that they have a purpose given to them by a higher power. This is consistent with the views of collectivistic groups, where there is more of a focus on how those within the group are portrayed and lifted, rather than focusing on one's own needs while dismissing everyone else's (Oyserman et al., 2002). The experiences that were shared within this study express that the emerging adult had the chance to see how these family values can be integrated within the action of bridging

their relationship with their significant other to their family of origin. This further alludes to the idea that the emerging adults' family of origin is offering these values as information regarding romantic relationships.

Making a Positive Impact on Emerging Adulthood for Black Women

This study painted a brighter picture for not only Black women, but also Black women who are managing emerging adulthood. Although previous studies highlight the difficulties that Black women experience related to their race, desire for future occupation, and struggles regarding romantic relationships, the participants painted a different story, specifically regarding romantic relationships. There are common stereotypes of Black women that include them being either too overbearing, too mother-like, too independent, or sexually promiscuous (Collins, 1998; Harris-Perry, 2011; Stephens & April, 2007; Townsend et al., 2010). Participants in this study were viewed as valuable, worth being patient with, and worth advocating for. These characteristics were expressed by both the family of origin of the Black woman and her significant other. As most of the participants were either graduate students or had at least their bachelor's degree, they were able to find that they could have a romantic relationship and receive higher education simultaneously. Further, regarding their family of origin, there was encouragement for the Black women to go for the goal they wanted to achieve (solidifying a romantic relationship) as opposed to discouragement and any form of concern was more related to how the significant other was treating the woman, as opposed to how the woman was treating the man (Debnam et al., 2024; Pemberton et al., 2025). These findings change the narrative, stating that Black women can be treated well and that they can make their own decisions regarding their lives as an emerging adult.

Family Approval is Not Always Negative

Upon hearing the concept of family approval, one can infer that the experience would be negative. This is due to the common ideas that when individuals meet their new potential family members or choose to allow their family of origin to meet their new significant other, that there may be misunderstandings or concerns that are not addressed (MacDonald et al., 2012). In the chance that this happens, it is not surprising that the quality of romantic relationships and the relationship with one's family of origin are negatively impacted. This impact could resemble potential divorce or the complete cut-off from one's family of origin (Benjamin et al., 2025; Cao et al., 2019). The present study expressed the opposite—the experiences of family approval were quite positive. In fact, they were more positive than anticipated. The aspects that tied into these positive experiences included alignment of family values, transparent communication and the desires of the family to support the emerging adult.

As previously mentioned, when the core values of the family aligned with the practices of the new significant other, the family was more approving of the relationship. When the family of origin found that the core values of the new significant other aligned, there was greater confidence in the romantic relationship and peace, knowing that the emerging adult was going to be in good hands as the values would remain consistent. This action shows how much the core values of the family drive the actions and decisions of the family members (Dartey et al., 2024; Easton & Holbein, 2021; Miller et al., 2021; Shrodt, 2021). Although there were cases where not all of the family values aligned to the specific details of the value, as long as the other prominent values were the same, there was minimal concern.

In instances where there was concern or disapproval of the relationship between the emerging adult and their new partner, transparent conversation was present. Contrary to expressing disapproval without context or reason, both the family of origin and the emerging

adult both had multiple conversations about their concerns and perspectives. This ties to a more positive experience as it gives the emerging adult more information about the concerns of their family of origin and allows the family of origin to learn more about how this relationship impacts the emerging adult in such a positive way. In the end, all the parties involved were able to strengthen their relationship with one another through authentic conversation and healthy problem-solving (Li et al., 2018; Marbell-Pierre et al., 2019). This ties into the fact that the family of origin truly wants what is best for the emerging adult. In some instances, that expression resulted in the family of origin setting a boundary (if this individual treats you in this negative way again there may be some consequences) as well as the emerging adult (if there is no respect, we will have to have another discussion). Thankfully, it was the transparent conversations that allowed these emerging adults and their families to properly manage the situation. In the event that there is still further confusion, it would be helpful for the family and the emerging adults to receive some further guidance, potentially in therapy.

Clinical Implications

To begin, this study offers a significant amount of insight into the experience of family approval, how EAs need support in this phase of their life, and further, how to help families increase their awareness of their expression of approval and how it can impact the EA that is pursuing a committed relationship. From the responses of the EAs, we learned that transparent forms of communication (verbal or non-verbal) are an important way to learn more about how and why family approval is expressed. Looking at the developmental milestones of EAs through life course theory, there is already a concern around decision-making, feeling a sense of instability, and attempting to solidify romantic relationships (Arnett, 2019). When working with an individual who is in this stage of development, it would be beneficial for clinicians to first

validate and normalize the stage that they are in. Following, they ask the EA about their reasoning as to why they desire to have approval from their FOO and how this approval will impact them. The reasoning for this is not to deter them, but rather to learn more about the relationship that EA has with their family and how this relationship impacts their continuous development in this stage of life. From there, it would be helpful to help the EA increase their confidence in having conversations with their family about their significant other. Specifically, how they can share their perspective clearly, and allow them to truly feel heard by their family of origin.

As was observed in the study, it would be helpful for the EA to know how to communicate pushback from the family in a respectful way. Additionally, being transparent in their communication with their family of origin. Some EAs shared that they appreciated being able to have transparent conversations, as it allowed them to be honest and receive honesty from their family of origin. Clinicians can help EAs to be able to set aside the potential fear of their FOO's response or how things may change due to their response. Further, allowing the space for the EA to process through the new information that was received and how it may impact them. Participants also shared that if it was not for their ability to be transparent with their family of origin about their feelings and concerns, they most likely would have made their own decision to stay with their significant other, even if their family of origin was not approving of their relationship, and that would not have been an easy decision for them to make. Moreover, when the family of origin were transparent about can concerns or accepting of the significant other, this gave the emerging adult more insight around their beliefs and expression of their reactions and not allowing the EA to make assumptions based upon unclear expressions. This was the case with those that were in biracial relationships as. For example, for Jessica and her husband, even

though some members of both of their families of origin were not approving, Jessica and her husband both had transparent conversations with their families about how they felt and welcomed their families to do the same. It was through that transparent communication that promoted transformative change within their relationships with one another.

This study also highlights aspects of Bowen's family systems theory, specifically differentiation. Differentiation is defined as “the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation” (Friedman, 1991). The question related to how the experience of family approval (or lack thereof) impacted the individual gives more insight into how the EA potentially practiced remaining true to who they are becoming, while managing the responses from their family of origin, as well as their significant other. Further research can look more into how the process of differentiation occurs within EAs as they move into a committed relationship, as this can help inspire and create clinical interventions that can be used for this specific population. Even further, clinicians can attempt to bridge family systems theory and life course theory together, especially when working with families and the concept of family approval. Systems theory lets emerging adults know that their family of origin does have an impact on their relationships and trajectory of growth, while their families learn more about the growth and experience of an emerging adult. This knowledge gives emerging adults further insight into how they can differentiate from their family of origin by recognizing the role that their family of origin can play in their life, while having the autonomy to adjust that role. For the family of origin, the awareness of the developmental stages can help them to come alongside the emerging adult as they all navigate the introduction of the emerging adult’s significant other, while pushing for clarity in their guidance.

Limitations

There are some limitations present in this study. To begin, the targeted age group was older emerging adult Black women. One can argue that not seeking out the full age range of emerging adulthood can take away the ability to learn the true essence of this experience in this phase of life. As this point is understandable, there was a concern that participants in the earlier stages of emerging adulthood may not be able to either fully recognize family approval or may not be in a sufficiently committed relationship for family approval to be manifested. Second, the fact that only emerging adults were considered for this study. Others can pose the argument that middle-aged adults who are considered to be more settled in their lives could have a better understanding of family approval and provide a richer expression of how it impacted them; however, due to the guiding theory of life course and focusing on the unique developmental milestones that this phase of life highlights, it pairs well with answering the research questions around the experience of family approval while in emerging adulthood. Third is the number of participants who were collected. Future research could initially consider utilizing focus groups as opposed to interviews to meet the demand for the great number of individuals that would like to participate in the study. Fourth, there is the fact that the majority of the participants had experienced primarily family approval within their relationships. This may have been tied to the pre-screening question, “have you experienced some form of family approval”, whereas similar wording could have been used, “have you experienced some form of family approval or disapproval”, which could play into the participants’ choice to be a part of the study. There is a chance that some of the individuals who were on the waitlist may have had a story of disapproval, which potentially could have caused the responses to be more positive. Fifth, all the participants were in heterosexual relationships, so this study is limited to the heterosexual

experiences of family approval, where it can be different for those in non-heterosexual relationships.

Future Research

To begin, there was a phenomenon of a positive experience of family approval that emerged through the third research question, and this is worth further exploration of the characteristics of the phenomenon of positive family approval and then looking at the characteristics of family disapproval. As mentioned in the limitations section, if there were a large group of women who would like to participate in future studies, focus groups could be considered to meet the demand for participation. Future research could also consider participants or groups that are either solely married or just dating, to see how the phenomenon may differ between the two groups. Separating the groups could help learn more about how the experience might have changed during the course of one's dating then marital relationship, as well as the various stages of the dating relationship. Future research could also consider how the phenomenon of family approval impacts individuals depending on their birth order. It was observed that those who were older siblings had a more intense experience than those who were younger. For those who were middle siblings, they had a unique experience where they could receive encouragement from their older siblings. With these observations in mind, it would be encouraged to look at the experiences of the various sibling birth orders and how they may vary. An additional area of research could be the experience of Black males ages 24-29 within their romantic relationships. This could provide greater insight into how the experiences compare and contrast based upon impact, along with how their family of origin may express their approval or disapproval of their romantic relationship. Further, inquiring of how emerging adult Black men define family approval and how they respond to it. Future research could include both

individuals that are present in the relationship to learn more about how the relationship was impacted from both perspectives and family expressions of approval or lack thereof. This research could help support the thought above by offering greater insight for clinicians as they are working with couples, individuals, and families. Receiving dyadic data can offer insight into the couple's experience and further provide clarity or fill any gaps in the experience that may be present.

Conclusion

Deciding to introduce one's significant other to their immediate family can be scary and require courage. Deciding to take the leap to introduce a romantic partner to family requires a bit of bravery. Being an emerging adult and a Black woman can add even more pressure to the experience. This study showed that the experience of family approval is not always negative. Rather, it can be positive if the core values of the family align with one another, transparent communication around the relationship, and the ability to come alongside the emerging adult as they embark on this possibility-filled experience can allow the outcome to be more positive than anticipated.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

- 1.) How did you both meet?
- 2.) How long have you been together?
- 3.) Who would you consider to be your family of origin (those you grew up with)?
- 4.) How do you describe the concept of family approval in your own words?
- 5.) What core values does your family of origin hold?
- 6.) What has been your experience of family approval within your romantic relationship?
- 7.) How was family approval (or disapproval) of your romantic relationship shown in your family of origin?
- 8.) How did this (dis)approval make you feel? How did it make you feel about the relationship?
- 9.) What was helpful and unhelpful to you in handling the family approval?

Appendix B - Pre-Screening Questions

- 1.) How old are you?
- 2.) Have you ever experienced family approval within a romantic relationship before?
- 3.) Has this experience impacted you in a major way (i.e. change in perception of romantic relationships, relationship with family or self, impacted, mental health impacted etc.)
- 4.) If chosen for this study, would you like to participate in an interview to share your experience?

Appendix C - Debriefing Statement

Purpose of Research

This study will inquire about the lived experiences of emerging adult Black women as they experience family approval within their romantic relationships. This study intends to increase awareness of this phenomenon amongst emerging adults and Black women specifically, regarding moving into independence, learning more about what helps Black women handle family approval, and how this has impacted their relationship.

Specific Procedures

Participants must be between the ages of 24-29, in a romantic relationship, and have experienced some form of family approval in any phase of their romantic relationship. You will participate in a candid interview of about 8 questions from a PhD student in Couple and Family Therapy.

Benefits

There are several benefits to you from participating in this study. First, you will have the opportunity to authentically share your experience of family approval in a candid interview with a graduate level family therapist. Additionally, because of this interview, this information will help therapists in the field have greater insight into preparing couples on how to maintain their closeness with one another as well as navigating their relationship with their family of origin. Your responses will help therapists provide a safe space for deeper curiosity and understanding of the unique experiences of family approval for couples and their families alike. Those who participate will receive a gift card as a form of compensation.

Following Study

As mentioned in the informed consent, your participation in the study will help therapists as they work with individuals, couples, and families and provide insight into teaching curricula that can be used for these individuals. Your compensation will be sent to you following your interview and your responses will receive code names for the sake of reviewing to determine the results of the study. Updates will be sent as the study completely concludes, including the results of the study. Thank you for your participation!

Contact Information

If you would like to participate in counseling services, please visit www.psychologytoday.com or the following link <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>. If you have any questions after participating in this research study, please contact Preshous Benjamin at pbenjam@ksu.edu, Dr. Jared Durtschi at jadmft@ksu.edu, or IRB Chair Lisa Rubin (rubin@ksu.edu) or Associate Vice President for Research Compliance Brad Woods (brwoods@ksu.edu).

Appendix D - Identified Themes

Research Questions	Question Themes
Experience of Family approval among Black Women	Family approval Definitions Acceptance, Support, Validation Experience of Family approval Acceptance of differences (or lack thereof), resistance, open-mindedness, and trust
Information Received from Family of Origin about Romantic Relationships	Expression of Family approval Acceptance, open conversation, non-verbal, mixed reactions/expressions, integration Helpful Managing Family approval Support from their significant other, open communication, and collaboration
Experience of Emerging Adulthood and Family Approval	Family of Origin Core Values Religiosity, Honesty, and Respect Expression of Family approval Acceptance, open conversation, non-verbal, mixed reactions/expressions, integration Impact of Romantic Relationship on Self Confidence, mixed emotions, validation Impact of family approval on Romantic Relationships Confidence, connection, relief Unhelpful Managing Family approval Fear, lack of transparency, conflict