

Meet the Family

Crystal J. Schuster and Toni M. Morgan

Communication and Media Studies, St. Norbert College, De Pere, WI



INTRODUCTION

- Early adulthood is a developmental stage in which romantic relationships often take priority. Parents play an important role in new romantic relationships, even before marriage, and their role increases as the couple becomes more serious (Ciesielski & Janowicz, 2021).
- The family acts as a socialization agent by transferring schemas from parents to children, and they influence attitudes toward outsiders, and the degree to which families engage in conversation and are open about the exchange of ideas can have important implications for their future relationships (Young & Schrod, 2016).
- Meeting one's family is important because parents' approval of a couple's relationship has been shown to have an impact on the quality of the marriage, marital satisfaction, and physical and mental health (Ciesielski & Janowicz, 2021).
- Differences between the adult child's perception of an ideal partner and parental expectations for an ideal partner can cause anxiety in introducing a new partner to one's family, thus making this process potentially stressful (Ciesielski & Janowicz, 2021).
- Previous research details that explicit relational talk is a predominantly Western relational maintenance strategy and that other cultures use different strategies for managing relationships, such as nonverbal tactics (Theiss & Nagy, 2013).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ 1: What does the process of introducing a new romantic partner to the family entail?

RQ 2: What are the relational implications for romantic partners following meeting one's family?

RQ 3: What are the relational implications for family members following meeting one's romantic partner?

RQ 4: How does culture play a role in the expectations or outcomes of this introduction?

RQ5: What advice do adult children give regarding the process of introducing a romantic partner to their family?

METHOD

Participants: The sample consisted of 14 principal participants (adult children) between the ages of 18-22 ($M=20.36$, $SD=1.15$).

- **Sex:** women ($n=11$), men ($n=3$)
- **Sexual Orientation:** heterosexual ($n=12$), bisexual ($n=2$)
- **Race/Ethnicity:** white ($n=13$), Hispanic/Latino ($n=1$)
- **Age When Relationship Began:** $M=18.55$, $SD=.688$, range = 18-20
- **Living Situation:** living separately from partner ($n=12$), living with partner ($n=2$)

Recruitment:

Participants received course credit if they were recruited via the SONA system. Family members and romantic partners of the principal participants were also recruited on an optional, voluntary basis to provide their insights as well, but their responses were not included in the present study. Principal participants needed to meet the following criteria in order to participate:

- Be 18 years or older
- Have been or are currently in a romantic relationship where they introduced a partner to family members
- Be willing to participate in an interview process,
- Exhibit an openness to have a survey sent to a family member and/or romantic partner

Procedures:

- Principal participants (the adult children) participated in an audio/visual-recorded, one-on-one online interview session, conducted through the web platform Zoom, with the student researcher.
- Before the interview portion of the investigation, participants were sent a Qualtrics survey during which they went through a consent process and filled out a demographic questionnaire.
- The interview process followed a semi-structured protocol.
- At the end of the interview, the principal participant was given information on how to send an additional survey with several open-ended questions to their romantic partner and/or to their family member.
- All participants underwent a debriefing process at the conclusion of their respected research procedure.

Data Analysis

- Interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

RESULTS

RQ	Theme	Definition	Exemplar
RQ1	Introduction Timing & Labels	Relationship labels were varied. Friendship was a label used both as a marker for a potential relationship and as an indicator that the relationship was not yet officially defined.	Explicit labels: "serious" or "dating," "girlfriend/ boyfriend." Pre-relationship labels: "really good friends," "we're talking," "a person I'm seeing," or "hanging out"
	Expectations for Partner's reaction	Adult children expected partner would react positively to suggestion with openness and a desire to meet the family	"...my partner was going to want to do it because my relationship with my family is important to me" (P7; 5:15)
	Introduction Preparation	Providing background knowledge to both the romantic partner and family members	"We went over who my parents were, their jobs, a little family history, and logistical things to ease the nervousness" (P6; 8:35)
	Expectations for Behavior	Partner: following basic norms, such as introducing themselves, being polite, and having of spatial awareness; nervousness Family: proactive and restrictive behaviors; nervousness	"I expected that she would introduce herself, be herself, and talk about herself" (P3; 8:11)
	Introduction Challenges	Addressing past family history and background, navigating logistics, no clearly defined labels or feelings, fear of potential familial judgment, wanting to be liked by partner's family.	"I didn't know how I felt about him, and I didn't want my family to get the wrong impression if I didn't want to get in a relationship yet and for them to be pushy about it" (P13; 4:40)
RQ2	Relational Growth	Overall, adult children felt that introducing their partner to their family member was an important and formal step that led to increased closeness as a relational unit and allowed the relationship to continue progression (turning point vs test run)	"It definitely gave me more acceptance to the idea of being in a relationship with him and moving things along. I knew my family knew he was a good person, and it would be okay if we were to move forward in a relationship" (P13; 11:12)
	Relational Strain	Sense of expectation grew, especially the expectation to then meet their partner's family	"Now I had to meet my partner's family, so that was really stressful for me" (P8; 12:24)
RQ3	Family Growth	Increased conversation and connection with family members	"My parents really like him, so I think that really helped my relationship with my family and now we have a new thing to talk about" (P6; 25:20)
	Perfectionism	Desire to protect led to standard of perfection, which didn't allow room for error or growth in the relationship. Parental involvement introduced tensions surrounding the pace of the relationship	"They trust me to make the right decision and think things through but wanted to make sure I wasn't misplacing that trust because that was something they couldn't fix" (P2; 17:49)
RQ4	Language Differences	Communication could be strained or difficult during the introduction process if there was a language barrier	"The communication was stale at times because of a language difference" (P5; 11:45)
	Familial Norms	Adult children coming from families whose culture prioritized family acknowledged a sense of betrayal throughout the relationship process. Families also tended to have a more direct say in who child dated, making parental approval even more important in these contexts	"When I first got into a relationship I was really nervous because I felt like I was betraying my family because if you're still living with your family, they have a say in it [your relationship]" (P11; 3:43)
	Religious Implications	Religion influenced norms surrounding dating behaviors and sexual activity in the relationship and was also used by parents in terms of external appearances and as justification for extended family members	"My mom asked me was if I was still a virgin. In our culture, you stay a virgin until you get married, and if I deviated from that norm in any way, my mom would have to explain that" (P11; 23:45).
RQ5:	Family Members	Be open-minded and welcoming; Show support; Be mindful of how many questions are asked; Provide honest feedback	"You can't pick who your kid dates, but you can pick to have a relationship with your kid, so you should try to be supportive" (P6; 31:51)
	Romantic Partners	Be open about the introduction and communicate any concerns	"Be open with your partner about any concerns or insecurities you have about meeting your partner's family or if you need more time together first" (P8; 16:40)

DISCUSSION

- Introducing a new partner to one's family has the potential to introduce tension into the familial relationship, but it also has the potential to bring about increased closeness with one's parents and new relationships with the partner's family.
- Participants have different motivations for wanting to introduce their partners to their family members.
- This process can influence and shape how the relationship proceeds and how the relationship between a partner and family members affects the relationship overall; how the introduction goes can have long lasting impacts based on if there was parental approval or not.
- Family members' communicated acceptance is important for adult children.
- Relief was an important emotion that participants expressed after having introduced their partner to their family.

REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P.M. Camic, D.L. Long, A.T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K.J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2 Research Designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.
- Ciesielski, P., & Janowicz, K. (2021). Meeting potential parents-in-law and introducing a partner to own parents: Prospective and retrospective studies. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 24(1), 65-83. <https://doi.org/10.18290/rpsych2114>
- Theiss, A., & Nagy, M. E. (2013). A relational turbulence model of partner responsiveness and relationship talk across cultures. *Western Journal of Communication*, 77(2), 186-209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2012.720746>
- Young, J., & Schrod, P. (2016). Family communication patterns, parental modeling, and confirmation in romantic relationships. *Communication Quarterly*, 64(4), 454-475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2015.1103297>