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LEARNING ABOUT LOVE:
THE PRESENCE, NATURE & INFLUENCE OF
LOVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Dissertation
by

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Abstract

Considerable scholarly attention has been dedicated toward the role of peers in adolescents' romantic lives (Brown, 1999; Collins, 2003; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009, Korobov & Thorne, 2006). However, when it comes to the developmental significance of adults in promoting the healthy romantic functioning of adolescents, there has been comparably little research. For college students in particular, navigating romantic experiences can be a stressful and complex endeavor (Hurst et al., 2013) - one that may be aided by supportive relationships with adults who can listen, ask questions, and offer a distinct perspective. Indeed, recent literature has indicated that late adolescents (18-25 years of age) want more guidance from the adults in their lives about romantic relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2017).

The present study introduces the concept and term *love mentoring* - opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic experiences with someone who is older or more experienced in this domain. Through the theoretical framework of Relational Cultural Theory, the study investigates the presence, nature, quality, and influence of love mentoring relationships in the lives of college women enrolled in a university-based mentoring program.

Through reflexive thematic analysis of survey data and 12 in-depth follow-up interviews, the study's results are distilled into six integrative findings: love mentoring is prevalent in families and universities, love mentors (LMs) are trustworthy, love mentoring supports self-worth, conversations around sex complicate love mentoring relationships, LMs are distinct from friends, and LMs promote healthy romantic development through conversation and modeling. These foundational findings on the phenomenon of love mentoring provide an important contribution to existing bodies of literature on college students' romantic relationships and mentoring. Implications for research and practice are discussed in the context of study limitations.

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The following pages offer an overview of the dissertation study. Specifically, they provide an introduction and justification for a mixed methods study that will investigate the presence of a developmental asset that may support college students' healthy romantic development: *love mentoring.* In the present study, love mentoring is defined as opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic experiences with someone who is older or more experienced in this domain.

Definition of Terms

The dissertation's population of interest is traditionally-aged college students. As such, the terminology that has been conventionally used to describe this group is worthy of brief review. Within the last century, adolescence - conceptualized as the period of life beginning with puberty and ending with the transition to adult roles - was most frequently considered to represent the years of life between the ages of 10 through 19 (Steinberg, 2017). However, with increasing empirical support for the elongation of adolescence, many scholars now consider adolescence to represent the span of ages 10 through 24 (Steinberg, 2017). The concept of emerging adulthood at the end of adolescence also reflects new types of experiences for some youth between the ages of 18 and 25 that are characterized by a focus on the self, an exploration of personally meaningful activities, and a delayed transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Notably, this age range and types of experiences are characteristic of traditionally aged college students, who comprise the sample for this study. However, given considerable academic debate and subsequent acknowledgement that emerging adulthood is not a universal, developmental stage (e.g., Côté, 2014; Syed, 2016), *college students* will be the descriptor used throughout the proposal to describe the population of interest. Additionally, when appropriate and consistent with the literature they describe, the terms

late adolescents and young adults are also used to reference individuals roughly between the ages of 18 and 25.

A central concept in the dissertation is a particular aspect of college students' development: their romantic lives. Researchers who have focused on this topic have used various terms to describe the phenomenon of study. This proposal adopts definitions proposed by Collins and colleagues (2009) which distinguish romantic relationships from romantic experiences. According to Collins and colleagues, the term *romantic relationships* refers to mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions between partners, which are commonly marked by a distinctive intensity as compared to peer relations, expressions of affection, and/or current or anticipated sexual behavior. Alternatively, *romantic experiences* can be understood more as an umbrella term, referring to a larger category of activities and cognitions that includes relationships and also varied behavioral, mental, and emotional phenomena that do not involve direct experiences with a romantic partner (e.g., fantasies, one-sided attractions or crushes), as well as interactions with potential romantic partners and brief non-romantic sexual encounters, such as hooking up (Collins et al., 2009). *Hookups* are generally understood to be sexual encounters between partners who are not in a romantic relationship and do not expect commitment (Fielder et al., 2014). Such encounters are typically characterized by casual involvement in activities that can range from kissing to intercourse (Collins et al., 2009). When necessary, distinctions among romantic relationships, romantic experiences, and hookups will be made throughout the proposal.

Statement of the Problem

In higher education, an exorbitant amount of time, energy and resources is allocated toward preparing students for successful professional lives. Academic support, co-curricular

opportunities and vocational guidance are considered fundamental components of a high-quality, university education that sets college students up for successful postgraduate experiences, particularly at the nation's most selective, residential institutions. However, when it comes to preparing students for life after college, higher education has dedicated significantly less time and resources toward helping students understand, appreciate and practice healthy relationships - specifically, healthy romantic relationships.

While this abdication is paradoxical given the primacy of romantic relationships for college-aged students (e.g., Erikson, 1968), some explanations for the hands-off approach to supporting the healthy romantic development of college students can be found in existing literature. Recent research framed by the concept of the late adolescence/early adulthood moratorium has contributed to the perspective that the college years, marked as they are by an increasing focus on professional pursuits, are a time when educational and career goals take precedence over relationship goals (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). It has even been suggested that only when young people are more confident about their life plans, will they seriously consider becoming involved in a long-term relationship (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). This line of reasoning has been used as one of many explanations for the pervasiveness of college hookup culture. While research has shown that hook-up culture is a reality on most college campuses, it has also been demonstrated that students and parents alike exaggerate its prevalence (Weissbourd et al., 2017). Together, these two dominant narratives - that college is a time to focus on professional goals over relationship goals and that hooking up is the desired norm among college students - may lead families, educators and institutions to assume that college students are not interested, or perhaps not developmentally ready, to engage in deep thinking, learning, or conversation about their romantic feelings, behaviors, and aspirations.

Previous studies have shown that romantic experiences are frequent during adolescence and represent an important context for learning and training for future intimate relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). The establishment and maintenance of healthy adolescent romantic relationships has been shown to be important to wellbeing throughout the period; and because of this can be considered one of many "developmental assets"- skills, opportunities, relationships and values that promote thriving and resilience (Benson et al., 2006; Gómez-López et al., 2019).

The extant body of literature on college students' romantic experiences lacks research that applies a positive framework to explore the ecological assets that may support the healthy development of young people's romantic lives. Navigating the opportunities and challenges of romantic experiences can be a complex and overwhelming endeavor for college students, who have reported experiencing a host of romantic stressors, including concerns about developing romantic relationships, missing a significant other, managing a dysfunctional relationship and ending romantic relationships (Hurst et al., 2013). It seems likely, then, that college students' healthy romantic development could be aided by supportive relationships with adults who can listen, ask questions, and offer a distinct perspective. Indeed, recent literature has indicated that late adolescents (18-25 years of age) want more guidance from the adults in their lives about romantic relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2017). As such, more research is needed to elucidate processes of romance-related mentoring that college students may seek and receive from both parental and nonparental figures in their lives.

The Current Study

While research on the impact of parents, non-parental adults and natural mentors is robust, the field of developmental psychology has yet to examine the ways in which family members, non-parental adults, even institutional resources (courses, programs, etc.) can provide

opportunities for support and conversation regarding young adults' romantic lives. The current study examined the presence and influence of an ecological asset in the lives of college students that may help to foster the development of healthy romantic relationships: *love mentoring*. As noted previously, *love mentoring* is defined as opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic experiences with someone who is older or more experienced in this domain.

Theoretical Framework

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) guided the investigation of these concepts. RCT is a comprehensive theory of counseling and development that is grounded in the importance of growth-fostering relationships to human development - specifically, women's development. Originated by feminist scholars, RCT emerged from the notion that traditional models of human development emphasizing individuation, separation and autonomy do not accurately address the relational experiences of women and persons in other devalued cultural groups (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). However, like other multicultural and feminist theories, RCT holds that the context of relational development across the lifespan is inextricably linked to individuals' racial/cultural/social identities. Accordingly, the theory emphasizes an awareness and knowledge of the ways in which contextual and sociocultural factors (such as oppression, marginalization, and various forms of social injustice) lead to negative outcomes among persons from marginalized or devalued communities - and impede individuals' ability to create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008).

RCT theorists posit that growth-fostering relationships can be characterized by the presence of four central relational qualities: mutual engagement (as defined by perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship); authenticity (the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the

relationship); empowerment/zest (the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action); and the ability to deal with difference or conflict (the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling) (Liang et al., 2002b). As such, RCT was used as a guiding framework through which I conceptualized and analyzed the presence, nature, quality, and influence of love mentoring relationships in the lives of college women.

Research Questions & Design

Through this study, I investigated college women's   mentoring relationships with older or more experienced individuals who help them think, learn, and/or talk about romance-related topics, as well as the influence of these relationships on various aspects of their romantic thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. Two research questions guided this inquiry: *(1) What is the role of love mentoring relationships for senior college women enrolled in a university-based mentoring program? (2) How do love mentoring relationships influence their: understandings of healthy romantic relationships, approach to their romantic lives, and romance-related aspirations for the future?*

I pursued the above questions through a two-phase, mixed methods design. Survey data and 12 in-depth interviews were analyzed through reflective thematic analysis to answer the research questions and produce six integrative findings on the presence, nature, and influence of love mentoring relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following pages provide a broad review of theory and literature relevant to the study's exploration of college students' romantic experiences and mentoring relationships. This chapter includes: an introduction to relational developmental systems metatheory; a review of theories of relational development, including RCT - the dissertation's theoretical framework; an overview of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love; a summary of salient theory and research on adolescent romantic development; and a review of literature pertaining to romantic experiences in the college context. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering research on the role of parental and nonparental adults in supporting the healthy romantic development of college students, including relevant mentoring frameworks that have informed the construct of love mentoring.

A Relational Developmental Systems Approach to Positive Adolescent Development

My approach to these topics was guided by the metatheoretical framework known as relational developmental systems (RDS), which emphasizes that human development is a relational phenomenon (Lerner, 2004; Overton, 2015). This framework stresses that all levels of organization comprising the ecology of human development - from an individual's biology to their sociological system of community culture - are fused in a fully co-actional, mutually beneficial, dynamic system in which individual-context relations serve as the wellspring of thriving across the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Callina et al., 2017; Lerner et al., 2005). Derived from the RDS approach, PYD frameworks hold that the relations between individual strengths (e.g., purpose, goal setting skills, character) and contextual assets in families, communities, cultures, and the natural environment (e.g., romantic relationships, mentors) can be integrated to promote the positive development of youth (Lerner, 2004; Overton, 2015).

This individual-context relationship serves as a key unit of analysis for RDS and PYD scholars (Lerner et al., 2005). Also central to these perspectives is the understanding of the individual as an active agent in their own development, possessing the power to alter their own developmental trajectory (Lerner et al., 2005). Given the potential for shifting developmental trajectories, scholars suggest that development has relative plasticity: although individuals may be susceptible to develop in particular ways, development is not predetermined and it is quite possible for individuals or contexts to change over time (Lerner et al., 2005).

In addition to the individual-context relationship, mutually beneficial individual–individual relations serve as a central component to the relational developmental systems metamodel (Overton, 2015). Across various contexts, relationships with supportive and caring adults and peers - which include romantic partners, as well adult figures who support young people's romantic lives - are considered one of the most important assets in the promotion of high levels of positive youth development (PYD) and low levels of risk behaviors (Bowers et al., 2011; Bowers et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2018).

Relational Theories of Development

The following pages include a brief overview of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, as well as its criticisms, which led to the creation of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) - an alternative theory of development reflecting the relational experiences of women and other devalued cultural groups. Extending upon the brief explanation in the introduction, further justification for RCT as the chosen theoretical framework for the dissertation is provided here and in the following chapter 3.

Psychosocial Adolescent Development

Erikson's theory of lifespan psychosocial development is well known in nearly all sub-disciplines of psychological science. A Neo-Freudian thinker, he proposes that individuals pass through a series of stages, during which each person faces a developmental conflict to be resolved. Overcoming these conflicts are viewed as critical to the achievement of skills and qualities that foster personal growth and psychological wellbeing throughout the lifespan (Erikson, 1963, 1968).

Between the ages of 12 and 18 years, Erikson theorized that adolescence is centered on the conflict of *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, in which the formation of a conscious sense of self developed through social interaction becomes the focus of development. During this time of life, external forces, such as peers and popular culture, play a role in shaping and forming an identity. Those who do not end up successfully forming an identity may face role confusion - uncertainty about who they are, what they like, and what they aspire to. However, those who can resolve the crisis and commit to a particular identity would, in Erikson's view, attain identity achievement and move forward toward the subsequent stage of development, *Intimacy vs. Isolation*, of which the central tasks are geared toward the formation of lasting relationships (Erikson, 1963, 1968). Thus, in Erikson's view, psychosocial identity is the critical achievement of adolescence, and its resolution supports intimacy in relationships throughout adulthood (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

Criticisms

Despite its notable popularity and influence, Erikson's theory of identity development has been criticized on the grounds that it is more descriptive of male than female development. An account by Zelvin (1999) underscores the critical view of traditional psychosocial development theory in relation to gender, highlighting the limits of its application to women: "Normative men

thus become the model for emotional health, while women inevitably fall short. If a woman displays a degree of autonomy equivalent to males, she is considered unfeminine and psychologically abnormal" (p. 11). Others have argued that Erikson's more serious weakness lies in its emphasis on the individuated, socially connected self at the expense of processes of interpersonal attachment that are essential to the development of both males and females (Franz & White, 2006).

Relational Cultural Theory

Originated by feminist scholars at the Wellesley College Stone Center, RCT emerged from the notion that traditional models of human development emphasizing individuation, separation and autonomy do not accurately address the relational experiences of women and persons in other devalued cultural groups (Jordan, 2008; West, 2005). When held up against the separate-self standards of independence and autonomy that are often considered primary indicators of successful development, women and others are frequently judged as deficient or inadequate (e.g., perceptions of women being too needy, too emotional, too dependent) (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). In contrast, RCT suggests that women (and increasingly, all people) grow through and toward connections with others (Jordan, 2008).

RCT proposes that individuals need relationships throughout life and that it is through building good connections that a sense of well-being and safety is achieved (Jordan, 2008). These types of positive and generative relationships are referred to by RCT theorists as "growth-fostering relationships." Jean Baker Miller, whose early work is considered the foundation of modern day RCT, conceptualized growth-fostering relationships as including and generating "five good things": a sense of zest, clarity about oneself and others, a sense of personal worth, the capacity to be creative and productive, and the desire for more connection (Miller & Stiver,

1998). In turn, four central growth-fostering qualities of relationships have been identified within RCT literature, including: *mutual engagement* (as defined by perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship); *authenticity* (the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship); *empowerment/zest* (the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action); and *the ability to deal with difference or conflict* (the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling) (Liang et al., 2002b).

Furthermore, RCT holds that the context of relational development across the lifespan is inextricably linked to individuals' racial/cultural/social identities. Accordingly, the theory emphasizes an awareness and knowledge of the ways in which contextual and sociocultural factors (such as oppression, marginalization, and various forms of social injustice) lead to negative outcomes among persons from marginalized or devalued communities - and impede individuals' ability to create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008). In doing so, the RCT perspective makes cultural power dynamics explicit and challenges the myth of meritocracy in which those who "fail" are personally accountable and those that thrive are seen as accomplished, hardworking or sometimes heroic. In lieu of the over-personalization of problems characteristic of traditional psychology, RCT examines contextual factors and social conditions that influence relational development (Jordan, 2008). As such, RCT was used as a guiding framework through which I conceptualized and analyzed the presence, nature, quality, and influence of love mentoring relationships among my sample of college women.

The Triangular Theory of Love

Recently, an article published by *The Harvard Gazette* regarding the scientific inquiry of love stated that "when it comes to thinking deeply about love, poets, philosophers, and even high school boys gazing dreamily at girls two rows over have a significant head start on science" (Powell, 2018). Given the enduring primacy of love in the hearts and minds of adolescents, research on the topic within developmental science is surprisingly minimal. However, some social and behavioral scientists have been studying the concept of love for decades and have proposed taxonomies that aim to specify types and/or varieties of love. These include but are not limited to: a dichotomy of love as compassionate versus passionate (Hatfield & Walster, 1978); a typology of love as a variety of colors (styles) ranging from *eros* (passionate love) to *ludus* (playful love) to *storge* (love as an extension of friendship) (Lee, 1973); and a model and measurement of love that includes attachment, caring and intimacy - theoretically distinguishing loving from liking (Rubin, 1970).

One of the most notable conceptualizations of love is credited to psychologist Robert Sternberg. Sternberg (e.g., 1986, 1988) theorized love in terms of three fundamental components that form the vertices of a triangle: intimacy, passion, and commitment. *Intimacy* refers to the emotional experience of closeness and connectedness, including those feelings that give rise, eventually, to the experience of warmth in loving relationships. *Passion* consists of the drives that are involved in romantic and physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships. And finally, the component of *Commitment* represents both the decision to love another in the short-term, and the actions taken to ensure the maintenance of that love in the long-term - though these two aspects of commitment (decision and maintenance) do not necessarily go together in every relationship. Additionally, Sternberg notes that intimacy, passion,

and commitment can be understood to be derived primarily from different types of psychological processes: intimacy representing the affective dimension, passion mapping onto motivational processes, and commitment pertaining to largely, though not exclusively cognitive decision-making.

According to Sternberg, the three components of love differ with respect to a number of their properties, such as stability and conscious control. For example, the intimacy and commitment components appear to be relatively stable in close relationships, whereas passion is understood to be relatively unstable and unpredictable in its coming and going. Furthermore, while an individual can control to some extent feelings of intimacy, and to a large extent the decision to begin or maintain a commitment in a relationship, they may have very little control over the passion experienced in response to another. Conversely, while one is usually quite aware and conscious of the passion component, awareness of the intimacy and commitment can be less clear, such as vague feelings of warmth or connection that are difficult to label or uncertainty around a level of commitment to a relationship until people or events intervene to challenge that commitment (Sternberg, 1986).

When considered in combination, the three distinct components of the triangular theory of love generate eight possible types of love that may manifest in romantic relationships. These 8 types of love are: *nonlove* - the absence of all three components; *liking* - the intimacy component only; *infatuated love* or "love at first sight" - the passion component only; *empty love* - the commitment component only; *romantic love* - a combination of intimacy and passion; *companionate love* - a combination of intimacy and commitment; *fatuous love* - a combination of passion and commitment; and finally *consummate love* - a complete love marked by the full combination of all three components. Regarding consummate love in particular, Sternberg notes

that it is a kind of love toward which many strive in romantic relationships. However, for consummate love to thrive in these types of partnerships, more intentionality and persistence may be required. He writes that "attaining consummate love can be analogous in at least one respect to meeting one's target in a weight-reduction program: Reaching the goal is often easier than maintaining it. The attainment of consummate love is no guarantee that it will last" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 124).

Adolescence is considered to be the stage of life in which romantic love, as defined by Sternberg, first develops (Collins, 2003). Despite this, little is known about the perceptions of love during adolescence and the years that follow. Sumter and colleagues (2013) conducted what appears to be the first and only study on lifespan developmental differences in perceptions of love among 12- to 88-year-olds. More specifically, they compared perceptions of love in a sample of Dutch males and females across six developmental periods (early, middle, and late adolescence, and young, middle, and late adulthood) utilizing Sternberg's triangular theory of love as a framework. The study employed the Triangular Love Scale, which assessed all three components of love across the lifespan (Sternberg, 1997; Sumter et al., 2013).

Overall, the authors found that all components of love became more prominent from adolescence (12-17 years) to young adulthood (18-30 years). More specifically, young adults reported the highest levels of passion and early adolescents (12-13 years) reported the lowest levels of passion. Consistent with previous studies, the results indicated that passionate and erotic love diminish in later stages of life, however passion was still present at moderate to high levels in older adults' (30+ years) romantic relationships. Similar to the findings on passion, middle and late adults reported slightly less intimacy than young adults. However, age differences in intimacy

were particularly pronounced during adolescence, which is in line with existing literature on intimacy-related constructs in the context of romantic relationships (e.g., Seiffge-Krenke, 2003).

These findings can be understood in the light of adolescent psychosocial development: whereas the utility and practicality of romantic relationships (e.g., spending time and doing things with a partner) is paramount in early adolescence, for older teens a relationship is valuable because of the sense of personal connection it derives. In other words, for late adolescents the focus of romantic relationships shifts from what a partner can do for them to what a partner means to them; and these changes are likely to foster greater intimacy (Sumter et al., 2013).

Regarding commitment, Sumter and colleagues found that this third vertex of the triangle became the primary component within adults' conceptions of love. Late adolescents reported higher levels of commitment than early adolescents and young adults reported even higher levels of commitment than late adolescents. However, across adolescents, mean levels of commitment were high, supporting the idea that adolescents commit themselves to romantic relationships to a degree that is often unappreciated by adults (Diamond, et al., 1999).

Adolescent Romantic Development

This section of the review is rooted in theory and research on adolescent romantic development. Literature regarding popular myths about adolescent romantic development, romantic stage theories, group differences, and the complex trajectories that characterize young people's romantic lives are presented.

Popular Myths of Adolescent Romance

Collins (2003) states that research on adolescent romantic relationships has been impeded by erroneous assumptions that such relationships are trivial and transitory, that they provide little information beyond other more accessible social systems (e.g., parent-child or peer relationships),

and that their impact is only worthy of study because they forecast maladaptation. In challenging these "myths," Collins makes a number of empirically supported arguments that support the distinctive significance of these types of bonds.

First, Collins argues, adolescent romantic relationships are far more stable than commonly thought. In fact, they have been shown to resemble adult relationships with respect to various factors such as commitment, communication, companionship, passion, and relationship satisfaction (Levesque, 1993). And even when such relationships are relatively transitory, evidence has implied that they are significant to adolescent functioning and longer-term outcomes in both positive and negative directions (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009). For example, while the field has established a well-known link between participation in romantic relationships and depression, romantic relationships have also been shown to have positive impacts on psychosocial development during adolescence, including positive associations between: participation in a romantic relationship and romantic competence - which emerges by late adolescence to be a reliable component of general competence (Masten et al.,1995); beginning a long (over one year) and stable relationship and self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017); and self-concept clarity and romantic relationship involvement, functioning, and maintenance (McIntyre et al., 2014).

The next myth Collins (2003) identifies and tackles is the frequent assumption that adolescent romantic relationships merely reflect the influence of other, more accessible social systems, such as parent-child and peer relationships. Fueling this assumption is the fact that interpersonal correlates of romantic relationships are well established in the literature (e.g., parent-child relationships significantly predicting the stability and quality of adolescent and early adult relationships) (Collins, 2003). This perspective is echoed by Furman & Rose (2015) who propose a unified relational perspective for conceptualizing all dyadic peer relationships in

adolescents - including both friendships and romantic relationships - as sharing common features that should be studied as linked phenomena. The interchangeability of friends and romantic partners during adolescence only strengthens the argument that each relational phenomenon should be studied in light of the other: "adolescents consider their romantic partner to be friends; many romantic partners were once friends, and, less commonly, some friends were once romantic partners" (Furman & Rose, 2015, p. 6). However, Collins maintains that romantic relationships are distinctive from the contexts created by family, work (or school), and even friendships - and therefore can contribute additional significant variance in predicting adolescent outcomes making them anything but developmentally redundant (Collins, 2003).

Finally, Collins attempts to debunk the common belief that romantic experiences warrant attention only because they forecast maladaptation. He suggests that contemporary findings reveal that focusing only on problem outcomes distorts the picture of romantic relationships as a feature of adolescent development, given that positive correlates, as well as negative ones - as well as mediators and moderators - are now well documented. Collins cites social historian John Modell's hypothesis for the over-emphasis on problems associated with adolescent romantic relationships as being an attitudinal vestige from outdated cultural conditions in which dating, marriage and parenthood were typically linked, occurring in the second decade of life and soon thereafter. The unlinking of these life events - particularly sexual activity and marriage - exacerbated fears that these changing romantic patterns threatened the status quo and endangered adolescents (Modell, 1989). However, now that a succession of premarital romantic relationships is the norm in the U.S. and many Western cultures, examining both the developmental advantages of these experiences, as well as their detrimental effects, is critically important (Collins, 2003).

Romantic Stage Theories

Various theories of romantic development have accounted for the progression of romantic experiences of adolescence through a phase-based approach (e.g., Brown, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Connolly et al., 1999). Each makes a distinct contribution to the field's understanding of adolescent development, including the intimacy provisions of romantic couples (Furman & Wehner, 1994), peer status ramifications of partner choice (Brown, 1999), and the developmental functions of the peer context (Connolly et al., 1999). However, the similarities of these theories may outweigh their differences. Each theory connects romantic development to family and peer processes, catalyzes the role played by pubertal maturation and sexual need fulfillment, and incorporates potential developmental motivators of romantic relationships - such as intimacy, attachment, sexuality, identity and autonomy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). The ultimate consistency among these three theorists is that they all conceptualize romantic relationships within a series of developmental stages that progressively move the adolescent along a continuum from nascent romantic longings and exchanges to dyadic relationships similar to those of adults in their emotional maturity (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

Capitalizing on the commonalities among these stage theories, Connolly & McIssac (2009) articulate three phases of adolescent romantic development. In the first stage, triggered by pubertal maturation, the early adolescent years provide an entry into romantic relationships. The emergence of mixed-gender groups gently advances romantic development as both genders move into social situations in which romantic attractions are possible but not obligatory. In the second phase, which constitutes the ages of 14-16 years, casual dating and "dating in groups" become increasingly commonplace. This second phase paves the way for the third and final stage: the formation of dyadic involvement in late adolescence. Romantic relationships during this time can

be rooted in strong emotional bonds, often lasting a year or more, which requires involved adolescents to balance the developmental tasks of intimacy and autonomy in new ways (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). This progression from less committed romantic relationships to a single, committed "adult-like" intimate relationship has been considered not only "normal" adolescent behavior, but a critical developmental task that marks one's entry into adulthood[1] (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007).

Group Differences

Romantic stage theories contribute a great deal to the understanding of the pathways that characterize adolescents' romantic lives. However, literature highlighting group differences, such as gender and sexual orientation, are also critically important to this understanding.

Gender

According to Connolly & McIsaac (2009), the trajectories of adolescent romantic experiences throughout the course of adolescence do not differ significantly on the basis of gender. They maintain that this gender similarity speaks to the strength of the romantic staging models, which at their core presuppose that the genders come together in the same developmental space to jointly embark on romantic experiences (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). However, they acknowledge that that while the romantic trajectories of young men and women may be similar, the roles adopted at different stages within the developmental trajectory may be qualitatively different due to gender norms - the collective and often unequal expectations about how women and men should behave, feel, think and interact in a given society (Moreau et al., 2019). In the romantic domain, stereotypical gender norms depicting boys as romantically/sexually active and

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[1] It is important to note that traditional involvement in committed romantic relationships should not be taken as a sole indicator of romantic development because, irrespective of romantic relationship status, adolescents are known to be preoccupied with romantic concerns (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

dominant, and girls as innocent with less romantic agency have been shown to prevail even in early adolescence, across various cultural settings (De Meyer et al., 2017).

According to social role theory, the structure of societal gender roles evokes a phenomenon known as the sexual double standard, in which sexually active men are rewarded for adhering to their sexually agentic role, whereas sexually active women are punished for violating their sexually passive role (Zaikman et al., 2016). While the majority of research on the sexual double standard has focused on late adolescents and adults, recent literature has indicated that even before young people engage in sexual activity, they internalize different "social rules" about acceptable heterosexual romantic engagement for boys versus girls (Moreau et al., 2019).

Sexual Orientation

As noted, contemporary stage theories of adolescent romantic development each underscore the peer group as a supportive context through which young people work to develop romantic relationships. However, these theories operate under an assumption of heterosexuality that may not accurately reflect the experience of LGBTQ adolescents. Adolescent sexual minorities may be forced to establish meaningful interpersonal, sexual, and romantic relationships independent of peer support, as heterosexual peer groups discourage and/or disapprove of homosexual relationships (Connolly et al., 1999). Thus, many LGBTQ adolescents may be forced to either abstain from romantic relationships or engage in alternative relationships (e.g., same-sex intimate friendships, exclusively sexual same-sex relationships, or heterosexual dating) in place of romantic relationships (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009). Additionally, the stigma surrounding romantic relationships with same-sex partners and the difficulty of identifying other youth with same-sex romantic interest contribute to adolescent sexual minorities being less likely to have any

type of romantic relationship experience during their middle and high school years compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Diamond & Dube, 2002).

In recent decades, research delineating the processes of sexual orientation and identity development has increasingly recognized the complexity and multidimensional nature of sexual identity development among sexual-minority individuals (Morgan, 2013). Much of this literature indicates that sexual-minority youth typically adhere to a progression of development that involves recognition of same-sex attraction during early adolescence, the original assumption of a same-sex identity label in late adolescence, and the solidification of a same-sex identity in late adolescence and/or early adulthood (Morgan, 2013). However, systematic variation in trajectories of development has been identified. Additionally, scholarship has suggested that sociohistorical forces normalizing same-sex sexuality have condensed the timing between milestones in recent years, with LGBTQ women, on average, reporting older ages of sexual identity milestones as compared to sexual-minority men (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006).

Complex Trajectories of Romantic Development

Further complicating previous understandings of young people's romantic development is a longer period of premarital romantic relationships than ever before. Earlier entry into romantic relationships in adolescence coupled with the rising age at first marriage means the period in which individuals date and engage in a variety of romantic experiences has lengthened to over a decade for many (Carver et al., 2003). This extended period of time allows for greater variability in young adults' romantic experiences; and studies that have attempted to uncover "normative" developmental sequences of romantic relationships beginning in adolescence and extending through young adulthood have found that there is no single typical pattern (e.g., Meier & Allen, 2009; Rauer et al., 2013). A 2013 study by Rauer and colleagues used Add-Health data to trace

developmental transitions in and out of romantic relationships in a sample of young adults (ages 18-25). The authors found varying patterns in timing, duration, and frequency of participation in romantic relationships, resulting in five romantic outcome trajectory clusters, which included: those who had steady involvement in romantic relationships with two partners over the study period (21.9%), those who had more sporadic and short-term involvement with two partners over the study period (12.5%), those who had the fewest partners and the least romantic involvement or had yet to be involved in a relationship (28.4%), those who had frequent and continuous involvement in short-term relationships (16.4%), and finally, those who had a single romantic relationship partner over the entire study period (20.7%). In summary, extraordinary variability in young adult romantic experiences, a trend illustrated quite pointedly by these five unique romantic profiles, suggests that previous understandings of what constitutes "normative" behavior in young adults' romantic relationships may require reconsideration and revision (Rauer et al., 2013).

The study by Rauer and colleagues provides important insight into the multiple and varied pathways that characterize the romantic lives of young adults. It is particularly important to examine these findings in light of the sample used in this longitudinal study, as participants were recruited in Kindergarten. Data on educational completion by age 25 (the age of participants in the last wave of the study analyzed), provides a small window into the varied contexts participants in which participants had spent time during some of their early adult years: 14% of the sample had not graduated from high school, 19% were high school graduates, 32% had some college, and 35% had graduated from college (Rauer et al., 2013). The findings should be understood in light of the diverse experiences and contexts the participants encountered in their early adulthood. In particular, that some participants had attended college is an important footnote

to these findings, as the college context provides particular freedoms and constraints that may govern common trajectories of romantic relationships in distinct ways. The subsequent section of the literature review will explore the romantic relationships and experiences within the college context.

<div align="center">**Romantic Experiences in the College Context**</div>

This section of the review shifts the focus from the developmental significance of romantic experiences in the lives of adolescents to research that specifically pertains to the romantic lives of undergraduate college students. This includes the well documented phenomenon of hooking up, as well as alternative romantic partnering patterns. Pursuant to the focus of the current study, findings of gender differences are noted when relevant.

Hooking Up

Hookups are generally understood as casual sexual encounters - ranging from making out to intercourse - between partners who are not in a romantic relationship and do not expect commitment (Collins et al., 2009; Fielder et al., 2014). Hookups have become culturally normative (Garcia et al., 2012), and their prevalence on college campuses is why the term "hookup culture" has become a frequently cited phrase used to describe a perceived reprioritization of casual sexual encounters over more traditional forms of courting and romantic relationships. While a preoccupation with hookup behavior has dominated the conversation-academic and otherwise - regarding romantic and sexual relationships within the college context, there is not complete consensus regarding the predominance of hooking up. Recent research suggests that the percentage of North American college students who have had some sort of hookup experience is somewhere in the range of 60% to 80% (Garcia et al., 2012).

Interestingly, research has indicated that college students often overestimate the prevalence and acceptance of hooking up on college campuses (Weissbourd et al., 2017). In a study by Lambert and colleagues (2003), the authors found that college students rated their peers as being more comfortable engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors while hooking up than they rated themselves. Additionally, both genders overestimated the other gender's comfort with hookup behaviors. These perceptions matter, as there are consequences to this "pluralistic ignorance" about hooking up on college campuses (Lambert et al., 2003). One such notable consequence is that this overestimation can create perceptions of limited alternatives to hooking up (e.g., sex within committed relationships), thus shifting the opinions of the costs or rewards associated with hooking up. In other words, believing that most of one's peers are comfortable with hookup behavior might decrease one's perceived costs of engaging in a hook up (e.g., being judged), while also leading individuals to believe that alternatives, such as committed relationships, are less available and/or popular on college campuses than they are in reality (Anders et al., 2019).

Evidence from recent literature - data from 22 colleges across 12,068 hookup encounters - suggests that almost two-thirds of hookups among heterosexual college students were initiated through institutional settings, such as bars and parties (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015). The same study also found important gender differences in the contexts for initiation, with men more likely to meet in dormitory settings versus women who most commonly reported utilizing friend recommendations and common interest groups to identify partners. However, meeting a potential hookup partner in person is not the only option in today's college environment, in which individuals can meet hookup partners through online dating apps. In a qualitative study of heterosexual undergraduate students, Hanson (2020) found that many dating app users see the

apps as a 'game.' However, over time students came to define dating apps as more convenient than in-person partner identification. Importantly, the study noted gender-specific concerns around the safety of dating apps, with men viewing dating apps as fun albeit superficial, and women describing them as potentially dangerous (Hanson, 2020).

The Influence of Hooking Up

The influence of hooking up in college has been well examined. Although the negative consequences of hooking up constitute a far more prominent narrative in popular culture, studies have found support for a host of negative and positive outcomes associated with hookup behavior (Napper et al., 2016).

Negative Outcomes. First, hooking up has been associated with a number of health risks (Napper et al., 2016). High-risk sexual activities, including unprotected sex and sex under the influence of alcohol, are common threads in students' self-reports of their hooking up experiences (Holman & Sillars, 2012). These behaviors are likely contributors to research findings which suggest that engaging in more hookups is associated with a greater likelihood of sexually transmitted infections (Fielder et al., 2014).

In addition to physical health risks, hookup behaviors have been associated with negative emotional consequences. In a recent study, Napper and colleagues (2016) explored relationships among hookup behavior, psychological distress, and a broad range of negative effects of hooking up in a mixed-gender sample of college students. The authors found that particular behaviors - such as engaging in unprotected sex and having more hookup partners - were associated with greater negative experiences of hooking up (e.g., feeling taken advantage of as a result of a hookup, believing that a hookup negatively impacted the relationship with that partner). They also found that while males reported more frequent hookups, there were no gender differences in the

negative impacts of hooking up. Additionally, negative effects were positively associated with psychological distress (Napper et al., 2016).

Sexual regret is a commonly cited negative emotional response to hookup behavior - and can be accompanied by feelings of embarrassment and loss of self-respect (Fisher et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2012). However, the sources of this regret can differ for men and women: women's regret is more likely to be closely related to feelings of shame or being used, and males are more likely to report regret over choice of sexual partner and partner unattractiveness (Fisher et al., 2012). Additionally, research has shown that females appear to experience more sexual regret than males following a hookup (Fisher et al., 2012).

College students' motivations for hooking up have also been shown to moderate the experienced outcomes of hookups. Using a framework of self-determination theory, Vrangalova (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of undergraduate students to explore relationships between casual sex and indicators of wellbeing. Results of the study indicated that when people engage in casual sex for internal autonomous reasons (i.e., because they wanted to) rather than external non-autonomous reasons (i.e., as a result of social pressure, external contingencies of control, or lack of intentionality) they are much less likely to experience negative outcomes associated with casual sex, such as low self-esteem, depression and anxiety (Vrangalova, 2015).

Critical to the conversation and literature on hookup culture is the acknowledgement of its intersections with unwanted and/or non-consensual sexual experiences. In a study by Lewis and colleagues (2012), the authors found that 7.6% of a random sample of undergraduate participants indicated that their most recent hookup was an experience they did not want to have or to which they were unable to give consent. Relatedly, in a study of 178 college students, participants noted

that most of their unwanted sex occurred in the context of hookups (77.8%) versus other contexts (e.g., a date, ongoing relationship) (Flack et al., 2007).

Consistently, data has shown that sexual violence on college campuses disproportionately affects women. According to a report prepared on behalf for the Association of American Universities, recent survey data gathered across 33 institutions of higher education found that among undergraduate students, 26.4% of women (vs. 6.8% of men) experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (Cantor et al., 2020).

Positive Outcomes. In recent years, research has begun to explore the positive outcomes of hookups. This perspective considers hooking up to be an adaptive behavior that can yield practical benefits (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). One such benefit is that hookups can help college students clarify their feelings towards a partner and/or the progression of a relationship (Shepardson et al., 2016). This is significant because research has demonstrated that not only do young people seek traditional committed relationships, they have intentions of using hookups as pathways into these types of partnerships, even if their expectations of this progression are very low (England et al., 2008; Garcia & Reiber, 2008). In this way, a hookup may serve as a "trial run" for a more committed relationship and may be one way to initiate the transition to dating (Shepardson et al., 2016).

In a study that explored the benefits of hooking up among first-year college women, 71% of participants identified at least one benefit; the most common of which were sexual satisfaction, general positive emotions, increased confidence, and clarification of feelings (Shepardson et al., 2016). An open-response survey from the same study suggested that participants benefited from a short-term interpersonal connection: some participants indicated that feeling close to "someone" was important to them, suggesting that feelings of intimacy resulting from a hookup encounter -

more so than the involvement of a particular partner - was a benefit of the experience. And if educational and career goals prevent some women from wanting to invest time and energy in a relationship during their college years, hookups may be used to meet their needs for social connection and relational intimacy (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Shepardson et al., 2016).

Finally, hookup culture may provide opportunities to practice sexuality skills. Arbeit (2014) proposed a skills-based model of adolescent sexuality development predicated on the belief that young people can both do well for themselves (e.g., experience their own sexuality with pleasure) and be good towards others (e.g., treat other people with respect). The model has three fundamental components: sexual selfhood, which includes an awareness of personal desires, adherence to a set of personal ethics, and grappling with identity development; sexual negotiation, which includes communicating about consent and protection and navigating sexual pleasure; and sexual empowerment, which includes setting boundaries, using coping skills, and analyzing the messages one receives in the context of the sexual relationship (Arbeit, 2014). While these skills may also be nurtured in the context of committed romantic relationships among sexually active partners; it is possible that more frequent sexual experiences with varied partners could provide a uniquely fertile ground for practicing these skills.

Hookup Culture & the LGBTQ Experience

It is important to note that until very recently, most research on hookup culture has excluded or overlooked the experiences of LGBTQ students. Most scholarship on hooking up has focused on white, heterosexual college students, largely due to sampling constraints, leaving a critical gap in knowledge about LGBTQ youth and how they navigate hooking up (Watson et al., 2017). One significant finding that has emerged from literature focused on the relational experiences of LGBTQ college students is the challenge of locating potential romantic partners

(Mustanski et al., 2011). Although sexual stigma against LGBTQ individuals has been dissipating slowly in North America in recent years, continued marginalization and the prevalence of closeted identities inhibits the formation of friendships and sexual partners for many LGBTQ young people (Murchison et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2017). As a response to these challenges, LGBTQ individuals utilize the Internet and online spaces to make initial contact with potential hookups (Mustanski et al., 2011, Watson et al., 2017). While contemporary advances in technology have changed the way individuals of all sexual orientations can connect, research by Kuperberg and Padgett (2015) showed that students with same-sex partners were more likely to meet online than their heterosexual counterparts.

Alternative Romantic Partnering Patterns

In recent decades, the popular narrative that hookup culture dominates college campuses has furthered the belief that traditional forms of dating have decreased, if not disappeared, among today's undergraduates. This idea is partially supported in the literature. For example, in one study of undergraduate students, both men and women had nearly double the number of hookups compared to first dates (Bradshaw et al., 2010). However, this quantitative comparison of number of hookups to number of first dates may paint an incomplete picture of college students' romantic lives. In a study of college student romantic partnering patterns, Kuperberg & Padgett (2015) found that while students do have more hookup partners than dating partners, they have essentially equal rates of participation in these types of partnering, with 62.19% of undergraduates reporting hooking up, 60.97% reporting having been on a traditional date, and just over half of respondents (51.26%) reported participating in a long-term relationship during their college years. Notably, since the start of college, only 8% of participants exclusively participated in hookups to

the exclusion of other partnering forms - a finding that belies media reports that declare dating has been virtually replaced by hooking up on college campuses (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015).

Prior to engaging in exclusive committed relationships, late adolescents generally prefer spending time with their possible love interests in a non-romantic way and engaging in casual communication with them (e.g., texting). Although the process of becoming a couple is still less rigidly defined than in past generations, engaging in conversation with the goal of "defining the relationship" is a more formalized and common step toward an official, committed relationship (Taylor et al., 2013). During the college years, it is possible that individuals might experience a number of committed relationships, causing breakups to be a common and frequent experience during late adolescence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Additionally, late adolescents within and outside of the college setting, have been found to experience relational reconciliations and the continuation of sexual relationship with ex-partners (Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013) - common relational patterns of instability that have been termed "relationship churning" (Halpern-Meekein et al., 2013).

In addition to proximal relationships, some undergraduates participate in long-distance relationships with partners who do not attend their institution. A qualitative study of the influence of campus organizational culture on women undergraduate's sexual relationships found that many women (across class years) in committed relationships described participation in long-distance partnerships, often with students at adjoining schools or with individuals from their hometown (Pham, 2019). For women in the study who attended an elite institution where the pressure to achieve and exceed prevailed, participants described both hookups and long-distance relationships as advantageous, allowing them to maintain their focus on academics in a highly competitive, pre-professional environment. For students who attended a beach-side state institution with a party

reputation, committed relationships were talked about as clashing with the party culture of the school, whereas hookups were described as part of the "fun" of college life (Pham, 2019). The findings by Pham (2019) challenge the notion of a monolithic sexual culture across university settings and highlight the unique organizational conditions that may influence students' romantic decision-making.

Healthy Romantic Relationships as a Developmental Asset

The establishment and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships has been shown to play an invaluable role in wellbeing throughout the college years; and because of this can be considered one of many "developmental assets"- skills, opportunities, relationships and values that promote thriving and resilience (Benson et al., 2006; Gómez-López et al., 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that being in committed dating relationships, compared to being single, may be protective to college student mental health - particularly for women. In a study of committed dating relationships and mental health among a sample of undergraduate students, involvement in a committed relationship was found to be associated with fewer depressive symptoms for college women only, but not for men (Whitton et al., 2013). While the study did not address mechanisms behind this association, it is possible that committed relationships could be more important to the self-concepts of young women than men during this period, given that women are generally socialized to value relatedness with others whereas men are taught to value maintaining individuality (Whitton et al., 2013) - a perspective that aligns with an RCT-based understanding that women grow through and toward connections with others (Jordan, 2008).

The Role of Older Adults in the Romantic Lives of College Students

For decades, close links between adolescent romantic relationships and connection with peers have been established in the literature, as young people's romantic lives unfold in a web of

relational contexts shaped by friendships (Brown, 1999; Collins, 2003; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Even for early adolescents, the familiar and comfortable context of same-gender friendships serve as a safe space in which youth can feel secure enough to discuss issues of romance, sexuality, attraction, and passion (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Further along in development, in navigating the complexities of dating and romantic relationships that arise in late adolescence, young people rely heavily on friends for support and advice, especially during the college years (Korobov & Thorne, 2006).

Clearly, considerable scholarly attention has been dedicated toward the role of peers in young people's romantic lives. However, when it comes to the developmental significance of older adults in supporting the healthy romantic functioning of adolescents, there has been comparably little research. This section of the review examines what is known about the role of supportive adults in the romantic lives of college students, with a focus on family and University contexts. However, a significant mentoring framework that has informed the conceptualization of the construct of love mentoring will be provided.

Parental Relationships during College

For many adolescents, the adjustment to college is a period marked by moving out of the home environment, rapid increases in independence, and changing dynamics in relationships with family members - particularly parents. During this transition, research has shown that college students tend to report positive changes in their relationships with parents, including a greater sense of closeness and mutuality, as well as more open communication (Lefkowicz, 2005). In 2007, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) added items to tap into 9,000 first and senior year students' reports of parental involvement, including the frequency, method, and topic of parent-student contact. Approximately 70% of students reported they communicated "very

often" with their parents throughout the academic year, mostly about personal issues, academic

performance, and family matters (Lowe & Dotterer, 2017).

The Role of Parents in Students' Romantic Lives

The above finding fits with existing literature that has indicated that adolescents may be

more inclined to approach parents about less sensitive topics (i.e., financial, educational, and

career concerns) than sex-related topics (Noller & Bagi, 1985; Riesch et al., 2000). However,

there is scant but suggestive evidence that parent-adolescent conversations about sexuality are

related to overall patterns of parent-adolescent communication, indicating that increasing

conversational openness may also apply to discussions of sex and dating (Morgan et al., 2010).

In fact, college students wish their parents would talk to them more about certain facets of

romantic relationships. Pariera & Brody (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study on

undergraduate students' beliefs about the ideal age and frequency for parents to discuss sex-

related topics, and about their perceptions of their parents' strengths and weaknesses in sexual

communication. A significant finding from this study was that the topic participants felt parents

should discuss most frequently was dating and relationships. The authors emphasize that this is an

encouraging finding given that this topic requires little specialized knowledge by parents; and that

parents should be made aware how much young people value this communication (Pariera &

Brody, 2018).

Research has established that parents can be important sources of information and support

about sexual decision-making and romantic experiences during adolescence and young adulthood

(e.g., Pariera & Brody, 2018), but this phenomenon has primarily been investigated via cross-

sectional and quantitative approaches, which can obscure and oversimplify the complexities of

young people's lived experience (Morgan et al., 2010). A notable exception is a 2010

longitudinal, mixed methods study by Morgan and colleagues that explored salient conversational changes from the first through the fourth year of college. The findings from this study situated increased engagement in sex and dating throughout the college experience in the context of increasingly routine, mutual, and disclosing conversations with parents. Over the waves of the study, the authors found that conversations shifted from hypothetical prohibitions (e.g., "don't get a girl pregnant" or "stay away from boys") and prescriptions ("use safe sex") to discussing issues in actual and ongoing relationships. Additionally, these personal disclosures were characterized by increasing reciprocity: "for example, a mother might explain why she was attracted to her husband, while the daughter would talk about her dissatisfactions with her boyfriend. Informants attributed these changes to increased equality in their relationships with their parents" and/or to specific events (e.g., abortion, breakup) that led to conversations about sexuality and dating (Morgan et al., 2010, p. 148).

In a powerful summary of their findings, the authors state that by the last year of college, nearly all 30 of the young adult participants had settled into more comfortable, open, and mutual discussions about sex and dating with their parents; and that the patterns of communication were grounded in real experience (Morgan et al., 2010). Past studies have found both parents and adolescents to be more reluctant to discuss sex and dating than other topics (Riesch et al., 2000); so, the findings by Morgan and colleagues are significant in that they support the notion that conversation about sex and dating with parents may follow the trends of general relational development of increased mutuality and disclosure during the college years and beyond (Morgan et al., 2010).

Despite the consistent pattern found by Morgan and colleagues, there was notable variability within their results: participants reported a range of gradual and abrupt shifts in their

increased comfort discussing dating with parents; the frequency and medium of conversations varied (e.g., weekly telephone conversations versus in-person conversations on school breaks); and a small number of participants did not achieve a high level of openness with parents and their relationships continued to be characterized by rigid hierarchies throughout college, rather than a growing sense of mutuality. This variability in the developmental trajectories of relationships between college students and their parents underscores the importance of taking individual and familial differences into account when studying these dyads (Morgan et al., 2010). One such difference would be cultural differences - which emerged as a source of difference in the Morgan and colleagues study. The authors reported that a few Asian American and Mexican American participants attributed their parents' discomfort with conversations about sex or restrictive messages to culturally based values and/or attitudes in which discussion about sex was a taboo topic between parent and child (Morgan et al., 2010). While the small sample did not allow for analysis based on ethnicity, these findings are consistent with other research concerning the role of ethnicity in parent–child communication about sex (Kim & Ward, 2007; Morgan et al., 2010).

Parents as Relationship Models. In addition to playing an active role as a source of support and/or conversation for their children's romantic lives, parental relationships can also serve a modeling (or anti-modeling) role in young people's lives. The small amount of scholarship on this topic has largely referenced Bandura's theory of social learning as a foundation for understanding how parents' relationships influence children's own romantic relationship experiences in adulthood (e.g., Kuo et al., 2017, Rhoades et al., 2012). Social learning theory is predicated on the idea that children learn social behavior, in part, from the modeling they observe in their caregivers' (and others') social interactions and relationships (Bandura, 1977). According to social learning theory, having a positive role model for what

romantic relationships look like may be important to developing positive relationships in early adulthood (Rhoades et al., 2012).

One study investigated relationship quality among unmarried but dating young adults ages 18 to 35. Findings revealed that those whose parents never married one another tended to report the lowest relationship quality in their own relationships (e.g., relationship adjustment, negative communication, commitment, physical aggression) compared to those with divorced or married biological parents. In addition, those with divorced parents reported lower relationship adjustment and more negative communication than those with married parents. In keeping with social learning theory, the authors cite that this latter finding may be due to increased parental conflict and less positive relational role-modeling among divorced parents (Rhoades et al., 2012).

Although prior research has revealed that children often resemble their parents in romantic relationship outcomes, the associations are modest (Stith et al., 2000), which suggests that socialization influences beyond modeling may come into play, including youth's efforts to learn from their parents' mistakes and take different courses in their own lives. This idea was explored in a longitudinal, multi-reporter study by Kuo and colleagues (2017), in which the authors assessed Mexican-origin youth's reports of their modeling of and deidentification from their mothers and fathers in the romantic relationship domain. Results indicated that marriages marked by more positive qualities (e.g., high marital satisfaction and warmth, low marital conflict) predicted higher levels of youth's self-reported modeling of their parents' relationships five years later. Conversely, when the family emotional climate was less positive, youth were more likely to report deidentification from their parents in their own romantic relationships. Importantly, this study's focus on deidentification demonstrates that youth can learn from mistakes and problems in their families and that these processes of intentional differentiation may help to explain why

some youth exhibit resilience in their own romantic relationships, despite unhealthy models of romantic relationships within their own family context (Kuo et al., 2017).

Supportive Nonparental Adults in the College Context

While the influential role of parents in scaffolding and supporting college students' romantic experiences is somewhat intuitive; the ways in which nonparental adults within the college context support the development of healthy romantic relationships is an area of study that has garnered comparatively little academic attention.

The college years require students to establish a sense of connectedness and identity in a new community while negotiating many important challenges, including establishing and maintaining meaningful friendships and romantic relationships, identifying passions and laying the groundwork for a fulfilling career, and finding ways to become contributing members of a larger community (Asher & Weeks, 2014). The physical distancing of significant family members and high school friends coupled with the prevalence of social media used as a tool for constant comparison can lead to a college transition process in which the realities of students' experiences fail to meet their expectations of how they will engage and interact within the campus community. Given these extraordinary developmental challenges, supportive nonparental adults who operate within the college context and who understand its nuances, can be highly sought out for guidance.

College as a Mentoring Environment

The term "mentor" is an overused word in contemporary culture that can describe relationships across the lifespan serving objectives both profound and superficial (Parks, 2019). In academic and educational circles, the term *natural mentor* is often used to describe nonparental adults who serve a mentoring role to youth and adolescents in their everyday lives (Rhodes et al.,

1992). In contrast to formal mentoring programs that match mentors and mentees, relationships with natural mentors arise organically and exist within the young person's social network as a source of support and guidance (Zimmerman et al., 2005). The relation between natural mentoring and positive youth outcomes is well established in the literature. A recent meta-analysis by Van Dam and colleagues (2018) examined this association across four domains: academic and vocational functioning, social-emotional development, physical health, and psychosocial problems. The findings indicated that the presence of a natural mentor was significantly associated with positive youth outcomes, with the largest effect sizes for social-emotional development and academic and vocational functioning. Importantly, natural mentorship relationship quality (relatedness, social support, and autonomy support) was found to be an important predictor of youth outcomes, as it increases the benefits from the natural mentoring relationship (Van Dam et al., 2018).

In higher education settings, natural mentors have been shown to emerge from differing roles including faculty members, student affairs educators, and employers (Parks, 2000). The ubiquity of natural mentors in the University setting has evoked an interpretation by Parks (2008) of all colleges as "mentoring environments" whether by intention or default. Parks describes mentor environments as powerful learning and social milieu in which space created by a mentor(s) provides "a context in which a new, more adequate imagination of life and work can be explored, created, and anchored in a sense of *we*" (Parks, 2019, p. 187).

A significant proportion of the literature on mentoring in higher education focuses on the relationship between faculty mentors and students. A meta-analysis by Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) indicates that students' non-classroom interactions with faculty members consistently promote student persistence and postgraduate aspirations even when other factors are taken into

account. The nature of this relation appears to be a function of the bond between student and institution that is facilitated by positive interactions with faculty members. Furthermore, qualitative research by Richard J. Light (2001) found that for many faculty members, mentoring students is an important component of the academic advising process; and that faculty mentorship of students on a one-on-one basis had a significant and positive impact on students. It has been theorized that the key difference between faculty advising and mentoring lies in the intentionality with which the faculty-student dyad engages in a relationship that is beyond a checklist of tasks and information sharing (Baker & Griffin, 2010).

Despite the substantial impact that faculty mentorship can have on undergraduates, the time constraints and reward systems do not always allow faculty to dedicate significant time to mentoring (Light, 2001, Parks, 2019). Accordingly, research has suggested that students often seek out mentors within the college context who may be more accessible or available, such as student affairs professionals. An emphasis on student psychosocial development is at the core of student affairs work, so it follows that student affairs professionals take on a variety of roles in students' lives such as advisors, counselors, and supervisors (Kuh, 2009). However, it has been argued that the polarization of the work of the faculty and the work of the student affairs professionals reifies their separation at the expense of students as whole persons (Park, 2019), requiring them to seek cognitive and affective-social-moral support in a siloed fashion.

The Role of College Mentors in Students' Romantic Lives

There is scant literature on the content of adult-student mentoring relationships in college, beyond academic and vocational topics. It seems logical that in their relationships with natural mentors, college students would seek support on a wide variety of topics - ranging from academic and career advice to guidance in the realm of social relationships - including romantic

relationships. However, to my knowledge, no studies have examined the role of nonparental adults within the college context that provide mentoring on the topics of love, sex, and romantic relationships. This is problematic, as recent literature has indicated that adolescents (18-25 years of age) want more guidance from the adults in their lives about romantic relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2017). Clearly, more research is needed to elucidate the processes of romance-related mentoring that college students may seek and receive from the parental and nonparental figures in their lives. These topics will be a focus of the present study.

A Mentoring Framework for Love Mentoring

The previous sections delineate the distinct and formative roles that parental figures and university-based mentoring relationships can play in the lives of college students. While the contexts and influence of family relationships and university or community-based mentorship are different, it is clear that relationships across contexts can play a role in supporting the healthy romantic development of college students.

However, relationships with family members have not always been included within mentoring literature. One reason that Parks' conceptualization of mentoring was influential in the development of the present study is that it views family members as significant figures that work within a college students' mentoring environment (Parks, 2019). However, Parks acknowledges that a particular challenge for parents who serve in a mentoring capacity for their child is to find the right mix of challenge and support for their evolving adolescent/young adult (Parks, 2019). This might include finding a new quality of conversation and relationship, rooted in recognition of the ways the young person changes over time (Parks, 2019). Additionally, often an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or other family member may offer a less weighted but deeply valued mentoring voice within the family circle (Parks, 2019).

Parks (2008, 2019) argues that good mentorship - especially of traditionally college-aged individuals on the cusp of adulthood - consists of a collection of qualities that come together in a special alchemy that positions the mentor to play a particularly formative role. She offers a framework for mentoring in which mentors provide five key gifts: *recognition, support, challenge, inspiration*, and *accountability*. Parks' view provides a foundation to understand how the qualities of good mentoring can be found across contexts and within a variety of formative relationships.

The first gift, recognition, refers to the capacity of a mentor to recognize the mentee - both as they are and as they could become, both their potential and their vulnerability. Support, the second gift, is a form of recognition. Support may involve the mentor serving as an advocate, a guide to resources, a source of protection and comfort, and sometimes a source of healing. Parks suggests that mentors dance an intricate two-step as they practice the art of supporting and challenging - the third gift - more or less simultaneously. In this way, good mentors provide rightly timed challenges, honoring the mentee's potential; and they almost always practice a kind of tough love. Fourth, mentors serve as an inspiring point of orientation, embody and inspire the possibility of committed and meaningful adulthood. Finally, mentors must be trustworthy in what they invite students to entertain and the ways in which they do that. Thus, mentors must be accountable - the fifth gift, both in the immediate moment and over time (Parks, 2008, 2019).

In Parks' view, all true mentoring includes the first three gifts: recognition, support and challenge. However, mentoring at its best also includes the elements of inspiration and accountability. Parks suggests that these five functions of mentoring tend to occur most significantly through the elusive quality of *presence,* whether the mentor is mindful of their role or not (Parks, 2019).

It is easy to see how these gifts of good mentoring can be applied across familial, University, and community contexts. That is to say, a parent or a faculty member, are both capable of being present to students - to truly see, support, challenge, inspire, and hold them accountable to their goals and potential. This collection of qualities has contributed significantly to my perception of what quality love mentoring may look like across contexts and within various formative relationships in a young person's life. In the following chapter, the construct of love mentoring will be explored more deeply within a detailed explanation of the study's methodology.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The following chapter provides an overview of the methodology of the dissertation study, including the context for inquiry, research questions, overall study design, participants, recruitment and data collection procedures, analytic strategy, and issues related to upholding standards of quality. Prior to delving into these methodological details, the chapter opens with background on the development and conceptual boundaries of the construct of love mentoring.

Love Mentoring: A New Construct

The dissertation offers a new and novel conceptualization of the way supportive adults may play a role in the romantic lives of young people: *love mentoring.* I define love mentoring as opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romance-related topics with someone who is older or more experienced in this domain. Love mentoring may involve the mentor figure sharing stories about their own romantic lives, offering their perspective on love, dating, or intimate relationships, or posing questions to the mentee on these topics. Likewise, it may involve the mentee sharing thoughts, beliefs, or experiences from their romantic life, listening to the mentor's stories or perspective, and/or asking questions. These are just some examples of how love mentoring may occur.

Prior to outlining the dissertation's inquiry into love mentoring, this section of the paper provides a more thorough description of my a priori understanding of what love mentoring is and what it is not - conceptual boundaries that were established through a small pilot project, deep engagement with the literature, and conversation with my dissertation advisor, committee members, and trusted colleagues.

What is Love Mentoring?

While love mentoring is not a term that has been used or explicitly investigated in the literature, that does not preclude the existence of the phenomenon. The concept of love mentoring was first generated from my own experience working as a student-facing higher education professional who frequently served as a conversation partner to students around topics related to their romantic relationships and experiences. Through my professional and academic work, I have repeatedly observed and heard about love mentoring relationships from faculty, staff, and students within University settings. In an effort to more systematically evaluate the prevalence of the construct, a pilot study was conducted in Fall 2020.

In the first phase of the pilot study, I conducted two focus groups consisting of a convenience sample of junior and senior undergraduate women. The objective of the focus groups was to concept test the idea of love mentoring. During the focus groups, topics relevant to the study were discussed by participants resulting in a refined understanding and definition of love mentoring that has been presented herein. In the second phase of the pilot study, a four-item survey was sent to recent alumni of the same university-based mentoring program from which the dissertation draws participants. Sixty students responded to the survey - a majority of whom were able to identify at least one person in their family, university, or community who served as a love mentor (LM) in their life. These results enabled me to progress with the expectation that the phenomenon of interest is present in the target population.

Conceptual Boundaries

In invoking the term "mentoring," love mentoring could be narrowly construed as a classical form of mentoring in which a non-familial individual who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience assists a younger, less knowledgeable, less

experienced person in learning the ways of life (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007) - in this case, the ways of romantic relationships. However, the definition has been crafted to encompass a wider array of dyadic processes between mentees and supportive figures in their lives. The theoretical lens of RCT contributes to the dissertation's expansive view of mentoring, in which high-quality mentor/mentee relationships reflects interdependent, mutual, authentic interactional processes (Liang et al., 2002b; Jordan, 2008), as compared to traditional models of mentoring that are conventionally one-directional and hierarchical in nature. As Parks (2019) notes, successful mentors have the capacity to work shoulder to shoulder with a young person, rather than from a place of superiority. Additionally, while a mentor generally brings a larger realm of experience or wisdom to the relationship, great mentors also learn from their mentees through a process of mutual challenge and discovery (Parks, 2019).

The type of mentoring described above is a process that takes place in the context of a mutual, ongoing relationship - and, potentially, across multiple relationships. In this way, it is possible that the landscape of love mentoring relationships will reflect research and theory on "developmental networks," which is the idea that mentoring often takes place through a diverse set of high quality relationships with supportive individuals who take an active interest in the life of the mentee and provide developmental assistance (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

These supportive individuals may be people from their school/University (e.g., professor, coach, mentor figure, retreat leader), other communities to which the young person belongs (e.g., counselor, spiritual advisor, family friend), or even in their family (e.g., parent, cousin). No matter the context, love mentoring is conceptualized as being facilitated by someone who is older and/or has more romantic experience, as opposed to same-aged friends or peers. As previously noted, friendships are known to be a relational context in which issues of romance, sexuality,

attraction, and passion are frequently discussed among adolescents (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). However, what is less clear is the ways in which young people discuss these topics with older peers and adults. Thus, to avoid conflating conversations about romance-related topics among friends with the process of love mentoring, I asked participants to identify and consider love mentoring experiences with individuals other than their same-aged friends or peers.

It is important to note that love mentoring relationships may not be the only context in which young people receive love mentoring. It is possible that a young person experiences brief and/or more distal *love mentoring moments* with individuals with whom they share a powerful but fleeting encounter (e.g., a memorable conversation about relationships with a seatmate on a flight). They might also experience a love mentoring moment with someone with whom they have an enduring relationship, but whom they do not regularly discuss issues of love, dating or intimacy (e.g., engaging in "the talk" with a parent about sex and relationships once during adolescence). While these moments may have an influence on romantic development, their short-lived duration makes them distinct from the enduring nature of a *love mentoring relationship*, in which mentor and mentee engagement regarding romance-related topics is sustained over a period of time. In order to best understand the distinctive contribution of love mentoring as a developmental asset in the lives of college students, the present study will focus on love mentoring relationships as opposed to love mentoring moments.

Context

The context for the present study is a private, selective, religiously-affiliated, residential University in New England that serves an undergraduate population of approximately 9,000

students. In 2020, the University's website reported an undergraduate student body of 53% female students, 34% students of color and 8% international students.[2]

In 2013, a committee of faculty was formed to address a concerning finding that emerged from analyses of two student surveys administered by the University's office of Institutional Research. The first survey was the CIRP Freshman Survey which is administered to incoming undergraduate students at Summer Orientation; and the second was the College Senior Survey which is completed by students in their final months as undergraduates. The finding of concern was data indicating that female students leave the University with lower self-confidence than they reported when they entered. In contrast, men generally gained self-confidence over the course of their four years, despite having, on average, lower GPAs than their female classmates. The faculty committee launched an effort (e.g., panels, focus groups, student meetings) to gain insight to the experiences of women undergraduates at the institution. The committee reported that issues pertaining to pressure to look or dress a certain way, the housing lottery, and hook-up culture were most frequently cited by students as being harmful to one's self esteem.[3]

In 2016, partially as a response to the concerning findings from the survey data and the subsequent investigative efforts, the University's Women's Center launched Journey[4] - a mentoring program for senior women at the institution. Journey matches women in their senior year with women-identifying faculty and staff members to reflect and discuss in small group settings the issues they are facing in their final year of college and help them prepare for their post-graduate transition. The program, which seeks to "challenge perceived cultural and social

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[2] Information obtained from the University website. Not cited herein to preserve anonymity of the institution and program.

[3] Information obtained from a 2013 University newspaper article, which summarizes the institutional report and cites multiple interviews with faculty committee members. Not cited herein to preserve anonymity of the institution.

[4] Journey is a pseudonym for the mentoring program.

norms at [University] that affect women's sense of self," incorporates personal narratives by adult mentors and loosely structured group conversation on topics including, but not limited to: life post-college, making difficult decisions, defining success, and navigating relationships after college.[5]

Research Questions

Through this study, I investigated college women's mentoring relationships with older or more experienced individuals who help them think, learn, or talk about romantic experiences, as well as the influence of these relationships on various aspects of their romantic lives. As previously noted, two research questions guide the study:

1. *What is the role of love mentoring relationships for senior college women enrolled in a university-based mentoring program?* Through this question, I examine the presence and nature of love mentoring in college students' lives. Lines of inquiry include: the extent to which love mentoring occurs across various contexts (e.g., family, university, community), the process and content of significant love mentoring relationships, and the relational health of these mentor-mentee relationships (as defined by RCT concepts). Finally, given that LMs are not, by definition, same-aged friends or peers, this question also addresses the role of LMs in college students' romance-related thinking, learning, and conversation, compared to friends.

2. *How do love mentoring relationships influence their: understandings of healthy romantic relationships, approach to their romantic lives, and romance-related aspirations for the future?* This second question examines how students perceive the influence of love mentoring relationships in shaping various aspects of their romantic lives. In particular,

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[5] Information obtained from the Journey website. Not cited herein to preserve anonymity of the institution and program.

this question investigates the influence of love mentoring on participants': understanding of healthy romantic relationships, approach to their romantic lives, and romance-related aspirations for the future.

Research Design

I pursued the above questions through a two-phase, mixed methods design intended to deeply explore the role that LMs play in their lives of college women. More specifically, the study followed the participant selection model of mixed methods research. A variant of the explanatory design, the participant selection model is applied when a researcher utilizes quantitative information from the first phase of a study to identify and purposefully select participants for a follow-up, in-depth, qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Thus, the second qualitative phase of data collection serves as the emphasis of the study - though data from both the survey and interviews were incorporated in the analysis.

Qualitative research is often utilized when a rich, complex and detailed understanding of an issue serves as the goal of inquiry. Creswell & Poth (2017) argue that this kind of understanding can only be established by talking directly with people and allowing individuals to tell their stories unencumbered by the researcher's expectation or perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Still, qualitative research is thought to be a situated activity that locates the researcher in the world. This means that qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning that individuals bring to them, thereby making the world "visible" through a set of interpretive practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

As noted, the study recruited exclusively from the Journey program - a program that was available to the population of interest. Conceptualized as a collective case or multicase design (Stake, 2004; 2006), a number of cases were studied jointly to investigate the phenomenon of

interest within the common context of the University and the Journey program. Thus, participants are women-identifying undergraduates in their senior year at a selective, residential University in New England.

Procedures

The Boston College IRB approved the study in accordance with the following methods for sampling and data collection.

Phase I: Survey

In the first phase of data collection, all students enrolled in the Journey program in the Spring of 2021 ($N = 88$) were recruited to complete a 23-question[6] survey soliciting information on the presence and nature of love mentoring in their family, University or other communities to which they belong. In the survey, respondents had the opportunity to identify up to three relationships with older or more experienced individuals whom they identify as a love mentor. Following this set of questions, respondents were prompted to choose among the mentoring relationships they identified and to select one mentoring relationship that has provided the most significant opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romance-related topics (i.e., the relationship in which love mentoring has been most prevalent). Once a respondent identified a most significant love mentoring relationship, they were instructed to reference that relationship as they moved through the next section of the survey that asked a series of questions about the significant love mentoring relationship. This set of questions included an 11-item scale that constitutes an adapted version of the Relational Health Indices - Mentoring (RHI-M) (Liang et al., 2002b).

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[6] One "question" in the survey was the 11-item Relational Health Indices-Mentor scale. Not all questions were required. Depending on the extent to which individuals identified love mentoring relationships, respondents answered as few as 10 or as many as 23 questions.

In a 2002 study, Liang and colleagues introduced and provided evidence of the reliability and validity of three distinct Relational Health Indices - for mentoring, peer and community relationships. This study was particularly aimed at elucidating characteristics of women undergoing a challenging transition period, such as the transition in and out of college, as the sample consisted of 850 first- and senior-year undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in the Northeast. Developed using the RCT framework, the RHI scales assess three aspects of growth-fostering connections that are thought to represent an RCT-based understanding of relational health: engagement, empowerment/zest, and authenticity (Liang et al., 2002b). As hypothesized, results suggested that each of the three types of relationships contribute to positive outcomes in women's lives, but that each aspect of relational health appeared to have differential impacts on adjustment outcomes, as well as different patterns of interrelationships across relationship types. Thus, separate indices for each relationship type proved justified (Liang et al., 2002b).

In consultation with Liang, the RHI-M was adapted for this study to reflect the content of love mentoring relationships. Examples of adapted items and the subscales they represent include: "This person gives me emotional support and encouragement regarding my romantic life" (engagement); "I feel as though I know myself better when it comes to my romantic life because of this person" (empowerment/zest); and "This person shares stories about his/her own romantic experiences in a way that enhances my life" (authenticity). The survey, including the adapted RHI-M, is located in Appendix A.

Survey Sample. Recruitment for survey respondents involved three primary efforts: First, in March of 2021, I spoke directly to all Journey program participants in the first few minutes of one of the program's virtual meetings. During this brief pitch, I described the study and requested

their participation in a survey that would take them 5- 15 minutes to complete. The next day,

Journey participants were sent an email which included a link to the Qualtrics-based survey and

all relevant participation details. One week later, a follow-up email was distributed reminding

them that the survey would remain open for one more week. The survey remained active for

exactly two weeks in total. Once closed, all students who responded who chose to enter their

email address into the survey were entered into a raffle for three $100 gift cards. Winners were

drawn at random and contacted within a week of the survey's close.

In total, 62.5% of Journey participants completed the survey ($n = 55$). All 55 survey

respondents were in the age range of 20 - 22 years of age. Additionally, all respondents identified

their gender identity (in an open-ended question) as "female" or "woman." The majority of the

sample self-identified as heterosexual/straight ($n = 51$; 92.7%). Three respondents identified as

bisexual and one respondent did not disclose their sexual orientation. The racial composition of

survey respondents was: 78% ($n = 43$) identified as white, 13% ($n = 7$) identified as Asian, 3.5%

($n = 2$) identified as Black or African American, and 3.5% ($n = 2$) identified as multiple races

(white and Black, white and Asian). One respondent left the question blank. Additionally, 14.5%

($n = 8$) of respondents identified as Spanish, Hispanic or Latino. Finally, the respondents

identified themselves with religion, accordingly: 47% ($n = 26$) identified as Roman Catholic,

14.5% ($n = 8$) identified as Protestant, 14.5% ($n = 8$) identified as Nothing in Particular, 7% ($n =$

4) identified as Agnostic, 7% ($n = 4$) identified as Atheist, 6% ($n = 3$) identified as Other (2 as

Nondenominational Christian and one as Catholic and Jewish), 2% ($n = 1$) identified as Hindu,

and 2% ($n = 1$) identified as Orthodox (e.g. Greek or Russian Orthodox).

Interview Sampling Method

While I analyzed the data from the survey in its own right to elucidate the presence and

nature of love mentoring, it was also utilized as a screening tool through which a smaller sample of interview subjects were selected for the second phase of the study. It has been suggested that qualitative research investigating shared perception, belief, or behavior among a relatively homogeneous group, a sample of twelve will likely be sufficient in most cases (Guest et al., 2006). The "magic number 12" has also been cited by other qualitative methodologists as a sufficient baseline for sample size prediction (e.g., Morrow, 2005, p. 255). Given the guidance from the literature and other logistical considerations that factored into data collection, I sought to conduct approximately 12 interviews in the second phase of the study.

There were multiple criteria used to select the 12 interview participants. These selection criteria were identified to ensure that interview subjects in the second phase of the study were able to provide rich descriptions and detailed stories of how love mentoring has played a role in their lives. According to Patton (2002), the study employs an *intensity model* of purposive sampling, in which information-rich cases manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely, but not unusually. This process is also consistent with the "exemplar" methodology - a critical approach in the study of developmental phenomena - that utilizes a sample selection technique involving the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner (Bronk, 2012).

The first criterion used to select participants for the second wave of the study was that no members of the Journey group that I personally facilitated would be invited to participate in an interview. Next, only survey respondents who were able to identify two or more love mentoring relationships in the survey were considered. Thirty-one of the 55 Journey program members fell into this category. From this group, participants were selected based on the strong relational health of their significant love mentoring relationship, operationalized as an average RHI-M score

of 4.0 or higher (which was 69% of the eligible group). The rationale behind these two criteria was that participants would be able to provide richer descriptions and detailed stories if they could speak to more than one love mentoring relationship during the interview, especially if they considered one of those relationships to be close and impactful in their life. These two factors yielded a group of 18 survey respondents as possible interview participants.

To narrow the list further, two additional factors were considered: 1) heterogeneity among participant demographic factors, such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality in the pursuit of a diverse sample; 2) heterogeneity of the type of person identified in their significant love mentoring relationship. Heterogeneity of LM type was considered so that the breadth of love mentoring relationships that were identified in the survey data would also be represented in the interview data.

In total, 14 survey respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting no more than one hour and 45 minutes. I contacted selected students via email and asked if they would like to participate in an interview. If students did not respond to the initial email request, I sent a follow-up email one week later. Thereafter, there was no additional follow-up. The 14 interview requests yielded 12 interviews (2 survey respondents did not reply to the interview invitation).

Interview Sample. All 12 interview participants were either 21 or 22 years of age. Additionally, all interview participants identified their gender identity (in an open-ended question) as "female" or "woman" and their sexual orientation as heterosexual/straight. The racial composition of interview participants was white ($N = 11$) and Black or African American ($N = 1$). Additionally, three interview participants identified as Spanish, Hispanic or Latino. Finally, the respondents identified themselves with religion, accordingly: Roman Catholic ($N = 7$), Nothing in

Particular ($N = 3$), Protestant ($N = 1$), Agnostic ($N = 1$). While heterogeneity among participant demographic factors, such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality, were desired and pursued as a lower-tier criterion for selection, ultimately the interview sample does not reflect the full breadth of diversity of survey participants. Finally, the type of significant LM identified by the 12 interview participants was evenly distributed among mothers (4 participants), other family members (4 participants), and non-family members (4 participants), reflecting broad coverage of various LM types.

Phase II: Interviews

In accordance with University research guidelines pertaining to the pandemic, I conducted interviews remotely via Zoom. The protocol for the interview was designed to probe the presence, nature, quality, and influence of love mentoring relationships. The interview protocol is located in Appendix B. Upon completion of the interview, participants received a $30 gift card as compensation for their involvement. Once transcriptions were completed, I initiated member checks, which provided interview participants the opportunity to clarify or edit their statements in the transcript. No interview participants requested changes to any of their recorded statements.

Analytic Strategy

The study's two-phase approach to data collection laid the groundwork for my recursive analytic strategy. I began preliminary analysis of the survey data as soon as it was collected (Spring 2021). As noted, survey data was tabulated and analyzed in order to select participants for the second phase of the study. Additionally, using the qualitative research software NVivo, initial coding of the open-ended responses provided by survey respondents commenced, using a provisional start list of codes generated prior to data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This list originated from the study's conceptual framework, research questions, literature review, data

generated from focus groups and the pilot survey, as well as my decade of experience working with the population of study.

Building upon the analysis that followed the first phase of data collection, initial analysis of interview transcripts took place throughout the second phase of data collection (May/June 2021). An interactive, back and forth approach between collection and analysis helped me stay close to the data, facilitating a reshaping of my perspective and small refinements to the interview protocol (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The interview data was analyzed using the thematic analysis (TA) method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While frequently misunderstood as a singular method with one set of procedures, TA has most accurately been described as a *family* of methods that retains some common characteristics but also rooted in divergent values and orientations to data (Fugard & Potts, 2020). Distinct TA approaches typically acknowledge the potential for inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) orientations to coding, capturing both semantic and latent meanings, processes of coding and theme development, and the potential for some flexibility around the theory that frames the research (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

In contrast to coding reliability approaches (e.g., Boyatzis, 1988) and codebook approaches (e.g., King & Brooks, 2018) that are centered on structured approaches to data centered around a codebook and often utilized by multiple researchers, reflexive approaches (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006) involve later theme development, with themes developed from codes, and conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept (Braun et al., 2014). Importantly, reflexive TA holds that themes cannot exist separately from the researcher. Instead, themes are considered to be generated by the researcher through data

engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process (e.g., their research values, skills, experience and training). Likewise, coding is considered a largely organic and inherently subjective process - one that requires a reflexive researcher - who strives to reflect on how their assumptions shape their coding. Through this methodological technique, codes evolve to better capture the researcher's deepening understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

My analytic strategy followed the recursive, six-phased approach to reflexive TA outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006): *familiarization* - transcription, reading and re-reading the data, noting initial ideas; *generating initial codes* - coding interesting data, collating data relevant to each code; *searching for themes* - collating codes into potential themes; *reviewing themes* - checking if themes work in relation to coded extracts and the data set as a whole, generating a thematic 'map'; *refining, defining and naming themes* - ongoing analysis to refine specifics as well as the overall story the analysis tells; and *producing the report* - writing up the analysis by selecting vivid, compelling examples and relating the analysis back to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout this iterative analytic process, continued memo writing took place to facilitate sense-making within and among cases as coding took place (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

While the goal was to conduct 12 interviews, I remained open to conducting additional interviews as necessary to achieve saturation, which was operationalized as no new codes generated by my analysis. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In the latter stages of analyzing the 12 interviews, I was very confident that I was not expanding my code list in significant ways and became confident that I had gathered data to the point of redundancy, or saturation.

Standards of Quality

Assessment of quality in qualitative research has taken a number of names and forms through recent decades. In their seminal contribution to the field, Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified the overall goal of *trustworthiness*, consisting of "parallel criteria" including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, understood as respectively equivalent to conventional quantitative criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Morse, 2015). The term *rigor* has also been endorsed by scholars (e.g., Morse, 2015), and conversely, criticized for implying an inflexibility, uncompromising harshness, and rigidity that threatens to take researchers too far from the artfulness, versatility, and sensitivity to meaning and context that mark qualitative works of distinction (Sandelowski, 1993).

Many consider criteria for quality as linked to the paradigmatic underpinnings of the discipline in which the study takes place (Morrow, 2005). While the present study borrows from the postpositivist paradigm in that it is technically mixed methods, the emphasis of the study is on the qualitative phase of research. In approaching data collection and analysis of interviews, the dissertation adopts a primarily constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, characterized by an understanding that reality is constructed due to local, individual and specific influences and contexts, and thus parallel realities might exist. Put simply, constructivism focuses on subjective interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This simultaneous mixing of paradigms within one study has been shown to be common, particularly in qualitative psychological research (Kovács et al., 2019; Ponterotto, 2005).

Despite myriad terminology and conceptualizations of quality in qualitative research within and across paradigms, many of the suggestions and strategies advocated for under these frameworks are the same. As both postpositivist and constructivist paradigms have been

associated with the aforementioned parallel criteria (Morrow, 2005), this section of the
dissertation will review strategies for trustworthiness in qualitative data and interpretation.

Indicators of Trustworthiness

Credibility (vs. internal validity) refers to the idea of internal consistency in qualitative
research. Across qualitative studies the use of peer debriefers, prolonged engagement with
participants, inclusion of "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973), and researcher reflexivity, are just
some of the methods qualitative researchers employ to demonstrate credibility (Morrow, 2005). I
pursued credibility in a number of ways. First, while I served as the sole investigator and analyst
in the study, I sought to engage colleagues in critical and sustained discussion throughout the data
collection and analytic process (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I was in regular contact with my
dissertation chair to discuss my progress (e.g., issues that arise during data collection, early theme
generation). I also engaged in conversation and reflection with other members of my dissertation
committee and with trusted colleagues who have deep experience with the themes of the study.
While prolonged engagement is not considered a necessary component of interview research
(Morse, 2015), I pursued detailed, rich descriptions, not only of participants' experiences of
phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur (Morrow, 2005).

Transferability (vs. external validity) is understood as the extent to which findings are
generalizable (Morrow, 2005). In qualitative inquiry, the application of the findings to another
situation or population is achieved through decontextualization and abstraction of emerging
concepts and theory (Morse, 2015), and aided by information describing the researcher as the
instrument of analysis (e.g., researcher reflexivity) (Morrow, 2005). Given the usually small
sample sizes and absence of statistical analyses, qualitative data cannot be said to be generalizable
in the conventional sense (Morrow, 2005). Thus, the dissertation's findings are presented in light

of the limits of generalizability.

The parallel criterion *dependability* (vs. reliability) refers to the consistency of method across time, researchers, and analysis techniques (Morrow, 2005). Thus, the process through which findings are derived should be explicit and repeatable as much as possible. In the present study, this was pursued through the keeping of an audit trail in which a host of relevant information will be housed, including: detailed chronology of research activities and processes; influences on the data collection and analysis; emerging codes and themes; and analytic memos (Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2015). Additionally, triangulation strategies, such as the study's combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, are also considered useful in achieving dependability (Morse, 2015), as multiple methods generate different types of data allowing for cross-data validity checks (Patton, 1999). Finally, triangulation and audit trails are also a helpful strategy to demonstrate *confirmability* (vs. objectivity), a parallel criterion based on the acknowledgment that research is never objective, but that "findings should represent, as far as is (humanly) possible, the situation being researched rather than the beliefs, pet theories, or biases of the researcher" (Gasson, 2004, p. 93). Therefore, an awareness on the part of the researcher of her own values, interests, and biases is a key component of producing confirmable qualitative research.

Reflexivity

Each of the parallel criteria described above invoke the important role the researcher plays in the process of qualitative inquiry, although different paradigms espouse distinct perspectives on this inherent subjectivity. Interpretivist/constructivist paradigms embrace the positioning of the researcher as "co-constructor of meaning, as integral to the interpretation of the data, and as unapologetically political in purpose" (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). In practicing an active form of

self-reflection known as *reflexivity*, qualitative researchers attempt to address issues of subjectivity through self-awareness (1) of their role in the social context, affecting the phenomena under observation; and (2) as someone who applies biases prejudices, cognitive filtering and bounded rationality to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Gasson, 2004).

My identity as a white, socioeconomically privileged, cisgender, heterosexual, married woman influences the way I think about and carry out the present study. With the exception of my marital status, these identities align with the dominant/majority identities within the undergraduate University community that serves as a context for my research. These identities, and the privileges they confer, have shaped the way I have experienced some of the constructs I explore in the study - such as love, dating, hooking up, and mentorship. In particular, I strived to acknowledge biases based on traditional heterosexual experiences of romantic relationships in and after college in the way I asked questions and analyzed results. Through memo-writing and consultation with trusted colleagues and my dissertation committee, I held myself accountable for understanding the influence of my identities on the research process.

Additionally, throughout the study, I remained attentive to the fact that the study's participants viewed me not only as a graduate student/researcher, but also as a member of the University's administration and as a mentor within the Journey program during the period of data collection. While I may view these roles as beneficial in helping me to understand the larger context of participants' experience, this "insider" perspective can often pose a challenge for researchers who are familiar with the culture being investigated or the phenomenon of inquiry, as it can cause a failure to see the participants as the authority on the phenomena of interest (Morrow, 2005). In order to fairly represent participants' realities, including, within the data gathering process, I employed a number of strategies, including asking for clarification and

delving deeply into the meanings of statements, taking the stance of "naïve inquirer" (Morrow, 2005). Finally, while I did not know all of the study participants personally (I only met regularly with 6 students in my small group and did not interview any of these students for the study), they may feel as if they "know" me to some extent, as I shared a brief personal narrative with the entire program that focused on the theme of romantic relationships. Their perspective and knowledge of me - professionally and personally - was a subject of continued reflection throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This dissertation explored the following research questions: *(1) What is the role of love mentoring relationships for college senior women enrolled in a university-based mentoring program? (2) How do love mentoring relationships influence their: understandings of healthy romantic relationships, approach to their romantic lives, and romance-related aspirations for the future?* This chapter outlines the results of my analysis derived from the two phases of the study: the program-wide survey and the follow-up interviews with individuals who indicated love mentoring relationships playing a significant role in their lives. The survey produced quantitative and qualitative data to analyze, while the interviews produced strictly qualitative data - replete with rich descriptions and detailed stories from participants. All names, locations, and other identifying details have been given pseudonyms or edited out of this document.

The chapter begins with an overview of each of the 12 interview participants, as their voices animate this section of the dissertation and greatly inform the study's key findings. Following this overview, I present results pertaining to: the prevalence of love mentoring relationships, types of LMs, LM characteristics, the mechanisms, content, and relational quality of love mentoring relationships, and the influence of love mentoring relationships on participants' romance-related thoughts, feelings, and aspirations for the future. The chapter concludes with results on the participants' satisfaction with their love mentoring relationships.

Introduction to the Interview Participants

In the following section, I introduce each participant by providing a brief overview of their self-described characteristics, selected salient elements of their background, and the LMs they identified. The information included here, derived from both the survey and interviews, is meant

to provide 1) a high-level summary of the interview participants; and 2) context for findings that will be detailed throughout the chapter. These overviews are summaries, but even when not presented in quotes, they closely represent the words used by participants to describe themselves and others. Some information is presented inconsistently across participants due to the open-ended way participants were asked to describe themselves at the start of each interview (e.g. some participants shared where they were from, whereas others did not, so not all participants will have this information included). All participants have been given pseudonyms; and many personal details have been generalized or edited out of this document to preserve participant anonymity.

Elisa

Elisa spent the majority of her childhood and adolescence living internationally, however she most recently resided in the Southwest region of the U.S. before attending college. Elisa's father passed away during high school; and she looks back upon her parents' marriage as a positive and healthy model of romantic partnership:

> I was a caretaker for [my dad] all of junior year and senior year of high school, and he passed away from brain cancer right before coming to college. So that was a huge life changing event for me, for my mom, for my sister, who's four years older than me … [My parents] had such an amazing marriage and I always looked up to them, which was really, just… I'm lucky to have experienced that.

Elisa describes herself as someone who values diversity, has clear professional ambitions, and is independent. She has been dating her long-distance boyfriend for a year and a half - her first "serious" relationship in college.

In the survey, Elisa named two LMs: her mom and her older cousin. She chose her relationship with her mom as the most significant of the two. Elisa described her mother as a

"voice of reason," and cited her openness, inquisitiveness, and similar personality as reasons why it is easy to talk to her about romance-related topics.

Ashley

Ashley describes herself as a service-oriented, liberal arts student, who has been actively engaged in the exploration of her faith during her time in college. Romantically, she has never had a "solid partner or anything like that," but believes respect and equality to be important components of healthy romantic relationships.

Within her own nuclear family, Ashley has witnessed relationships she does not want to emulate (i.e., her parents) and other relationships that she views as exemplary (i.e., her sister's relationship with her girlfriend). However, both of the LMs Ashley named were outside of her family: her Spiritual Director and a professor in a first year philosophy/theology course. Of the two, Ashley chose her Spiritual Director, who works at the University, as her most significant LM. She describes her Spiritual Director as relatable - in that she is also a young woman of faith, but is "just a few years ahead" and in a "strong marriage." Most notably, their conversations have helped Ashley grapple with significant questions pertaining to the integration of her romantic, sexual and spiritual identities. She writes that her Spiritual Director has allowed her "to explore what it means to be a spiritual woman who is also a sexual being and how those ideas can be complementary, not just contradictory."

Blake

Blake is a low-income, first-generation, student from New England. A self-proclaimed "romantic," Blake has been intentional about putting her schoolwork before romance during her college years. She identifies as Black and spoke to the ways in which living and studying in predominantly-white spaces has negatively impacted her sense of confidence in romantic

relationships. Blake described her family as "complicated" - she lived most of her life with her aunt and uncle, who served as the primary parental figures in her life, though she does not consider them models of parenting or partnering.

Blake named her older sister as her most significant LM, and stated that their shared background is one of the reasons it is easy to talk to her about romance-related topics: "I don't have to explain any of that with her, like, why I might not want to bring a guy home after school or like why I don't want him to meet my family or why I don't talk about my family." She has also observed her sister's romantic relationship with a live-in boyfriend closely through the years, which Blake perceives as loving and healthy, though not perfect. The second LM Blake named in the survey was her Journey mentor, who has served as a conversation partner on romance-related topics to a much lesser degree than her sister, and only in group settings.

Alice

Alice is a Psychology and International Studies major from the Midwest who describes herself as creative, passionate about social issues, and relationship-oriented. While she is close with her parents, she does not aspire toward a similar relationship to theirs. Recently, she has started to talk to her mother more about romance-related topics, but it is only "to make her feel included and never because I actually really want to."

In the survey, Alice named her older cousin and her senior-year seminar professor as LMs. She chose her older cousin as the more significant of the two and described a great deal of mutual sharing between the two of them on romance-related topics. Alice explained, that her cousin often shared about her relationship with her boyfriend, providing Alice with:

> a very realistic expectation of how relationships are and how it's not fairy tale passion, but
>
> feelings come and go. And it's kind of just like you have to stay committed to a partner if

you do feel like you love them, even if the day to day might not be as passionate as the first month that you met them.

Alice described her romance-related learning via her professor as more depersonalized than with her cousin, with opportunities for deeper connection through her reflective course assignments and office hour conversations.

Gina

Gina is a student of Latin American heritage who identifies as Catholic and grew up overseas in a small, tight knit family. She is a "hopeless romantic type of girl" who has been in a relationship with her current boyfriend for over a year. After graduation, she is headed to medical school.

Gina named three LMs in the survey - all of whom are close members of her family: her mother, father, and grandfather. Gina chose her relationship with her mother as the most significant of the three, stating that conversations with her mother about romance-related topics have "helped me confirm things that probably I already knew. But talking to her, it kind of just makes me more sure about my decisions and what I'm doing." Regarding her father, Gina spoke about his role in helping her know her worth - in relationships and other dimensions of life, and the fact that he always has her best interest in mind. Compared to the role that her parents play, Gina described her grandfather offering a more optimistic and wise perspective on love and relationships "because he's lived so much more."

Merrill

Family is very important to Merrill, who is one of four children and the only girl. She adores her parents who instilled in her and her brothers the importance of family dinners and being there for one another, no matter what happens. Merrill is more honest with her mother now

about her romantic life than she was in high school, but she still wishes there was more openness between her and her mother regarding these topics: "I do wish sometimes I could talk to her because I have gotten hurt by numerous guys. And like sometimes I can only say so much to like my brothers."

Merrill named her older cousin and high school English teacher as LMs. Merrill described her high school English teacher as "brutally honest" and as someone whose advice and perspective was offered "kind of in a mother way." She named her older cousin as the most significant LM, citing daily texts, occasional conversations, and observations of her cousin's own romantic relationship as a constant influence on how Merrill thinks about and behaves in intimate relationships.

Vivi

Vivi identifies as an enthusiastic and creative person who is an advocate for body positivity. A "stark individualist," Vivi has been in two short relationships during her time in college. She uses dating apps frequently and primarily dates people outside of the University setting: "I'm very comfortable being alone. So having another person isn't something I'm always after. So I kind of go on dates for fun to meet people."

Vivi named three LMs in the survey, all of whom are members of her family: her mother, father, and aunt. She views her parents' relationship as a model of a healthy relationship - she admires the way they work as a team to prioritize care for their three children. With respect to her father, Vivi states that "learning by example is how I've been informed romantically through him," whereas conversation plays a bigger role in the romantic learning that Vivi has received via her mother - her most significant LM. Vivi talks with her mother openly about her romantic life, apart from the sexual dimension, and she appreciates how her mother "keeps it real" when sharing

about her own experiences. As for her aunt, Vivi is open with her about her romantic life and appreciates her aunt's willingness to listen.

Camila

Camila is a student from South America, who moved to the United States with her family when she was a teenager. She describes service as a significant part of her life: it "is definitely like either a vocation or like something important to who I am." She has been involved in multiple formational opportunities, such as retreats, mentorship programs, and reflection-based seminars, during her time at the University. She values these involvements for allowing her to get to know "professors as people" and also for providing her "ample space to talk about relationships" throughout her college experience.

In the survey, Camila named the professor of her first-year seminar as her most significant LM. She describes romance-related conversations with her professor, both in and out of the classroom, as grounded in the reality of the college student experience: "she's not as idealist as some other professors. I think the way that she, like, explained student life, and even explained life. It's very real." The realness that Camila encountered in her professor was also a hallmark of her relationship with another LM that she named in the survey: her mother. Camila describes having a very close relationship with her mother - something she credits to their spending so much time together during her adolescence when they made an international move. And while feels a closeness to her mother, Camila also views her mother as more carefree when it comes to romantic relationships - which she speculates is a function of the different cultures they were raised in during their teen years.

Claire

Claire is an Economics major from the Midwest who says the most important things in her life are her relationships with friends and family. With respect to romantic relationships, she values them greatly but has not pursued one during her time at the University. She explains: "I think a lot of that comes from seeing the relationship my parents had and how committed they are to each other. I just never wanted to waste my time or somebody else's time pursuing something I didn't find valuable."

Claire considers herself close with her mother; they occasionally talk about romantic relationships. While her mother has shared pieces of her own romantic history with Claire, she believes her mother is most interested in learning about Claire's romantic life: "I think more than anything, she just wants to be involved in all my relationships and like, know where I'm at, what I'm going through." Claire's mother was one of three LMs named in the survey. She also named two University figures: her Journey program mentor and her senior-year seminar professor - whom she identified as the most significant of the three. She said that her professor served as a "life mentor" of sorts and that the seminar "was really the first time in class that any professor had made a space to talk about relationships." Apart from the seminar, she cited the Journey program as one of the only other times at the University where space was formally created for honest conversation about romantic relationships.

Greta

Greta is studying business and is a self-described achiever and extrovert. She grew up with two sisters in a single-parent household for the majority of her adolescence: "My dad is the one who is still around and he is super supportive, almost to the point where, like, he doesn't want to push us too much. And so I think that's how I've become, like, as self driven as I am now." Greta

has spent the majority of college in a romantic relationship or, at least, a "situationship," thus her romantic life has been a big force in shaping her experience at the University.

Greta named a business professor, her Journey program mentor, and an older friend as LMs in the survey. Greta chose her professor as the most significant of the three, and described her as warm, open, and validating in their conversations about romance-related topics. Greta also appreciated that her professor, who is seven years her senior, has had more learning opportunities in the realm of romantic relationships, but that she also "doesn't treat me like I'm younger or like inexperienced." Similarly, Greta discussed the small age difference between her and her older friend as valuable, noting that her friend knew more about college and relationships. Finally, Greta emphasized her Journey mentor's active listening skills as a quality that makes her a good conversation partner on romance-related topics: "I feel very heard whenever I talk to her."

Madison

Madison is a student from the Northeast region of the United States. The oldest sibling in her family, Madison described herself as possessing "older sister/mentor energy." Prior to college, Madison attended a Catholic school that had a conservative approach to ethical teaching which caused her to internalize some "weird lessons" about premarital sex, healthy romantic relationships, and gender dynamics during her teenage years. At the University, she has been deeply involved in a student-facilitated retreat program in Campus Ministry that fosters reflection on relationships with God, self, and others.

Madison named her mother and her Resident Director as LMs in the survey. She chose her mother as the most significant LM in her life, citing their close relationship and similarities as reasons why she chooses to talk to her mother about romance-related topics: "she understands, like, the way I think and like react to things and like how well she knows me, helps her to, like,

understand what I need and want and should have." Regarding her Resident Director, wrote that he "challenged me to think about how my relationship fit in with the rest of my goals" and emphasized his ability to ask good questions that help her reflect on her life experiences. Madison also spoke at great length in the interview about a Campus Minister at the University who has served as a major love mentoring figure in her life, though she neglected to name her in the survey.

Hope

Hope has been very focused on academics during the course of her undergraduate experience and plans to pursue a career in healthcare after graduation. For the first three years of college, her romantic life was not very important to her: "I was very much, like, devoted to myself and kind of figuring out where I want to go, like what my path is." However, she began dating her current boyfriend this year, and now it constitutes a much more significant part of her college experience, equal in importance to the relationships she has with her friends.

Hope named three LMs in the survey: her grandmother, Journey program mentor, and her mother. She named her grandmother as the most significant LM. Hope spent a lot of time with her grandmother growing up and they have always been "really good at talking about things with each other." She cites her grandmother's empathy and openness as some of the reasons she has been comfortable opening up about her romantic life. Hope looks up to her grandparents' relationship and hopes to "follow in their footsteps." However, her feelings toward her parents' relationship, and her mother in particular, is more complicated: "it was, like, especially hard during high school to kind of open up with her, because I just didn't always see eye to eye with things and how she handled things with my dad." Nonetheless, Hope believes her mother always has her best interest at heart, which is why she still occasionally talks to her about romance-

related topics. Regarding her Journey mentor, while they have not had any one-on-one conversations, Hope included her because she is one of the few individuals at the University who has created space for her to talk about romantic relationships.

Prevalence of Love Mentoring Relationships

As noted in the Methods section, love mentoring is not a term, or concept, that has been explicitly investigated in the literature. Therefore, the foundational questions of the dissertation, upon which all subsequent findings are based are: Are love mentoring relationships present in the lives of college women? And, if so, how prevalent are they?

These questions can be answered with the survey data in two ways. The first is through the respondents' identification of up to three love mentoring relationships. In total, 90 LMs were identified by survey respondents. An overwhelming majority of respondents ($n = 51$, 92.7%) named at least one LM in the survey. More specifically, 36.4% ($n = 20$) named only one LM; 41.8% ($n = 23$) respondents named two LMs; and 14.5% ($n = 8$) respondents named three LMs. Only 7.3% ($n = 4$) of respondents did not identify a LM in the survey. Notably, all four of these respondents self-identified as Asian.

There is a second way to understand the prevalence of love mentoring relationships through the survey data. At the end of the survey, all respondents - regardless of whether they identified a LM(s) - were asked to enumerate the total number of individuals who play a love mentoring role in their lives. The question read: "Including any of the people you have just identified in this survey, please write the total number of older and/or more experienced persons who have provided you space to think, learn, and talk about romantic relationships." The average number of mentoring figures identified was 3.07 ($SD = 3.45$), with responses ranging from 0 to 10. In fact, three out of the four respondents who did not identify a love mentoring relationship in

the earlier part of the survey, answered this question with a response of "1" indicating they did indeed have a love mentoring relationship in their life. The full range of responses to this question are represented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Total Number of LMs Enumerated by Respondents
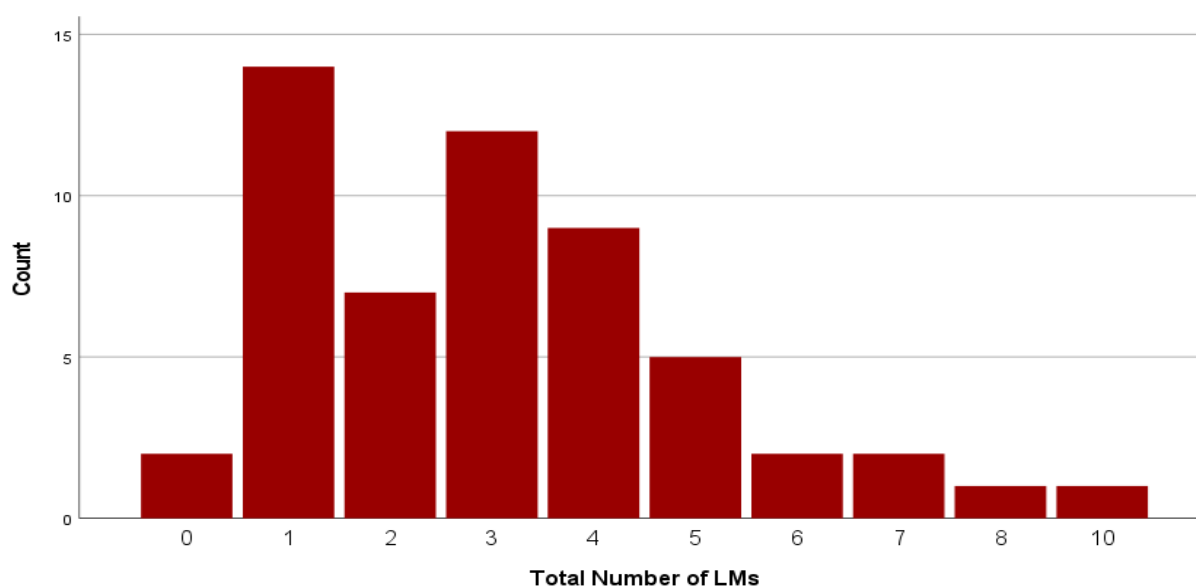
Who They Are: A Typology of Love Mentors

The following section offers insight into the different types of LMs that respondents identified in the survey. Data on the prevalence of romance-related conversation with University Figures and Journey mentors is also reported.

Types of Love Mentors

Across the 90 LMs identified by respondents in the survey, a wide variety of individuals were named. A first round of coding produced 11 specific "types" of LMs: *Family - Aunt; Family - Cousin; Family - Father; Family - Grandfather; Family - Grandmother; Family - Mother;*

Family - Sister; University - Mentor; University - Professor; Friend; and Other. In the second round of coding, codes were reexamined and condensed to produce seven categories of LMs: *Family - Father; Family - Mother; Family - Older Generation; Family - Peer Generation; University Figure, Friend, and Other.*

The largest category was *Family - Mother;* mothers made up over a third (*n* = 33, 36.4%) of all LMs identified by respondents. *University Figures* was the next largest category of LMs identified (*n* = 25, 27.8%), and included faculty members, student affairs professionals, and other adult mentoring figures at the University (only one of whom was an older student serving in a mentoring capacity). The survey directions instructed respondents not to identify "same-aged friends or peers," however two respondents identified older friends, and their responses constitute the category of *Friend.* The *Other* category included 8 entries, such as "high school English teacher," "pastor," "therapist," "friend's mom," and "mentor from home," that did not fit squarely into an existing category. Frequencies and percentages of LM types are represented in Table 1 in the *Total LMs Identified* column.

Most Significant Love Mentor Types

After identifying up to three LMs, respondents were asked to select one of the people they just named who has been "MOST SIGNIFICANT in creating opportunities for [them] to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships." Of the seven categories of LMs detailed above, six were represented in the pool of significant LMs: *Family - Mother; Family - Older Generation; Family - Peer Generation; University Figure, Friend, and Other.* The only category not represented among the significant LMs was fathers. Mothers were, again, the largest category, representing more than half (*n* = 27, 53%) of all significant LMs identified by respondents.

Frequencies and percentages of significant LM types are represented in Table 1 in the *Significant LMs* column.

Love Mentor Types By Case

A within-case analysis of each respondent's LM(s) revealed that 43.6% (n = 24) respondents identified purely familial LMs, 23.6% (n = 13) identified only non-familial LMs; and 25.5% (n = 14) identified LMs both within and outside of the family (at least one familial LM and at least one non-familial LM). Thus, including the 4 individuals who did not name any LMs, only 30.9% of respondents (n = 17) did not identify a member of their family as a LM. With respect to University Figures specifically, 38.2% (n = 21) of respondents identified at least one University Figure as a LM, including the 10 respondents (18.2%) who identified their Journey mentors.

Romance-related Conversation with University Figures

Near the end of the survey, all respondents - regardless of whether they identified a LM(s) - were asked whether they have had at least one conversation "with an adult within the University about romance-related topics, including but not limited to: love, dating, hooking up, sexuality, or future relationship aspirations." Of the 55 respondents, 35 (63.6%) said they have had one such conversation with a University figure, while 20 (36.4%) respondents reported they had not. Those who answered affirmatively were then asked if they have engaged in conversation with their Journey mentor about romance-related topics. Of the 35 who were asked, 29 (82.9%) respondents said they have had one such conversation with their Journey mentor, while six (17.1 %) reported that they had not.

What They are Like: Love Mentor Characteristics

This section highlights the salient attributes of LMs, through participants' descriptions of their identity-based characteristics and personal qualities.

Identity-Based Characteristics

While demographic information on LMs was not explicitly collected, qualitative analysis of survey responses and interview data provides some insight into LMs identity-based characteristics, as well as the role that shared characteristics can play in shaping the love mentoring relationship.

LM Gender Counts

Survey data in which respondents described their LM was coded for gender. This was not self-reported data and gender assumptions were made based on: 1) LM type (i.e., mothers were assumed to be female) and 2) pronoun usage in qualitative entries that describe the LM ("*He* really challenged me to think about how my relationship fit in with the rest of my goals"). Of the 90 LMs identified in the survey, 81 (90%) were female, and nine (10%) were male. All 51 of the significant LMs identified in the survey were female.

Shared Identities

Interview participants were asked if they share any identities with their LMs that they deem important with respect to the love mentoring relationship. Some interview participants spoke to identity-based characteristics of their LMs in reference to identities they, themselves, hold. In the majority of these cases, participants characterized shared identities with their LM as a valuable aspect of the love mentoring relationship.

Gender. Ten of the 12 participants mentioned that sharing an identity as a woman with a LM was important in their love mentoring relationship(s). Gina expressed that sharing a gender identity with her mother/significant LM helped to shed light on:

> … the difficulties that may come with [being a woman]. Like if she's had, like,
> uncomfortable sexual situations with men or like certain harassments or experiences that

are, like, troubling to talk about. And maybe when I don't even want to talk about my own

or don't feel comfortable sharing, hearing her stories kind of makes me feel like I can go to

her for anything, because it kind of proves to me how strong she is and how resilient she is

and how she understands the challenges and difficulties that come with being a woman.

So, I think that's also a big part of why I feel so comfortable going to her.

Alice described never having felt comfortable opening up about romance-related topics to

older men, which she attributes to their "different experiences" in the realm of romantic

relationships. In particular, she talked about this discomfort with respect to a male mentor figure

at the University with whom she has a close relationship, but did not name as a LM. Regarding

romance-related conversation with him, Alice said, "I know he'd be there if I was like, 'oh, I'm

really sad.' And he would, like, give me a hug. But I don't know if I'd really want his advice. Not

that I don't respect him, but yeah."

Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation was referenced by four of the participants as an

important shared identity in their love mentoring relationships. For example, regarding her love

mentoring relationship with her mother/significant LM, Gina articulated, "I think the fact that she

has also experienced relationships with men makes it easier for me to talk about relationships with

men. So, I think that's convenient." While all interview participants identified as heterosexual,

two participants expressed that they would be comfortable talking to their LM about

"hypothetical" nonheterosexual romantic experiences should they ever develop same-sex

attraction or become part of a same-sex relationship. This information was spontaneously offered

by the two participants, and was not explicitly asked of all interview participants.

Race and/or Ethnicity. Race and/or ethnicity was spoken about by three participants as an

important identity that they share with at least one of their LMs. Blake, who identifies as Black

and mixed race, expressed that being a Black woman in predominantly-white environments - including her hometown and the University - resulted in her receiving little romantic attention from her male peers. Furthermore, she explained that conversations with her sister/significant LM (who shares her racial identity) about dating as a Black woman is very different from talking to her friends at the University, who are mostly white. Blake recalls feeling sidelined, romantically, in high school:

> I just felt like I'm not noticed. Like when I look back at that now, it's like hard for me not to trace that back to, like, being Black in my town. Because I, like, I can't think of what else it is. Like, I wasn't ugly. I was very athletic. I was on the soccer team .... it's easy to talk about it with my sister, because she's also Black. I feel like when I say [I'm not noticed] to my white friends, they're like, 'oh, stop, that's not true.' And they just go 'oh, you're so hot.' And I'm like, it's just like no one likes me [romantically] at this school. So, I can express that sentiment with my sister and she doesn't question it.

Similarly to Blake, Gina values that her mother/significant LM shares her racial/ethnic identity as a Latina. She feels that she can more easily speak to mother about culturally-based challenges that impact her romantic life (i.e., confronting stereotypes), because her mother may have encountered similar challenges. Gina explains:

> I feel like especially coming to [the University], like it being the first time that I kind of felt, like, different because back home it's like, 'oh, we're all Latino, we're all the same.' And here it was kind of like the first time that I took on that identity of like, 'oh, I'm like a woman of color. I'm Latina.' And so I feel like with that comes … like, certain pressures and things, as well, because I feel like in a cultural stereotypical way it could be like, 'oh, Latina women like to party and are sexy' and this and that. Just like the stereotypes that

may come with it. Like, talking to her about that, as well her being someone who also lived in the U.S. and might have struggled with that. I also feel like that aspect of her makes me feel comfortable to talk to her about situations that I might have.

Religion. Two participants highlighted their religious or spiritual identity as an important identity they share with a LM. For example, Ashley valued the fact that her Spiritual Director/significant LM was also a Catholic woman, given that their conversations largely center on helping Ashely integrate the romantic and sexual parts of her identity with her spirituality. Regarding her relationship with her Spiritual Director, Ashley states that their similar religious identity is an important dimension of their relationship "because I don't think a male would feel the same - like I don't want to say 'oppression' that women, I think, especially, in the Church feel."

Personal Qualities

This section of the dissertation provides results on the ways in which study participants described their LMs' personal attributes relevant to the love mentoring relationship. The open-ended survey question read: "Briefly describe the qualities this person possesses that makes them someone you are interested in thinking with, learning from, or talking to about romantic relationships." Additionally, interview participants were again asked this question, and were provided an opportunity to elaborate on their survey response during the interview. Survey data and interview transcripts were coded for LMs' personal qualities. Results are organized by the following themes of LM qualities: unreservedly honest, emotionally supportive, nonjudgmental listening, and possessing more experience in romantic relationships.

Unreservedly Honest

Study participants articulated various ways in which their LMs transparency and candor played an important role in the love mentoring relationship. In the survey, many respondents named qualities such as "honest" and "open" to describe their significant LM. Often, these adjectives were listed without context, though occasionally they referenced LMs being truthful about the realities of their romantic life, past or present - an idea that was teased out in greater detail in some of the interviews. For example, Vivi described her mother/significant LM as open, accessible, and *real* - particularly when it came to her mother sharing about her own romantic history:

> My mom keeps it really real. And I think that's probably where I get it from. She grew up in, like a not so great area … she was living in the city, like south of Brooklyn, going out with guys who were, like, kind of a schmuck - like not, not that bright, like not that good, but like those were the people around. So, like, she was always very open about, like, people she went out with.

> Vivi was not the only participant to bring up this concept of *real.* Camila used *real* to describe her mother/LM and her senior-year seminar professor/significant LM. Camila explained that they were both the type of people to prize honesty above comfortability in relationships, particularly when it came to conversations about romantic relationships:

> She's not as idealist as some other professors. I think the way that she, like, explained student life, and even explained life, it's very real. It's not mushy, gushy and… it felt very honest. And I think that that gave in my eyes a lot of credibility to her as a person, because that's also how my mother is. My mother will tell you like it is whether you want to hear it

or not. So having, like, a mentor who was willing to be honest and hard sometimes when needed, felt something like a comfort to me.

Another participant, Alice, spoke about the honest feedback she receives from her older cousin/significant LM. Alice described her cousin, who is twenty-nine and engaged, as "very blunt" - a personality trait that she has always valued: "I like when people are very straightforward with me. So that's something that I enjoy that she kind of tells me what I need to hear." Whereas, Alice admitted her own tendency to "sugarcoat the truth a little bit" in order to save others' feelings, her cousin has shown Alice that meaningful romantic relationships are benefitted by complete honesty and that she should strive to be "a hundred percent with my feelings all the time."

Emotionally Supportive

Words like "caring," "loving," "empathetic," and "kind" were frequently used by survey respondents, in their descriptions of LMs as emotionally supportive individuals who approach the love mentoring relationship with care and concern for the mentee's wellbeing. For example, one survey respondent wrote about her mother/significant LM: "[she] approaches all my questions and problems with such love and kindness that I feel comfortable speaking to her about my relationships."

The notion of LMs as sources of emotional support was expressed in greater detail by many of the interview participants. Elisa spoke about her older cousin/LM who had recently had her first baby. Despite being consumed with the demands of new parenthood, Elisa felt that her cousin prioritized their relationship just as much as she did before she had a child and is always "willing to lend an ear" whenever Elisa needed her:

She's also just so caring. So she really genuinely wants to know how I'm doing. She doesn't want to just hear good. She wants to really hear how I've been and how it's been going. So I would say those are definitely qualities of hers that make it easy to talk to her.

Hope named her grandmother as her significant LM and repeatedly cited the ways in which she relies upon her as a source of care, concern, and counsel. Hope acknowledged that when she is going through something at school, she knows her grandmother will always answer her phone call and help her through the problem. Hope credits her grandmother's empathy as one of the reasons she is a trusted LM: "she's definitely super empathetic, like she always kind of feels other people's feelings and can relate to those and kind of, like, mirror them almost."

Even when participants were not discussing their mothers or grandmothers, they often described their LMs in ways that are consistent with conventional notions of motherhood, in which mothers are viewed as kind, nurturing, and protective. Alice, who lauded her older cousin for her bluntness, also described her as "extremely motherly" and explained that her cousin has been "so loving toward me from a very young age. She always, like, just took care of me even though she lives in [further away]. She always had my back."

Greta described her significant LM - a professor for whom she serves as an undergraduate teaching assistant - in motherly terms, as well. In particular, she emphasized her professor's warmth, affirming approach and unequivocal support for decisions Greta has made in her romantic life. As Greta put it, "she is one of the most validating people that I've ever met." Greta also spoke to the way her close relationship with her professor fills an emotional void left by her mother's passing in her early adolescence: "I think she also kind of fills this void that I've had, like, since I was like [a pre-teen], which is, like, great … she's just very warm and, like, and is very interested in everything that I have to say."

Another participant, Camila, also spoke about the emotional support she received from a professor at the University. She recounted an experience of seeking emotional support and counsel from her first year seminar professor/significant LM as she faced the one year anniversary of a sexual assault[7] she had experienced prior to coming to college:

> I was also going through a really hard semester that semester I was taking [the first year seminar]. And I remember that one day I walked into her office, everything was wrong. I had talked to her before, like, you're forced to do a one-on-one with her and stuff. But I remember that this time I walked into her office and I was really, like, not doing okay. I started crying. I was telling her, like, I was having such a hard time. I had a really unfortunate experience with a guy a year prior to that. And she was the first person I - well, second person I told. Like, full breakdown in her office. And she offered to walk me, to walk with me to counseling services and make an appointment, which was to me, like, a really humbling and really sincere experience of - quite literally - the metaphor of someone walking with you. She literally held my hand and walked me to the office. Me, a twenty year old grown up at that point! So… I really felt, like, kindness and compassion and, like, she was someone who offered those to me.

Nonjudgmental Listening

A characteristic that was frequently highlighted by study participants was their LMs capacity to listen without judgment. Words and phrases such as "nonjudgmental," "understanding," "good listener," and "open-minded" were frequently used by survey respondents to describe their LMs. For example, one respondent wrote, "My mom is a good listener and she doesn't pass judgment. She provides me a safe space to explore my thoughts and concerns about

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[7] This term was used by the participant later in the interview to describe this event.

relationships." This concept of a LM as a *safe space* expressed by another respondent in the survey who wrote that her University mentor has provided her "so many opportunities in her office to simply vent, to be completely and utterly listened to, void of judgment, helping me to see the value in myself during a time when I was questioning [that]."

Seven of the twelve interview participants spontaneously referenced a LM's nonjudgmental approach within the love mentoring relationship. For example, Gina spoke to the way her mother listens first, before responding within their romance-related conversations:

I think she's very understanding and I think that is something that is useful when you're having awkward conversations, so she always kind of, like, before judging or saying anything, she'll just listen to what I have to say … I really appreciate that.

Similar to Gina, Claire admired her Journey mentor's tendency to listen without judgment. Specifically, she spoke to her Journey mentor's approach to leading group conversations as one that leaves room for silence, giving everyone the opportunity to share when/if they are ready:

She's just very nonjudgmental whenever we have a conversation. And she'll give time for everybody to kind of think about the questions that she asks, and she won't just continue talking. She'll wait in the uncomfortable silence for a minute or two.

Greta echoed these sentiments about her Journey mentor, as well. She said that one of the primary reasons her Journey mentor has become someone she can talk to about romantic relationships is because of "her willingness to listen. Like she's a really, really good listener, definitely a very active listener. And I feel very heard whenever I talk to her."

More Experience in Romantic Relationships

Throughout the survey and interviews, study participants repeatedly described their LMs as more experienced in the realm of romantic relationships.[8] For example, one respondent wrote, "She is in a stable, healthy, long-term relationship. She has more experience with dating and can help me not make the same mistakes she did." Another noted, "My mother has had a successful 30+ year marriage with my father that inspires me, and they seem to have friendship at the core of their relationship."

Alice talked about how the fact that her senior year seminar instructor/LM had a healthy marriage and family of her own gave her credibility "in the relationship field" and made Alice respect her opinions on romance-related topics. Similarly, Merrill valued the advice of her older cousin/significant LM not necessarily because she is more sexually experienced, but because she has more experience engaging meaningfully in romantic and/or sexual relationships:

> I do have to say she's probably had more, like, meaningful sexual relationships than I have. And so when she hears about, like, a guy or something that I've done, I think she kind of puts it in perspective and is like 'Merrill, that's not like how you should be treated' or… like, 'If a guy likes you, that's probably not what he would do.'

Merrill's reflections about her older cousin highlights a distinction between having more romantic experience (in terms of quantity) versus having more *quality* romantic experiences. This distinction was one that Gina raised, as well, as she reflected on her tendency to value romance-related advice only when it comes from people who she views as having healthy and/or successful romantic lives. Gina explained, through metaphor:

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[8] The description of LMs used in the study encouraged participants to consider individuals who were older *or* more experienced, so LMs did not necessarily, by definition, need to be someone with more experience in this realm.

I feel like you can't be a hairdresser, if your hair was super bad. Like, how are your clients supposed to trust you? That's how I feel. Like, if you have no idea what you're telling me, how am I supposed to know what you're telling me is actually good?

How They Work: The Mechanisms, Content & Health of Love Mentoring Relationships

This section provides results on the mechanisms that underlie love mentoring relationships, how love mentoring relationships function relative to friendships, the content discussed within love mentoring relationships, and the relational health - or quality - of love mentoring relationships.

The Mechanisms of Love Mentoring Relationships

Throughout the open-ended survey responses and the interviews, study participants offered insights into how love mentoring relationships work - that is to say, the relational dynamics between the mentor and mentee. Whereas the previous section highlighted attributes of LMs, this section elucidates common mechanisms that underlie love mentoring relationships.

Knowing the Mentee Well

Throughout the interviews, participants often described a closeness and familiarity between themselves and their LMs. Specifically, multiple participants noted that their LMs "know them well" - which they spoke about as beneficial to the love mentoring relationship in various ways. Often, the closeness of the relationship between the LM and mentee was characterized as a foundational ingredient of an open and useful love mentoring relationship. For example, Elisa credited her mother/significant LM's candor around romance-related conversation to the fact that they are so intimately acquainted. As Elisa put it, "she also knows me really well, so she's not afraid to call me out on anything that I say or think and tell me to rethink something."

In Hope's case, her mother/LM has helped her discern whether certain romantic partners are a good fit - a source of guidance that she finds valuable because of how well her mother knows her. Hope explains:

> In high school or really early high school, when I had my first experience with a boyfriend, I think she knew the whole time that he was not the right person for me. And I think it was kind of obvious in the way I was acting, but I didn't really know how it could be. And so I think ever since then, she can definitely help me navigate whether or not, like, this is kind of the right thing for me, because she knows me so well.

Two participants discussed the ease and comfort that came from having a LM who knows them well, precisely because they do not have to spend as much time explaining themselves or their romantic experiences, as their LMs already know so much about their life and their relationships. Merrill, who has an "extremely close" relationship with her older cousin/LM, stated: "if I have something that I want to talk about, I don't have to, like, re-explain everything and be like this is the situation … so, she can better help me, kind of, calm down or figure out what to do." Similarly, Blake shared that talking about her romantic life with her sister/significant LM is easier than talking to others about these topics because of their shared childhood and "complicated" family dynamics at home:

> She knows all that. She experienced it as well. I don't have to explain any of that with her, like, why I might not want to bring a guy home after school or like why I don't want him to meet my family or why I don't talk about my family.

Demonstrating Interest in Mentee's Romantic Life

One mechanism that appeared to fuel all love mentoring relationships was LMs' curious inquiry about the mentee's romantic life. Each of the interview participants talked about ways in

which their LMs demonstrated an interest in their romantic thoughts, feelings, or behaviors; and in most cases, this interest was demonstrated by asking questions. Elisa provides an account of how her mother/significant LM's inquiries about her relationship with her boyfriend have contributed to their love mentoring relationship:

And often she'll ask, like, how is Dan? Or she'll ask kind of how I am and how things are going. It's never a formal, like, 'how is your relationship going?' It's really just kind of like, 'how is he doing?' … We'll kind of talk about the future. Like she'll be like, 'have you considered this? Have you guys considered living together in the future? What will you be doing in terms of that?' And we're both very open and very similar in terms of personality. So it's really easy to talk to her about those things. And it's, it's really nice to be able to share it with her, because I know that she wants to hear those things, and I like to be able to talk to her about those things.

Similarly, Gina, who named her grandfather as one of her LMs, shared that he often begins their phone calls by asking about her boyfriend: "Whenever he calls me, it's so funny, because he asks me how I'm doing. And the second question is how is my boyfriend doing. They always ask about him, as well."

Some participants articulated a persistence on the part of their LM when it came to inquiries about their romantic lives. Claire recalled the ways her aunt pushed her for information about her romantic life, particularly when her younger cousins were not present:

Whenever I Facetime her and my little cousins, they'll always say, like, 'oh, do you have a boyfriend?' Just kind of in a joking way. And like, no matter what I answer, she will be like, 'Okay, the kids are gone. Tell me! Tell me!' Like if she has a question, she's not

afraid to ask it and she'll always, like, push farther, even if it seems like I'm not giving her

all the information she will keep taking until she gets it.

Notably, persistent inquiry by LMs did not seem to bother participants; they seemed to view it in

a positive light. For example, Alice said of her aunt, "she will always, like, interrogate me in the

best way." Madison, too, described her mother asking her some "good questions" during a time a

complicated time when she was considering a potential relationship with different romantic

partners:

So, um, sophomore fall things were, like, very complicated with like two of my guy

friends and Thomas was coming into the picture and there was just a lot going on. And I

remember her just asking good questions … like, 'what about this person is important and

like makes you want to spend time with them? Versus this person? Versus this person?

Like why? Well, what is going on? Like, what is the pull that each person has?'

Prompting Reflection

Various participants cited their LM's role in prompting them to reflect upon their romantic

thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Oftentimes, participants described this dynamic as one in which

the LM "challenges" them to reconsider assumptions or see a situation from a new perspective.

This notion was also expressed by one survey respondent who wrote:

While I have had great conversations with other people about romantic relationships, this

particular professor was the first person to really challenge me to think about what I

valued and why. Being able to identify and articulate what you want is so important, and

she was one of the first people to help me do that.

Madison likewise viewed one of her University mentors as someone who urged her to

avoid easy answers to some of life's "big questions" - including those pertaining to romantic

relationships: "She is someone that, like, challenges me. Like, she asks big questions and wants you to answer them and, like, not answer them just to make her happy but to... think about it for yourself, kind of answer for yourself."

Alice, too, described one of her professors/LMs as someone who was often trying to "challenge your perspective and very much wants to tell you when you're in the wrong." Alice admitted that this level of honesty and pushback about her romantic life "could be hard, but it's, like, good overall." She recalled a particular conversation with this professor about her post-graduation plans, in which her perspective on the fate of her current relationship was challenged:

> She asked where my boyfriend's going. I was like, 'oh, he's going to New York. So, we'll see what happens.' Like if I end up in the same city, like we'll see where that goes. And she was like, 'what do you mean? Like, you guys have a good relationship, why would you break up?' And I was like, 'well, if we're in different cities…?' And she was like, 'well, who cares?' And I was like, okay, good point. Like, yeah, that's fair. She's like, if you guys have a good relationship then it doesn't matter where you guys are living. And I was like, okay, thank you. Yeah, so that was nice.

A number of participants described the role their mother plays in helping them to reflect upon their romantic lives. About her mother/significant LM, Elisa said, "She's very willing to see it from your side, but also offer another perspective to kind of play devil's advocate and help me see through a situation." In a similar way, Gina described her mother as often helping her to see things from a perspective different than her own:

> I've always joked around with her that she tends to take other people's sides other than my own, like, I'll tell her something. And she's like, 'but what about…?' And I'm like, 'you

haven't even finished listening to what I'm about to tell you!' But she's always kind of offers a good perspective on, like, not staying close minded to what I think is right.

Alice discussed a situation in which her older cousin/significant LM helped her reflect upon her communication with her boyfriend and strategize alternative ways to express her feelings within her relationship. She recalled:

I remember talking to her a few months ago about… just feeling, like, a bit insecure and like I might be putting in more effort in the relationship. And I brought it up to my partner and he didn't respond well. Then I was, like, talking to her about it. And she was like, 'can I ask how you brought it up? Like what exactly you said?' And I told her what I said. And she was like, 'alright, like, that was a really good thing that you brought it up and it's really a fair thing that you're feeling, but if you bring it up in that way, like saying 'you did this,' he's going to put guards up. So, it's better, you know, just - tale as old as time - choose 'I' and say, like, 'I feel this way'… So, it's frustrating - to protect someone's pride while I'm hurt. But then, it's something that you should do. And if you care about your partner, you don't want to hurt them either. So, she just has helped me to be able to work things in a better way and not attack… And I was like, you're right, I should have done that. And I apologized to my partner and had a better conversation with him about it.

Providing Advice

A majority of study participants highlighted advice giving as a primary function of the love mentoring relationship. For some participants, this meant that their LM made them feel comfortable asking for advice. For example, one survey respondent wrote, "She asks me questions to check in on me and she also provides the space where I can ask her questions or ask for her advice." Another wrote, "She has always made it clear to me that I can ask her about any

and everything." These responses paint a picture of LMs as dependable sources of guidance on a variety of topics, including romantic relationships. This perspective was echoed by Claire, who described her aunt as someone she often talks to about romantic relationships and other aspects of her life: "she just always has been someone that I can go to as a sounding board, no matter what the question or the situation is. She's always someone who's definitely full of a lot of good life advice."

Beyond general life advice, many participants described the ways in which their LM's advice on romance-related topics has helped them prepare for or navigate through challenges in romantic relationships. Gina spoke to the ways her mother/significant LM's ongoing guidance about "noticing red flags" in relationship has shaped what she wants in her romantic life:

I think a wisdom like she's given me a lot is on, like, noticing red flags. I think she told me a lot throughout the years, like, if you see a man doing this, like, that's not something that you would want or like. Think of these qualities in a relationship and look for that in a man. Like I think she's definitely giving me a lot of wisdom on what I want and what I don't want.

In a similar fashion, Elisa spoke about the ways her mother/significant LM encourages her to see things from her boyfriend's perspective when she finds herself frustrated with him. She explains, "If I'm annoyed or if I'm being crazy, she'll just say, like, 'it's okay. Just take a step back, see it from his perspective.' So, she's definitely kind of a voice of reason, I would say."

Hope reflected on a time when she asked her grandmother/significant LM for advice about an important conversation she was going to have with a "summer fling" that she had been seeing for a few months. She had been around her grandmother a lot that summer, including the hours leading up to the anxiety-inducing conversation:

[My grandmother] had seen how happy and just, like, how carefree and, like, relaxed and how great my summer was. And like I definitely talked about him with her before. And that day she definitely saw, like, me having a lot of anxiety and like, um, just not having a great feeling about the conversation I was about to go into later that day. And so, I definitely asked her for advice on how to kind of handle that situation … she just kind of, like, talked me down, kind of out of my own head, and she was like, 'no matter what happens, you'll get through it.'

Like Hope, Merrill sought the advice of a LM during a challenging moment in her romantic life that involved an on-again, off-again partner. Their families were friends and they had started hooking up her freshman year of high school. They continued to do so through her first few years in college - often when they were home on break from college. However, Merrill had grown frustrated at this person's tendency to let her know he was coming home - implying an interest in seeing her - only to not contact her during his visit. Merrill did not feel as though she could talk to her mom about the intricacies of this relationship, given it was primarily sexual in nature and because their families knew each other. Instead, Merrill reached out to the mother of her best friend Tanya - whom she had confided in about the relationship, once before:

So, I called [Tanya's mom] and I was like, look, like I obviously have this attachment to this person and I don't want to. He's a family friend. So, like we see him, not him, but with his family all the time. So, I couldn't make a thing out of it because I don't want it to be awkward. And she was like, 'I think that you need to move on from this person and you need to kind of delete him on your phone and Snapchat and whatever else. And you need to give yourself the chance to be able to move on' … And I think, like, she gave me really good advice and she was like, 'It's okay if you every so often want to reach out. If you do

want to reach out, but you don't actually want to talk to him, then talk to your friends …

go talk to [Tanya] and just be like 'look like I really want to say something. You need help

me get my mind off of it.' And to this day, I still haven't talked to him, which is for me,

really good.

Mutual Sharing

During the interviews, participants were asked if and how their LM shares with them

about their own romantic experiences. While the answers revealed some variability, it appears

that most love mentoring relationships are characterized by some degree of reciprocity - in which

both individuals share some details from their romantic lives, past or present.

Alice described her older cousin/significant LM as someone who discloses a great deal

about her own romantic relationship. In particular, she often calls Alice to "vent" about her fiancé

- a habit that Alice welcomes:

She'll talk about how he's like not putting in his fair share of work, you know, in the house

and how, you know. So yeah, I think… like, I am honored to be there for her through that

stuff. And there's not much I am able to give her advice on just because I am twenty-two.

But I do what I can and just kind of hear her out and listen to her.

Madison reflected on a similar idea during her interview - specifically when talking about her

Resident Director/LM at the University. Madison recalled how her Resident Director "used

himself as an example" in some of their romance-related conversations. She explains:

Especially like this year, when we are having conversations about, like, where [my

boyfriend] is applying to law schools and, like, where I want to be. He and his

girlfriend both went to [the same university] and then went to different sides of the

country when, like, theoretically, they could have been in the same place, but they chose

different places. And he just talked about what that meant and like sometimes having to prioritize yourself, but like, that's okay.

Claire discussed a particular dynamic within her love mentoring relationship with her aunt: even though she is not as close with her aunt as she is with other LMs (i.e., her mother), she is more open with her aunt about her romantic life. Claire credits this dynamic to her aunt's candor regarding romantic relationships. Put simply, her aunt's honest sharing about her own romantic life encourages Claire to share about hers, in return:

[My aunt] felt like growing up there were certain things people wouldn't talk about with her. Like, she felt like she couldn't tell my Grandma some things. So, she never wanted that for my sister and I or for her kids. And so, because of that, she was always honest about things that had happened to her in the past or the relationship she had been in, like what happened with that, where it went. And I think because she's so transparent, I'm more transparent with her.

A few interview participants noted that their LM(s) either: 1) did not share very much within the context of the love mentoring relationship, or 2) shared only surface-level romance-related information. As Vivi explained, although she has heard anecdotes from her mother/significant LM's romantic history through the years, her mother does much more listening than sharing when it comes to romance-related conversation. She says:

She knows what it was like to be a female in college and she relays stories that, I don't know, she feels will resonate with me or help me see some kind of, I don't know, some kind of advice. There are funny tidbits here and there. It's not so guarded. When I was moving or I signed the lease on my Brooklyn apartment and she was like, 'oh, my God. Down that subway stop? I threw up on my boyfriend's shoes down there.' So, I mean, it

comes out in pieces, but for the most part, it's not reciprocal. Like I mean, at the end of the

day, this romance is a lot more confusing at this stage of life. So, she knows that listening

is primarily the job here.

Elisa also characterized her love mentoring relationship with her mother/significant LM as one in

which she does most of the sharing. Elisa believes that the reason for this is that her mother's

grief about the passing of Elisa's dad may make it more difficult for her mother to reminisce

about their relationship. Elisa states:

I would say it's probably more one-sided in terms of me talking about my relationship.

And I think that's not necessarily because she wouldn't talk about her relationship, but

maybe there's just grief surrounding, kind of, that aspect of her relationship. But that's not

to say that she doesn't talk about my dad a lot, too, or their relationship, as well. But I feel

like when we have those conversations, it's definitely more me talking about my own

relationship.

Romantic Relationship Role Modeling

Many participants expressed that their LMs helped them to think and learn about romantic

relationships via relationship modeling - a process through which the mentee is exposed to the

LM's romantic life and perceives it as an example of a healthy and/or positive romantic

relationship. Thus, this phenomenon will be called *romantic modeling* herein.

Romantic modeling is a distinctive mechanism within the love mentoring relationship

because it can take place through observation, requiring no conversation at all. Gina, in discussing

how her Grandfather/LM has shaped her understanding of romantic relationships, recalled the

way her grandparents' caring relationship was often on display, though seldom talked about. Gina

stated:

I don't think we've ever sat down and talked about his love life, but he's open to it in the sense that I've been able to witness it my whole life. Like I've always seen my grandparents caring for each other, like being romantic with each other and holding hands and giving each other kisses. And like he writes her letters and buys her flowers and, like the whole thing, like, I've always been able to see that.

Greta spoke in romantic modeling terms about her professor/significant LM. Greta has served as a TA for this professor for multiple semesters. The professor is in her late twenties and lives with her boyfriend, and Greta has spent time with the two of them on numerous occasions. She admiringly recalled aspects of their relationship in great detail - from the way they communicate using "I statements" to their shared "fundamental values" that unite them in their mutual care for issues like education, anti-racism, and sustainability. Greta discussed what she has learned by watching them interact as a couple:

Watching them together, I can see how much they care about each other. Like the way that they even look at each other. You can see, like, how much love they have for the other person and they're not afraid to, like, show that a bit. And what else? I think that they are also both comfortable with, too, like physical touch and stuff. So it's like they definitely hug a lot and hold hands and connect in those ways. And they have been able to determine what's comfortable for both of them, like, through the communication that they have. But they also know how to navigate disagreements …. I've seen them be able to, like, talk through - not like huge disagreements, obviously - but just like small ones about, like, maybe what to have for dinner.

Greta continues:

[My professor] actually just told me today that apparently women's brains are fully

developed, like, plus or minus two years, around twenty five years of age; and like men's is like twenty seven. And so she first started dating her partner when she was twenty eight, when they were both twenty eight. And so, like, this is kind of her first like real, fully developed adult brain relationship. And so that's something that, like, I'm just not - I haven't gotten there yet. I mean, like, scientifically. I think that so far my relationship seems pretty mature. But, like, I now know …that's what two people with, like, fully developed brains - like that's what their relationship looks like. And so even that is just helpful to see. I mean, they live together. And so it's kind of like a vision into the future of, like, this might be what a healthy functioning relationship looks like when you're in your late twenties and like when you're living on your own and like paying your own expenses.

As Gina and Greta articulated, romantic modeling can be very influential when it takes place through firsthand observation. However, some study participants viewed their LM as a romantic model simply through the way they spoke about their relationship. For example, one survey respondent wrote that a student mentor of hers:

> met her boyfriend on a service immersion trip through [the University], and I saw recently on Instagram that they're engaged… what she said during [our mentoring] meetings spoke to me because of the level of commitment that she and her boyfriend had to each other, especially in college. It made me realize that I wanted to have a relationship like that, and I was willing to wait until there was someone who would have the same level of loyalty and commitment to me.

Not all participants spoke about their LM's relationship in purely positive terms. Some participants depicted their LM(s) as part romantic anti-model. For example, one survey respondent who named both her mother and father as LMs, described the relationship between the

two of them as unequal and unhealthy. However, she also noted that she has since been able to witness her father in a new, healthy romantic relationship - which has been very important to her. She wrote:

> My father lost his voice in his relationship with my mother. She was domineering and took advantage of his carefree, easy going nature. Seeing him move on to a healthy relationship where his opinions are heard, valued, and appreciated, is both empowering to me, and also reminds me of my tendencies to be more similar to my mom. Hearing him express what he needed my mom to do or not do in order for him to feel valued and loved is important as I navigate relationships with traits similar to that of my mom.

Another survey respondent - described their LM as a total anti-role model in romantic relationships. She wrote:

> This person has shown me how to not act in a relationship. Specifically, she demonstrated to me what emotional abuse looked like. For instance, throughout my childhood she would try to alienate my father from other friends and family members, and then claim that she was the one being hurt by my father.

Despite her LM serving as a romantic anti-model, the respondent maintained that she still has learned about romantic relationships from this person, as she can now better evaluate "whether the people I'm interacting with have those [same] tendencies, so I can avoid them."

Mothers and Relationship Modeling. Seven of the interview participants named their mother as one of their LMs; and six of those seven participants cited their mother's relationship to their father as an example of a healthy or loving relationship during the interview. For example, Elisa, who named her mother as her significant LM, reminisced about her parents' relationship

before her father passed away. She admired greatly the way her mother lived out her marriage vows while her father was ill with cancer:

> It really was through sickness and health. And I think that was really amazing to witness. She never complained about it as hard as it was. She really never complained about it. And she kind of just did it because that's what she wanted to do. She wanted to take care of him and love him. So that was really special for me to be able to witness.

Of the seven participants who named their mother as a LM, Hope was the only one who described her parent's relationship as a romantic anti-model. Hope stated, "[My mom] and my dad haven't had, like, an ideal relationship and I don't want their kind of relationship for myself. So I think from that aspect, it was especially hard during high school to kind of open up with her because I just didn't always see eye to eye with things and how she handled things with my dad."

LMs vs. Friendships

Throughout the interviews, participants talked about the way love mentoring relationships function relative to friendships. The results indicate that LMs and same-aged peers are distinct in the way they provide mentees opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic experiences.

One benefit of LMs is that they bring a perspective that is different from their friends - specifically, a perspective that is informed not only by age, but by life experience. For example, one survey respondent explained the importance of hearing "an older perspective, rather than just my friends who are around the same age as I am. I learned a lot from this dynamic because we were able to talk about the results of things in the long run, rather than short term."

Similarly, Alice considered the distinctive roles that her cousin/significant LM and her friends play when it comes to conversations about romantic relationships:

I think with my roommate and best friend, I'm most open with about every single thing just because I feel like she knows me best. But I think my cousin gives better advice because she's just had more life experience. And, like, my roommate does not communicate her emotions to men, which is fine. But it's just, I think my cousin's really just grown so much and knows how to, I don't know… I just respect, I would follow her advice more. But I probably talk to my roommate more about this kind of stuff.

Alice's comment reflects a sentiment that was shared by many participants - love mentoring conversations are valuable, but perhaps not as common as conversations with friends on the same topics. Indeed, conversation with friends about romantic thoughts, feelings, or behaviors was cited by each of the 12 participants; and friends were often described as frequent or easy conversation partners around romance-related topics. When I asked participants to explain why it was so easy to talk to their friends about their romantic experiences, many of them spoke about their friends as proximal to the ongoings of their romantic lives. This was true for Merrill, who described the difference between talking to her high school teacher/LM versus her friends about her romantic experiences: "[my teacher] could help me, but she wasn't in the same situation as me, whereas your friends - some of them are in the same situation."

Madison echoed Alice and Merrill's thoughts on this topic. She expressed that when it comes to her romantic life, her friends "get it" more than her LMs - a difference she credits, in part, to the language that she shares with her friends around romantic experiences. She states that with her friends it's easier "to talk about what it means to be like *talking to someone* or like in *a thing*." She continues:

I don't know, just like sometimes the language is easier, like how it feels to be like twenty one and graduating college. Do you move in? Do you move to the same city? Do you

make decisions around them? And someone going through it might understand it better, or feel it more in a true way than like someone who is twenty years removed.

Claire expressed similar thoughts as she discussed the differences between talking to her mother/LM and her friends about her romantic life. She stated, "It's not that I couldn't go to my mom, but I feel like my friends are in a similar place that I'm at. And so maybe there's more of an understanding of the situation. You know, dating is different than when you were in college, Mom."

Blake shared that she chooses to talk about sex-related topics with her friends, as they are also immersed in the world of hookup culture and dating apps which makes conversation about dating and sex easier than it is with her older sister/significant LM. However, she acknowledges that this distinction is somewhat paradoxical, given that she has a closer relationship with her sister/significant LM, overall. She explains:

> I think with my friends, we actually talk about the most like sex-related stuff. I don't know particularly why, because it's not like my closest relation. Like they're not as close as my sister. Yeah, I don't know how to explain it. But like I'm willing to talk with my friends about sex, but not my sister, but I think it's also because she's my family.

Ashley described romance-related conversation with her friends as "more back and forth" than with her LMs. She explained that hearing about her friends' romantic experiences and what is important to them informs her own thoughts. Then, she will share her thoughts with her friends and they will respond. This highly reciprocal and immersive conversational dynamic with friends was something that Greta also noted. She contrasted the two dynamics between her friends and LMs, noting that with her LMs:

the conversations usually end up being more, like, not philosophical, but more trying to

figure out, like, what are the lessons from this? Whereas with my roommates and friends

that is sometimes something that we kind of talk about, but it's more like this is how I'm

feeling and I want to explain the situation right now. And, like, sometimes I want advice

and sometimes I just want someone to vent to. And so I think that it's more of like a casual

conversation with my roommates and friends where I'm like, this is just kind of what I'm

going through… But it's not trying to figure out the things that I find most valuable in a

relationship or like what a healthy versus unhealthy relationship is. It's not answering

those bigger questions. It's kind of like, okay, we're on the ground right now. Like, what's

a practical solution to this problem? That may lend itself to a bigger conversation, but a lot

of the time it's just like 20 minutes here or there.

Greta's remarks highlight a distinctive aspect of romance-related conversations with friends:

because friends are "on the ground" and in close proximity, they tend to get more detailed, in-the-

moment accounts of romantic experiences. As Camila put it, romance-related conversation with

friends happens in a "catch up format, where you're like this happened and then this happened.

And this is how I feel and this is what it's like. I met this person and it was exciting or it was not

exciting." LMs, on the other hand, are (by definition) outside the mentee's friend circle - a factor

that Greta found very helpful when talking to her professor/significant LM during an

overwhelming period in her romantic life. Greta was in a committed relationship, but had

developed strong feelings for a friend. She did not want to talk to her roommates about what she

was feeling because she feared the information could too easily be leaked. Greta explained:

I didn't want people to know yet, but I wanted to talk to someone about the fact that I

thought I had feelings for someone that I, quote, shouldn't have had feelings for because I

was still in a relationship. And I was like, I don't want this to get back to the person I have

feelings for. I don't want this to get back to the person I'm in a relationship with. And so

she was someone who was far enough away from like the whole college scene.

Similarly, when Madison was deliberating her feelings toward multiple romantic partners,

her mother/significant LM served as a neutral sounding board who had no preconceived

judgments about the individuals in question. She recalled:

My friends at school - like, everyone knew each other. So everyone had their favorite, or

like, things they liked about someone or didn't. So kind of, in a way, it was helpful to not

have the bias of my friends at school being like, 'I don't think you would work' or 'this

would work out because I know you and I know him,' blah, blah, blah. But [my mother]

kind of pushed me to figure it out for myself.

The Content of Love Mentoring Relationships

This section reports on both survey and interview data regarding the content that animates

the conversation and learning facilitated by love mentoring relationships. In the survey,

respondents were asked a multiple response question about the content of their significant love

mentoring relationship. The question read, "Which of the following components of romantic

relationship topics have you discussed, learned about, or considered more deeply as a result of

your relationship with this person?" Respondents were then asked to select from a list of content

categories that applied to their significant love mentoring relationship. The four content categories

were: *Commitment* (decisions around partner selection; how to maintain relationships or love);

Intimacy (the emotional dimension of relationships; love; experiences of closeness and

connection); *Passion* (romantic and physical attraction; decisions around sex and related

activities), and *Sexuality* (sexual orientation; navigating identity expression; experiences of

marginalization). *Commitment, Intimacy*, and *Passion* - including their corresponding definitions - were derived from Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. *Sexuality* was added based on feedback from the focus group conversations. There was also a write-in category labeled *Other*.

Of the 51 respondents who named a significant LM, 94.1% (*n* = 48) of respondents selected the content category *Commitment;* 72.5% (*n* = 37) selected *Intimacy*; 29.4% (*n* = 15) selected *Passion*; and 17.6% (*n* = 9) selected *Sexuality*. Three respondents (5.9%) selected *Other* with the following write-in responses: "Putting yourself first," "abusive relationships," and "parenthood and raising children with a partner." One respondent did not answer the question. Descriptive statistics for these love mentoring content categories - both by case mentions and by response - are located in Table 2. The following sections offer qualitative results pertaining to the content categories of commitment, intimacy, and passion (participants did not provide meaningful data about sexuality as a content category).

Commitment

Commitment was the most frequently cited content category in the survey; and interview participants provided rich descriptions of the ways in which they discussed, learned about or considered more deeply the idea of commitment with their significant LM. Multiple participants noted their significant LM's commitment-focused questions as a way the topic often came up in conversation. For example, Elisa discussed the way her mother/significant LM would frequently inquire about the future of Elisa's relationship with her boyfriend, especially with college graduation only a few weeks away. Elisa recalled the types of questions her mother asked, such as: "Is this someone you see yourself being with? How do you picture it? And not necessarily a timeline, but kind of like - if this is someone you see in your future, like where do you see yourself living with him?"

Camila is also in a committed relationship, however unlike Elisa, Camila is unsure about whether the relationship will continue after graduation, given that she and her boyfriend plan to be working in different cities. This decision is one that Camila's mother/significant LM has inquired about on multiple occasions. She explained:

> I like him and we've decided that we're together, but we also don't know that we will be together past graduation, for practical reasons. A lot of what I understand about it is that a relationship is just a choice to show up. To me showing up has to be physical, like a person showing up. And it was not part of my plans either. So I guess [my mother and I] talk about commitment in the sense that she asks about it and she's like, 'are you sure you want to break up with him? Are you sure? Isn't it weird that you set a date to break up?' And I mean, like, we talk about it and I explain it to her … And it's kind of cool because sometimes it's like the critical thinking of what it means to be 'committed' happens, in terms of this relationship with my mom.

Like Camila, many of the interview participants noted the decision of whether, when, and/or how to end a relationship as a frequent topic of conversation with their LMs. For Madison, who was involved in a two and a half year high school relationship that "engrossed a lot of who [she] was as a teenager," conversations with her mother/significant LM allowed her to consider whether she could maintain a sense of personal identity and wellbeing while in relationship with a partner who was struggling with severe mental health issues:

> My ex-boyfriend went to college near home. And he developed depression and, like, had severe mental health issues and put a lot of it on me. So we had a lot of conversations. And [my mom] also works in special ed. So she has a lot of experience with mental health, which helped. But it became, like, where does the relationship line end and my needs

begin? And what does it mean for me to have a healthy relationship versus it might be the healthier decision to say, for me, 'I need to step away from this. You need to work on yourself.' So we had, like a lot of conversations about that.

When Madison decided it was time to leave her relationship, she appreciated that her mother's direct and pragmatic feedback:

Instead of being like, okay well, 'be careful' and 'it's going to hurt, she was like, 'okay well, how do you think you want to do that? And why do you think that?' I liked that it was very much more practical as opposed to like, I don't know, trying to talk you out of it.

Greta leaned on her professor significantly during the fall of her senior year, when she was engaged in painstaking discernment as to whether she wanted to stay in a relationship with her then boyfriend. At the time, she had not had "romantic feelings" for him in four months, despite putting a lot of energy into the relationship. When she explained her distress to her professor/significant LM, she was reminded about how the greater context of the pandemic could be impacting the way she felt within her relationship. Her professor told her that it is possible that she no longer has romantic feelings toward her boyfriend, but that it is also possible that the pandemic is making it hard for her to feel anything other than fear and a lack of safety. Despite her professor's reassurance and perspective, Greta continued to feel out of sync in her relationship and kept returning to the idea of breaking up with her boyfriend. However, the decision was complicated by the fact that she had also begun to have feelings for a close friend. Stressed and overwhelmed, she called her LM to seek guidance on how to move forward:

I just basically was like, I am going to lose my mind right now. Like, I just started crying because I was like, I don't know what to do. I feel horribly breaking up with someone. I don't want to hurt someone's feelings. I also don't want to mess up this friendship. I don't

know if he's feeling the same way. Like, I'm literally losing my marbles! Yeah, so she was just like absolutely nothing but supportive. And she was like, 'this is okay. And like change is scary. And also, I think that you're doing a really good job of looking internally and like considering how you're actually feeling. And, like, the most important thing is you, now. And I know you care so much about other people's feelings, but you have to take care of yourself.' And so she was just like, 'I'm not going to tell you what to do. I think, like, I think, you know, what the right answer is. I'm here for you, whatever you need.' And then I ended up over the course of a weekend, like, fully deciding to break up with my boyfriend. And I called her right after and cried to her. So, she was really there for me, like the entire time that I was going through this, which was like a really hard, scary time because I was like, I don't know who else I can really lean on. And like, I really like she was the person that, like, I decided to lean on.

While multiple participants discussed ways in which LMs were useful conversation partners when it came to strategizing about whether to or how to break up, LMs were also described as a source of encouragement when it came to pursuing healthy relationships, even in challenging times. For example, Gina recalled her mother's encouragement when she was struggling with the realities of her long distance relationship. Gina observed, "she always, like, cheered me on whenever I was missing him or just struggling with the ideological 'I'll see him in two months' or stuff like that. She was always there."

Consistent with the aforementioned examples, most of the learning and conversation about commitment in the context of love mentoring relationships seemed to be focused on the romantic life of the mentee. However, one participant, Hope, described learning about commitment through a personal story told to her by her grandmother/significant LM. Her grandmother shared with her

an experience from her early thirties when her marital commitment was tested: she ran into a past romantic partner and the man invited her to get coffee and catch up. Hope recalls her grandmother telling her about the encounter:

> And she was like, 'that was like a moment when I was actually challenged. Like, what would have come about if I had said yes?'... It was a moment when she kind of had to decide to stay committed to her relationship and, like, her children and continue to follow that path because she knew that she was married to her best friend, and didn't want to jeopardize or change that. So, I feel like that's just something that has kind of stuck with me and I guess something that I will definitely keep in mind in future relationships, because, I mean, she was very honest about how she was conflicted about whether or not she should go. And then also just kind of like the way she worked through that in making that decision.

Intimacy

Compared to commitment, relational intimacy was a moderately frequent area of conversation and learning within love mentoring relationships. Camila recalled that her first year seminar professor made relational intimacy an explicit component of the course's module on relationships. This included learning about the definition of emotional intimacy and how it contributes to healthy romantic relationships. Camila expressed, "that was also really important in my formation, was having this understanding of what proximity and closeness looks like in a relationship. And how is it healthy? And how could it be unhealthy? So that is also an aspect of what she taught me that really, really mattered."

Apart from learning about intimacy in a didactic context, a number of participants described talking to their LMs about the emotional dimensions of their romantic experiences. For

example, Alice recounted the counsel she received from her older cousin/significant LM regarding her experience of emotional parity in her relationship with her boyfriend:

> I think [my cousin] and I are very similar in the way that we express our feelings very openly about our care for a partner. And I've talked to her about feeling insecure, that I might care more about my partner than they care about me, just because I express it more. And she's had similar things, just because I think guys are trained not to express their emotions… and it's hard to deal with that because you might feel really unloved at times. So, I confided in her about that.

In subsequent conversations, Alice's older cousin helped Alice consider communication strategies that could create opportunities for greater emotional intimacy within her romantic relationship. In a similar way, Merrill's older cousin/significant LM has helped Merrill navigate the emotional dimensions of the hookup scene in college. Specifically, she has encouraged Merrill to be more open with hookup partners about her feelings for them - especially if those feelings change during the course of their relationship.

> She's always pushed me to try to be as open as possible - like, say how I'm feeling - because, she's like, 'well, that's probably why you got hurt, because you don't say how you're truly feeling.' You can't just, like, please them! Because if a guy says they don't want a relationship, but then you guys keep hanging out, then you get attached. And like, maybe I want a relationship. So, you have to tell him that because he - because you agreed with him that you don't want a relationship and now you do. Like, he still thinks that you don't want a relationship! So it's not going to end well. You're just going to get more hurt down the road once it ends.

For Vivi, her mother/significant LM has been someone with whom she has discussed, on occasion, the emotional dimensions of her romantic life. In particular, her mother has encouraged Vivi to explore the potential benefits of letting her emotional guard down and embracing vulnerability within her relationships. Vivi shares:

> I mean, or I don't think I've ever been in love… we've definitely talked about that. I mean, I'm not someone who is the most, like, outwardly emotionally vulnerable. Like, I put my guards up and she's kind of one to say, 'I get you, I get why you have them. But like, let's talk about how it might be good to pull those down.' I even think in her own life, it's, I think it's been a similar experience. Like as she's gotten older, she's realized that pulling those guards down is not always bad and kind of has informed her, like, through intimacy, like it's not something to be afraid of. Like, yeah, scope it out, be skeptical if you can, but then you gotta let go a little bit. So we've talked about that. Definitely not like the main focus of the conversation. I mean, she knows how I am. I'm kind of, like, a tough lady - I don't know how else to say it. It's like, I'm not one to just go falling in love with everybody on the street. So, she's kind of informed me that sometimes you can. It's okay.

Passion

Interview participants articulated a wide range of experiences when it came to thinking, learning and discussing the topic of passion in their love mentoring relationships. On one end of the spectrum, some participants reported that it is simply not a topic that is acknowledged by them or their LM. This dynamic seemed to be particularly prevalent within family dyads, especially with LMs who were parental figures.

For example, growing up Vivi occasionally remembers her mother/significant LM offering vague, hypothetical prohibitions about sex, such as 'don't be giving it to everybody,' As

she put it, "it wasn't like, 'Yeah! Go! It's a fun, natural thing - that was not the - that was not how it was." In recent years, Vivi has begun sharing elements of her dating life with her mother, however they still do not explicitly address the sexual dimension of her romantic encounters. She explains:

> I keep a list. I've gone on fifty one first dates. I was like 'I hit number fifty last weekend' and [my mom's] like, 'that's crazy. I don't think I've ever gone on 50 dates in my life!' And, ya know, the older I get, like, it just becomes more casual, becomes more of like a friendship. Like sure there are certain things we don't talk about because that's still my mom. But when it comes to relationships, I'm open about that, ya know. Definitely, like, not sex. Like, that's not something we'll ever bring up. Like we both kind of know it's happening, but definitely not something we'll address. But, you know, going on a date: how was he? Ya know, where does he live? What's his deal? She kind of wants to know. And I feel very open and able to tell her, like, what it was like.

Notably, Vivi mentioned that she and her mother both know "kind of know" that Vivi sometimes engages in sexual activity with the men she dates, however that part of her romantic life never explicitly enters the conversation. Gina echoed a similar sentiment regarding romance-related conversation with her father/LM:

> In terms of, like the passion, romantic part of it? Not at all to be mentioned. I feel like he would have a heart attack. As far as we've gone is that he knows that [my boyfriend] sleeps over occasionally. And I feel like it took him a long time to come to terms with that, like he never talked about it with me. But it's something that he, you know, that he probably struggled with.

Camila discussed that when passion often comes up in conversation between her and her mother/LM it is not through explicit discussions about sex, but rather via her mother's questions about Camila's attraction to potential romantic partners. Camila explains:

> I think sometimes the version of my love life that [my mother] hears is like, 'oh yeah, he liked me, I don't really like him back. He's my friend.' And so… she is like, 'do you like him? Like, do you really like him? Like, you want to kiss him, like him?' So it's like her probing into this idea of attraction just because we have so many stories of, like, times that I was, like, 'eh' - indifferent.

Blake also reported talking about attraction with her sister/significant LM, however she does not talk to her sister about sex - at least not explicitly. Instead, they will talk about it in a coded or "even like a covert way. Like always joking, maybe drunk." Similarly, two other participants noted ways in which sex was often addressed through humor within their love mentoring relationship: Elisa recalled her mother bringing up the topic "in a joking manner at the dinner table" causing her sister cover her ears in embarrassment; and Madison recounted her mother's "hilarious" forewarning from her high school days: "you can't bring a baby to Harvard. Just remember that."

For two of the participants, the topic of passion in romantic relationships played a central role in conversation with LMs. One of those participants was Greta, who described conversation around sex as an easy, open, and frequent topic of conversation with her professor/significant LM. While it was never something she felt comfortable talking about with other people before, she credits her professor's openness in helping her understand what a healthy sex life looks like and how to be more confident and comfortable in her own sexual relationships.

For Ashley, the physical dimension of relationships has been a primary part of her conversations with her Spiritual Director/significant LM, as she has explored how she - as a Catholic woman - can integrate the romantic and sexual parts of her identity with her spirituality:

> I think a lot of the dialogue that we've had on romantic relationships has kind of talked about sexual intimacy just because of the different dialogues from the Church and other people who hold, like, religious authority … So, one is the idea of shame and guilt that I feel like is very prevalent in the Catholic Church. And I had shared an experience freshman year where after, like, I was with someone, I was like, okay, now I need to go to confession. And I actually went to confession. And then [my Spiritual Director] kind of reciprocated and shared a similar story from when she was younger, about having had someone be like, 'oh, I think we should go to confession before we can go to church together again.' And so kind of that idea of, like, shame and guilt.

Judgment as a barrier to Mothers as LMs. Of the five interview participants who did not name their mother as a LM, two offered insight into why they seldom discuss romance-related topics with their mothers. In both cases, participants shared that their mothers' more "traditional" perspective had caused them to feel or fear judgment on account of their sexual behavior.

Alice recalls an experience with her mother when her mother became aware of something that had gone on within Alice's romantic life that she disapproved of. In response, she told Alice that she "shouldn't be that type of girl" - an admonishment that has had a lasting impact on how she chooses to engage with her mother on romance-related topics. Alice explains:

> I think maybe the reason I don't like talking to her about it as much … when I was younger, I remember - this is the only word I can think of for it - being like slut shamed a bit. I think she would be mortified if I ever said that and would feel so bad. But I definitely

feel like that was kind of the gist of it. Like, if she knew I was kind of seeing guys. It was like, oh, you should be ashamed because, I don't know... She's not that religious, but she's just like traditional. And so it has made me more uncomfortable, like opening up about that kind of stuff.

For Merrill, her mother's traditionalism is intertwined with religious conservatism around sexual activity outside of marriage. This perspective makes it challenging for Merrill to feel as though she can be honest about her own romantic life, which is steeped in modern day hookup culture.:

My family is very traditional, very old school. And [my mother] does not get it, like the hookup culture of college. And I think that's definitely not just her. A lot of people her age feel that same way, too. And I think because we come from a pretty religious family, she kind of sees it more as like a sin. And she's like, you can't do, like, you shouldn't be doing that. And like, it's almost like the movie, not *The Scarlet Letter… Easy A. Easy A*. Yeah. And so, I think she kind of, like, sees it more like that. Like if you're kind of hooking up with people then you can be seen as easy and a guy won't want to hang out with you because you're easy, which is definitely not the case because they're doing the same thing. And it's kind of like the whole culture has changed so it's less bad than it was when she was growing up. I don't want to explain to her that, like, oh yeah, we're just hooking up. And she has no idea that, like, I have had sex and she will not have any idea. I won't say anything, probably until I'm married. And I could leave it at that. I guess I've avoided that, like, forever. Like, I never want to talk about it, about that with her. So I've kind of avoided the whole romantic part because if I don't talk about it, then she can't ask about it.

From Alice and Merrill's perspective, their mothers' traditional approaches to sex and relationships are out of sync with the lived reality of their romantic experiences. From a love mentoring perspective, these mother-daughter relationships demonstrate one way in which judgment - or even the perceived threat of judgment - can serve as a barrier to the open and honest communication that appears to characterize high quality love mentoring relationships.

Relational Health of LMRs

Results of the adapted RHI-M provide some quantitative insight into the relational health of survey respondents' significant love mentoring relationship. The means of the RHI-M and the three subscales were high, with an overall RHI-M mean of 4.094 (SD = .669) out of a maximum of 5.[9] Descriptive data for each of the 3 sub-scales (empowerment/zest, engagement, authenticity) and the overall RHI-M scale are located in Table 3.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the relational health of different types of significant love mentoring relationships (family members, University figures, other LMs). There was no statistically significant difference in relational health (RHI-M overall or subscales) among any of the groups.

Why They Matter: The Influence of Love Mentoring Relationships

Previously, I have outlined results pertaining to the prevalence of love mentoring relationships, LM types and characteristics, as well as the underlying mechanisms, content, and relational health of love mentoring relationships. This section reports on the influence of significant love mentoring relationships on participants' understanding of healthy relationships, confidence in their romantic life, and romance-related aspirations for the future.

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[9] This composite mean appears to be consistent with studies that have used the RHI-M with a similar sample, including a study of 450 first- and fourth-year female undergraduates that resulted in a RHI-M composite mean of 4.06 (SD = 0.56) (Liang et al., 2002a).

Influencing Thinking: Conceptualizations of Healthy Romantic Relationships

Participants described their LMs as people who have influenced their understanding of healthy romantic relationships. Often, this influence was exerted through mentees' observing their LM within their romantic relationship and being witness to "healthy" (as defined by mentees) patterns of behavior.

For Greta, her professor/significant LM's romantic relationship not only serves as a model of a healthy romantic relationship, but as a benchmark on which she bases the health of her own romantic relationship. When her professor draws parallels between their respective romantic relationships, Greta views it as an indicator that her own relationship with her boyfriend is healthy and strong:

> I kind of base what I think of a healthy relationship off of where she is now, because I recognize, like, how happy the two of them are and how fulfilled both of them feel. And can recognize healthy communication when I see it, too. And so if I ever talk about something that I'm experiencing, I kind of like base my perception of, like, what healthy means, depending on if she talks about her parallel experiences with her current relationship versus ones that I know in the past that weren't that good.

Some participants noted that witnessing their significant LM's relationship was valuable precisely because they did not grow up with models of healthy romantic relationships. As Blake explained, "I'm really thankful for my sister because she showed me a healthy relationship where I might not have ever seen one before entering into my own." However, some participants, like Elisa, described their parents' marriage as a blueprint of a healthy and loving partnership. Elisa discussed how her mother/significant LM has shown her the importance of:

just trying to be your best in terms of being patient or being loving and respectful. And I think she has definitely shown me how to do that. And that's not to say that my parents didn't have the occasional fight because they definitely did. They bickered like everyone does. But I think the way that they respected each other after those, I guess, many arguments or disagreements was something that I definitely looked up to her for.

Like Elisa, multiple participants spoke to the ways in which their significant LM helped to show them that healthy romantic relationships do not have to be perfect. Claire recounted a story that her senior-year seminar professor/significant LM shared in class about a compromise she made in her marriage: Her professor really wanted a dog, but her husband did not. Getting a dog was really important to her, but she loved her husband more than the idea of getting a dog. And because her work schedule is more demanding, he would have to be the one taking care of it. So, they compromised and got a cat that does not require as much attention. For Claire, through that example her professor shared, she learned that in romantic relationships:

> it's okay if everything isn't necessarily perfect. There are big areas where, you know, if it's not working out there, like something doesn't align, maybe that's an issue. But if there's a small part of the relationship that doesn't bother you, don't necessarily let that ruin the whole thing.

Similarly, Gina discussed the ways in which her mother/significant LM has taught her "the importance of just not believing everything you see in movies, where like a person has a fight and they break up and that's it." Instead, her mother has always put an emphasis on the importance of talking through disagreements, understanding a partner's perspective, forgiveness, and mutual respect - which Gina views as the hallmarks of a healthy relationship.

Influencing Feelings: Increased Romantic Confidence

Half of the participants cited ways in which a LM has helped them grow in confidence with respect to their romantic lives. For example, Madison expressed that her mother/significant LM is someone who listens and asks the important questions, but never tells her what to do when it comes to her romantic life: "I feel like it's improved my confidence, knowing I could do it on my own and that I'm not like running to her for answers." In a similar vein, Camila's professor/significant LM has been empowering influence by helping her see that she is "driving the ship" of her own life, particularly when it comes to romantic relationships. As Camila stated, "Knowing that, like, I have control of who I see or don't see. What I want, what I don't want. It has really made a huge difference."

Beyond reminding her that she is in control of her romantic decision-making, Camila's professor has also bolstered her sense of self-worth by helping her to internalize "this idea of being enough." Camila explains:

> It sounds like a Bruno Mars song, but I think that it has been incredibly important to realize that, like, the right people, they stay. Like they choose to show up. And you don't need to go through, like, seven different challenges for the right person because just being you is enough. And that's great. So I think in that sense, she has really impacted my confidence in relationships.

Hope's grandmother/significant LM has given her confidence in who she is by reminding her of her value and importance, irrespective of her involvement in a romantic relationship. She emphasized the importance of knowing oneself well before entering into a relationship "so that you always keep in sight, like, who you are as an individual" - which has played an important role in how Hope thinks about her romantic life and herself, overall.

Greta also spoke to ways her confidence has been strengthened by her relationship with her professor/significant LM. She recounted a specific piece of "life advice" that her professor had shared with her class during a recent conversation about consent: "if it's not an enthusiastic yes, then it's a no." This piece of wisdom, which can apply far beyond its conventional application to sexual decision-making, resonated deeply with Greta. She stated:

> I think that it helps me to feel more confident in the decisions that I make with relationships, with relation to partners or in pretty much any decision. It's like if I don't feel strongly and comfortable in something, then that's okay, and I don't have to explain. She makes me feel like I don't necessarily have to explain myself, like, to death because I feel a certain way. And so it's definitely, like, improved my confidence, my own decision making and like my own, like, ability to believe myself when I say how I feel about something.

Influencing Aspirations: Romance-Related Hopes & Expectations

Beyond influencing their romance-related thoughts and feelings, participants also shared that their LMs have influenced their romance-related aspirations for the future. Many participants articulated a desire to someday have a romantic life or romantic relationship similar to their LM's. For example, Blake conveyed that she would very much like to have a relationship like the one her older sister/significant LM shares with her boyfriend. She described their relationship as "really steady and stable" and noted that the "routinized" rhythm of their relationship is something that she would like to experience for herself. She continues:

> For me, like, I look at their stability and I'm like - they just seem like best friends. And I really want that for myself, like just someone to finish the workday with, order some food or like cook some really nice food together, watch TV, cuddle and go to bed.

Blake also expressed that her older sister's relationship is a deviation from the typical relational patterns she sees depicted in the media, or even what she sees among her friends' romantic relationships. However, while she "might have expected something more, like, tumultuous and passionate," her sister's relationship has allowed her to see, up close, that romantic relationships can also be "stable and at peace."

Alice's love mentoring relationship with her older cousin/significant LM has made her more comfortable with the idea of being in a committed relationship now and in the future. Similar to the way Blake's sister provides her an alternative model of a relationship in early adulthood, Alice's significant LM has shown her "a more mature mindset than a lot of college people have about relationships." This mindset has allowed her to feel better about the opportunity cost associated with partnering up in her twenties - a time when many of her peers think they are "supposed to be single." She explains:

> I think there is this belief that in your twenties you should be dating around and meeting new people, which is, like, great. And I wouldn't be opposed to that. But I think [my cousin] has kind of given me security in knowing if I stay with my boyfriend that I've been dating the last two years and go on and marry him, I'm not, like missing out on an experience like that.

Hope expressed that she has always looked up to the relationship that her grandmother/significant LM shares with her grandfather. She admires them not only for the duration of their relationship, but for the commitment they have made to working through challenging seasons of their relationship. She elaborated:

> I think finding, like, your best friend who you do want to spend the rest of your life with, like, that's a huge thing that I want to follow in their footsteps, which is a really hard thing

to do. But I think they acknowledge that, like they acknowledge the fact that, like, there were times they weren't sure that's what they still wanted. But they committed to each other and they followed through and worked to fix things if they were broken. So I think being able to embody that is like the biggest thing that I would like to follow in their footsteps.

As Camila imagines her romantic future, marriage and children are part of the picture. However, she holds these ideas somewhat loosely, believing that she could also be happy without ever getting married. Camila credits her professor/significant LM for both providing a model of a committed partnership that is "loving and honest and healthy" but also making it okay to not want that: "So, like, feeling like I don't have to be in a relationship is also a way that she has encouraged what I want for the future."

Like Camila, Vivi looks at marriage as something she will likely pursue, though she often questions the feasibility of finding and committing to a partner for a lifetime. Her mother/significant LM has been a source of hopefulness for Vivi - through conversation and example - that marriage, or whatever romantic future she desires, is possible:

> I think [my mother] has kind of shown me that even though it sounds hard, it can be done, ya know? Like if you want to marry someone, then, yeah, be on the lookout because not everybody is marriage material. But it's like - it'll happen, ya know? You put the effort in, you pray somebody shows up like it's, it's very possible. I think that's kind of the word that's coming to mind: it's possible. It could happen - whatever kind of future you want, ya know?

Satisfaction with Love Mentoring Relationships

Toward the end of each interview, participants were asked about their satisfaction with both the quantity and quality of their love mentoring relationships. Eight of the twelve participants shared that they were generally satisfied with both the quantity and quality of their love mentoring relationships. Many of these eight participants highlighted diversity among the types of LMs (family members, University figures, etc.) as a primary reason for their satisfaction. As Elisa put it, "I go to people for different things, so being able to have those different people that I can go to when I struggle or need to talk is really helpful."

Conversely, for the four participants who were not satisfied with their love mentoring relationships, their dissatisfaction was centered on the quantity of their LMs, not with the quality of their existing love mentoring relationships. For example, Alice wished she had more experienced people to talk to about romance-related topics outside of her friend group: "I'm bad at maintaining mentors and especially bringing up stuff like that feels unnatural. So, I would love to have more people I could talk to about that who have more life experience."

Gina felt that it would be beneficial to have a LM outside of her family who would be a more unbiased source of support. She also expressed that having a non-familial LM would free her up to talk more honestly about the sexual dimension of her romantic life. She stated, "I feel like deep down I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to my mom about sex and stuff like that, and I would to a complete random person that is, like, meant to help you with stuff." Hope echoed a similar sentiment to Gina regarding her love mentoring relationships:

> The quality, I think, is definitely there …. Maybe every once in a while it would kind of be nice to have another person to talk about it with who is like, I don't know, just serves a different role in my life, kind of. I don't know, maybe another person like my [Journey

mentor], like another kind of mentor like that, that's not related or necessarily a close friend of mine.

Love Mentorship Through the Journey Program

While only four of the twelve interview participants identified their Journey mentor as a LM, all of the participants were asked to reflect upon their experience engaging with romance-related topics through the Journey program. Strikingly, all twelve participants described a deep sense of satisfaction with the Journey program and the role it played in helping them think, learn, and talk about romance-related topics.

Camila has had a lot of conversations about relationships at the University, and appreciates that she has had so much space to do so. However, she expressed that sometimes the conversations "feel preachy because they lack real life experience." In that sense, her experience in the Journey program has been distinct. She explains that the Journey program:

has been really special because it's not just about learning what is a healthy relationship, but it's us hearing stories about what does a healthy relationship, to your knowledge, look like? And what does it not look like? …. We get to have these conversations and hear about mentors' lives and, like, how it went, how things played out. And I think that that's super special to me, especially as a senior who is leaving. That has brought me an immense amount of comfort, actually.

Madison echoed Camila's reflections on her satisfaction with the Journey program and her appreciation for the romance-related storytelling by the mentors: "It was just helpful to hear people, not that made it out, but that are past kind of like the college romance stage of life. And, like, what it means to be an adult in a working relationship or even a failed relationship." Gina, too, articulated the power of hearing stories of romantic resilience from "people who are so

accomplished" but who "overcame something very difficult." As she stated, "I didn't think I

needed to hear anything about relationships because I feel like I'm in a very healthy place right

now with that. But it was just good to reflect on it and think more deeply about it."

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Through this study, I sought to understand the presence, nature, quality and influence of love mentoring relationships in the lives of college women enrolled in a university-based mentoring program. The results provide insight into: the prevalence of love mentoring, common types and qualities of LMs, the mechanisms and content that characterize love mentoring relationships, and love mentoring's influence on healthy romantic development. In the previous chapter, these results were thoroughly detailed and presented in accordance with my guiding research questions and sub-questions. In this chapter, I offer an overview of the study's most important findings in the context of relevant literature and theory. These findings are organized into six integrative themes that emerged through the analytic process. Following the presentation of key findings, I address implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

Key Findings

Within the context of relevant literature and theory, the study's most important findings are distilled into six integrative findings, or themes, that emerged through the analytic process.

1. Love mentoring is prevalent in families and universities

To date, *love mentoring* is not a term that has been used or explicitly investigated in the field of psychological science. Thus, the foundational finding from this dissertation is that love mentoring is a phenomenon that exists in the population of interest (college women). When asked to report how many love mentoring relationships were present in their lives, survey respondents reported that they had an average of 3 LMs.

All but four survey respondents identified at least one love mentor in the survey. Notably, all four of these respondents identified as Asian. This finding is not inconsistent with previous

research citing discomfort among Asian American adolescents when it comes to discussing sex with parental figures, stemming from culturally based values and attitudes that make the topic taboo (Morgan et al., 2010). Additionally, culture may affect the development of love mentoring relationships within the University setting. Research by Liang and colleagues (2006) found that Asian American students were less likely to form mentor relationships compared with Euro-American peers, despite the fact that they were no less likely to value the notion of having mentor relationships. For example, characteristics of Asian culture (i.e., status hierarchy, emotional restriction) may inhibit Asian American students from initiating mentor relationships with individuals they view as authority/mentor figures - particularly when the mentor is non-Asian. Given the underrepresentation of faculty and administrators of color in higher education, continued research on how university figures can support the development and maintenance of love mentoring relationships with BIPOC students is needed.

Regarding the types of LMs that were cited by respondents, family members were the most common category: nearly 70% ($n = 38$) of respondents named at least one family member as a LM. Remarkably, 33 (60%) of respondents named their mother as one of their LMs (the most common LM type); and for 27 (53%) respondents, their mother was identified as their most significant LM.[10] This finding underscores the primacy of mothers in college women's understanding of their romantic selves and their ability to make sense of the ongoings of their romantic lives. Conversely, fathers were named as LMs much less frequently by respondents ($n = 5$, 9%) and none of the participants identified their fathers as their most significant LM.

Behind mothers, the second most frequently cited type of LM was University Figures, which constituted 27.8% ($n = 25$) of all LMs identified, and 21.5% ($n = 11$) of significant LMs.

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[10] Percentages reflect the share of all respondents ($n=55$) including those who did not name any LMs ($n=4$).

The prevalence of University faculty and administrators as LMs highlights their unique

positioning as non-familial adults in shaping the romance-related learning, thinking, and

conversation in which college students are actively engaged. It is also striking that nearly two-

thirds (63.6%) of survey respondents reported that they have had at least one conversation with a

University figure about romance-related topics. This percentage is much higher than the 38.2% of

respondents who actually named a University Figure as a LM, which could mean that University

Figures were less likely to earn one of the three identified slots in the survey because they were

deemed as significant in the eyes of respondents who had more than three individuals they could

name.

Another factor that could explain this data discrepancy is respondents' discernment

between University Figures who they have engaged with on romance-related topics in group

settings vs. those they have a more personal love mentoring relationship. It is possible that

respondents interpreted "conversation with a University figure" as inclusive of group

conversations leading them to "count" any professor or group mentor figure who has ever spoken

about romance-related topics in their presence. That is not to say that group-level love mentoring

cannot exert a powerful influence on college students. Throughout the interviews, participants

referenced 16 distinct courses, retreats, mentorship programs, and leadership opportunities

through which they have had the opportunity to think, learn, and talk about romantic relationships

within the University setting, including the Journey program.

Regarding the Journey program, 82.9% of respondents who reported having a

conversation with a University figure also said they had engaged in conversation with their

Journey mentor about romance-related topics. While this is a high percentage, it is surprising this

data is not closer to 100% given that romantic relationships is a theme that is explicitly addressed

through the Journey program. In the interviews, two participants mentioned that they were absent on the evening of the program when mentors gave talks on romantic relationships, so it is possible that program attendance/engagement could moderate this finding. It is also important to note that the question about romance-related conversation with Journey mentors was only asked to participants who had answered affirmatively to having had at least one romance-related conversation with a University figure. Unfortunately, this survey logic limits interpretation of the data.

Throughout many of the interviews, participants expressed a subtle preference for what would be considered a team approach to love mentoring, in which they have a diverse collection of LMs to turn to for conversation, guidance, and support. Along these same lines, multiple participants expressed a desire for a LM in a particular area of their life where they currently did not have one (e.g., Gina desiring a LM outside of her family). These findings are consistent with literature on developmental networks - an understanding of mentoring as a constellation of high support from a broad range of sources (Dobrow et al., 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007). Importantly, no participants expressed that they have too much love mentoring in their life, and a third of interview participants expressed they would like to have more LMs. This is a particularly significant finding, in light of the fact that the 12 interview participants were chosen precisely because they have a lot of love mentoring in their lives (i.e., each of them has at least 2 LMs of relatively high quality). So, if some of these participants crave more love mentoring in their lives, it is likely that the broader population of college women do, as well.

2. Love Mentors are trustworthy

LMs are often family members or other close adult relations, but they are not chosen for their proximity. Instead, LMs are chosen because they are viewed by the mentee as trustworthy.

While trust is an important component of many different types of interpersonal relationships, it may play a particularly important role for love mentoring relationships due to the highly personal nature of romantic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Participants recounted a wide variety of personal information pertaining to their romantic life that they shared with their LMs - ranging from the mundane (e.g., dating recaps, post-grad relationship plans) to the emotionally complex (e.g., decisions around breaking up, feelings of romantic insecurity) to distressing situations/crises (e.g., pregnancy scares, experiences of sexual assault). Repeatedly, LMs were described as individuals who were capable of hearing and holding this type of personal information.

Beyond trusting LMs with the important details of their romantic lives, study participants also articulated a deep trust in the feedback, advice, and wisdom that was shared by LMs in return. LMs were frequently described as "blunt" and "*real*" by participants, who seemed to find great comfort in the assurance that their LMs could be trusted to provide an honest take. Multiple participants appreciated the way their mentors were unafraid to challenge them - often helping them to reconsider assumptions or see a situation from a new perspective.

Furthermore, advice on romantic decision-making seemed to be a fundamental component of love mentoring relationships. In some love mentoring relationships, advice seemed to be woven into the fabric of relationships, and was offered freely on an ongoing basis. In others, it was primarily offered when it was explicitly solicited; and the value to mentees came knowing they could always reach out to seek guidance on a particular relational challenge or situation.

LMs often rooted their advice in their own romantic experiences - both past and current. While LMs motivations for sharing about their own romantic experience cannot be fully known from the data, participants painted a picture of purposeful sharing on the part of LMs. That is to say, LMs appeared to share stories and experiences that were relevant to the mentee's

circumstances - often using their own romantic life and relationships to normalize relational challenges, share wisdom, or provide an example of decision-making related to romantic relationships. This pattern of wisdom sharing within love mentoring relationships may help to explain why women were disproportionately named as LMs by survey respondents - and why the majority of interview participants reported that sharing a female gender identity with a LM was important to them. Female LMs are not just able to provide advice based on their romantic experience, they are able to provide it based on their romantic experience *as a woman* - which includes navigating a distinct set of cultural pressures and threats (e.g., sexual double standard, the pursuit of traditional family roles, increased risk of sexual violence) within the overwhelmingly heteronormative and gendered landscape of romantic relationships in college. This is not to say that male LMs cannot understand "the difficulties that may come with [being a woman]" in romantic relationships (Gina), but they cannot base advice on first-hand experience.

3. Love mentoring relationships support self-worth

Throughout the survey and interviews, LMs were frequently described as emotionally supportive individuals who approached love mentoring conversations from a place of care and concern for the mentee's wellbeing. Across the board, LMs enthusiastic inquiries into mentees' romantic experiences and nonjudgmental approaches to listening signaled to mentees a genuine investment in their lives. Moreover, in some exemplary cases, love mentoring relationships were depicted by participants as empowering and affirming wellsprings of self-worth (e.g., Merrill's older cousin telling her she deserved to be treated better by hookup partners, a survey respondent's LM helping her to see the value in herself during a time when she was questioning her worth). In RCT terms, love mentoring relationships seem to exhibit one of the essential

qualities of growth-fostering relationships: empowerment/zest - which is "the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action" (Liang et al., 2002b).

The fact that love mentoring relationships can promote feelings of self-worth among mentees is particularly important when it is considered within the greater context of the experience of women at the University. As noted previously, the University's own data indicated that female students leave the University with lower self-confidence than when they entered four years earlier, in contrast to their male counterparts who gained self-confidence despite not performing as well in the classroom. The faculty committee that investigated these findings - through multiple methods of qualitative inquiry - found hookup culture to be one of the most frequently cited threats to self-esteem cited by female students. This finding is consistent with research that has cited the physical health risks and negative emotional consequences of hookup culture - both of which are greater for women (Napper et al., 2016). However, despite the physical and emotional downsides, hooking up is a behavior that the majority of students engage in at some point during their college experience (Garcia et al., 2012). It is possible that for students who are engaged in a high quality love mentoring relationship, the relationship may buffer the negative effect on self-worth ostensibly caused by hookup culture or other challenging romantic experiences.

4. Conversation around sex complicates love mentoring

By far, commitment was the most frequently cited content category in the survey and interviews. This makes intuitive sense because while conversation around commitment (i.e., decisions around partner selection, how to maintain relationships or love) is still an undoubtedly personal topic, it may require less vulnerability than talking about the emotional dimension of one's romantic relationships (intimacy) or physical attraction/sexual behavior (passion). For

example, many participants described conversation around commitment to be as straightforward as a LM inquiring about whether they were dating anyone. That is not to say that the commitment content of love mentoring relationships was not important to participants. Many of them described the value of their LM as a conversation partner around breaking up, which research has shown is a frequent experience during late adolescence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

In contrast to commitment, the topic of passion in the context of love mentoring relationships is fraught with complexity. Interview participants articulated a broad range of engagement with their LMs around topics such as attraction and sex in romantic relationships - ranging from open and easy dialogue to completely ignoring their existence, let alone their centrality to many romantic relationships. This finding is consistent with past studies which suggest, for example, that parents and adolescents are more reluctant to discuss sex than other topics (Riesch et al., 2000). Indeed, multiple participants described the idea of acknowledging the sexual dimension of their lives with parents or other adult figures as "awkward." It is important to note that participants' discomfort with discussing sex with their parents is not necessarily problematic. In fact, such feelings of awkwardness may simply reflect healthy boundaries within the parent-adolescent relationship - which might evolve as an adolescent develops an increased understanding of their own sexuality and reckons with their parent's understanding of them (acknowledged or not) as a sexual being.

However, some participants admitted that it was actually a fear of judgment on account of their sexual behavior that prohibited them from talking about sex with their LM. In some cases, that fear of judgment was so pervasive it prevented mentees from talking about anything pertaining to their romantic lives with adults whom they are otherwise very close to (e.g., Alice and Merrill's reflections on their mothers whom they did not name as LMs). In this way,

conversation about sex seems to complicate - and in some cases, thwart - love mentoring relationships, as many LM-mentee dyads dance around the topic. Instead, many participants reported that they save conversation about sex for their friends.

Context may play a role here: namely, the University's identity as a religiously-affiliated institution. Relatedly, the majority of study's participants ($n = 39$, 71%) identified themselves with a particular religion (as opposed to being agnostic, atheist, or not having a particular religious identity); and for nearly half the sample, that religion was Catholicism. It is not clear how these contextual and identity-based factors could impact the findings. On the one hand, it could be assumed that students enrolled in a religiously-affiliated institution (many of whom identify spiritually themselves) might be more reluctant to engage in conversation about sex and related topics, particularly if their behaviors misalign with the sexual ethics of their own religion or that of the University. On the other hand, qualitative inquiry into college students' thinking about sex, dating, romance, and spirituality has found that, contrary to assumption, attitudes about the intersection of sexuality and faith among Catholic college students is about the same as it is for students who attend a private-secular or public institution. Many Catholic college students believe that religious views about sexuality are outdated and/or irrelevant to their modern day romantic lives (Freitas, 2008). So, while it is possible that the religious identity of the participants and the University could influence this finding, more research is required to understand if and how spirituality impacts the content of love mentoring relationships.

5. Love mentors are distinct from friends

LMs are not, by definition, same-aged peers; and they played a distinct role from friends in participants' romance-related thinking, learning, and conversation. Participants' reflections on their friendships confirmed what has already been made clear by an abundance of research:

adolescents rely heavily on friends for support and advice in navigating the complexities of dating and romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Korobov & Thorne, 2006; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Multiple participants articulated that because their friends are "on the ground" (Greta) and in close proximity, romance-related conversations with them are more immediate, frequent, and casual - often following a "catch up format," (Camila). Participants also described a prevailing sense that friends simply get what it is like to navigate romantic relationships within the modern day college context; whereas older adults sometimes struggle to understand the nuances. Madison provided a prime example of this perceived intergenerational disconnect when she stated that even the shared language around romantic relationships (e.g., "talking to someone," "a thing," "situationship") makes it easier to talk to her friends over other adults in her life, such as her mother.

Unlike friends, LMs are typically situated outside of the day-to-day ongoings of the mentee's romantic and social life - and it is precisely this outsider status from which they derive their value. Participants described LM's as providing a perspective that is different from their friends in that it is informed not only by age, but by life experience. In contrast to the highly reciprocal and immersive conversational dynamic shared by friends, participants described love mentoring relationships as sites of deep reflection about some of life's - and love's - "big questions." Greta distilled the distinction between friends and LMs powerfully when she explained how the two help her approach romantic challenges: her friends help her think through "What's a practical solution to this problem?" whereas her LM helps her reflect upon "What are the lessons from this?"

6. Love mentors promote healthy romantic development through conversation and modeling

Throughout the survey and interview data, LMs were depicted as capable of promoting healthy romantic development through both conversational and observational mechanisms. Conversation, in particular, was described as a ubiquitous source of learning and support in love mentoring relationships. Indeed, multiple participants cited one-on-one, in depth discussions with LMs as a catalyst for attitudinal or behavioral change within their romantic life (e.g., Greta's professor encouraging decisions that feel like an "enthusiastic yes", Alice's older cousin coaching her on communication strategies to employ in her relationship).

Through conversation, LMs are also able to provide a window into their own romantic life by sharing anecdotes from their past or current romantic relationships and lessons they have learned along the way (e.g., Hope's grandmother telling her about a time she declined an invitation to reconnect with a former romantic interest; Vivi's mother sharing funny tidbits with her from her early dating life). For non-familial LMs, such as university figures, conversational storytelling is typically the only way to convey relational expertise, as mentees are not exposed to the romantic lives of non-familial LM's firsthand (though there are some exceptions, e.g., Greta and her professor). In fact, storytelling appears to be a primary mechanism underlying group-based love mentoring, such as the Journey program - in which participants have the opportunity to hear about pieces of a mentor's romantic experience.

In addition to conversational storytelling, romantic modeling was another way that mentees learned from LMs about healthy romantic relationships. Romantic modeling is a distinctive mechanism within love mentoring relationships because it can take place through observation. The vast majority of participants who had the opportunity to observe their LM's

romantic relationship viewed it in a positive, if not idealistic, light (e.g., Elisa praising her mother's selfless care for her sick father before he passed; Gina admiring her grandparents' physical displays of affection and romantic gestures). Additionally, LM romantic modeling also fueled participants' future romantic aspirations, as many participants articulated a desire for their romantic life (or relationship) to emulate that of their LM (e.g., Blake wanting a steady and stable relationship like the one her older sister shares with her boyfriend). In this way, conversational storytelling and romantic modeling by LMs can promote healthy romantic relationships, so far as they actually depict healthy romantic functioning.

While a number of participants could easily identify relationships that they view as romantic anti-model (i.e., a romantic relationship that exemplifies the opposite of what one wants for their own romantic life), they very rarely named one of the involved individuals as a LM. Among the twelve interview participants, the one exception was Hope, who named her mother as a LM despite viewing her parents' relationship as one that she would not want for herself. There were also two survey respondents who named their mothers as LMs, despite describing them as emotionally abusive in romantic relationships. One of the respondents expressed that she has learned from her mother about romantic relationships through her mother's anti-modeling, as she can now better evaluate and avoid potential romantic partners who possess similar traits to her mother. This sentiment is consistent with research on intentional differentiation which has found that children who grow up with unhealthy models of romantic relationships in their family of origin can learn from problematic behavior and make choices to behave differently in their own romantic lives (Kuo et al., 2017).

Implications

The current study provides an important contribution to the existing bodies of literature on college students' romantic relationships and mentoring. First, this study introduces the concept and term *love mentoring* into the academic conversation on romantic development and provides evidence of its prevalence in the lives of college students. The study also offers insight into: common types and qualities of LMs, the mechanisms and content that characterize love mentoring relationships, and love mentoring's influence on healthy romantic development. Perhaps most importantly, the data revealed that college students value their love mentoring relationships and some would like more love mentoring in their life. Together, these findings add nuance to the prevailing understanding of how adolescents learn about the world of love and romantic relationships. Whereas research has traditionally focused on the role of peers in this domain, the present study highlights the role that supportive adults - particularly within family and university contexts - can play in promoting the healthy romantic development of college students.

The findings of this study offer several important implications for practice among those who aim to promote the healthy romantic development of college students. Within families, adult figures should create space for romance-related conversation by expressing curiosity about the romantic lives of adolescents and young adults. Family relationships are often close relationships, and therefore adult family members are able to ask questions, challenge perspectives, and provide advice in a way that is specific to the young person's life history or circumstances. The romantic relationships of adult family members are often ones that young people observe up close, and thus, adults should be aware of the potential influence of their example on younger family members' romantic development.

University figures at institutions of higher education should also be aware of the potential they have in shaping college students' romantic development. Given the primacy of romantic relationships for college-aged students, faculty and student affairs professionals who serve in a mentoring role to college students can open the door for romance-related conversation by inquiring about this dimension of students' experience. Whether the questions asked pertain to general observations (i.e., What are your thoughts on the dating culture on campus?) or personal experience (i.e., You mentioned a boyfriend/girlfriend from home. How has long distance been going for you?), they signal to the young person that the mentoring relationship is a space in which romance-related conversation is welcome, if not encouraged.

However, it is important to note that love mentoring by university figures may not be one-size-fits-all. More specifically, love mentoring may look different for faculty members versus student affairs professionals who are often immersed – by the nature of their roles – in students' social, personal, and spiritual lives; and who might encounter more opportunities to engage in love mentoring conversations. That said, love mentoring by faculty members may be particularly impactful when it takes place within intentionally formative classes taught by adults who are interested (and presumably skilled) in both addressing romance-related topics and in developing holistic mentoring relationships. Additionally, university-based formational opportunities such as retreats, mentorship programs, and reflection-based seminars, should ensure that romance-related topics are included within the programmatic or educational curriculum. Given that many of these opportunities involve older students or adults reflecting out loud about their life experiences, some of this storytelling should touch on romance-related topics (i.e., Journey mentors sharing narratives rooted in their experience of romantic relationships). Additionally, these types of programs should prioritize a diverse collection of storytellers, as

many participants cited shared identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity) as important factors within love mentoring relationships.

Whether the context is family, higher education or other community settings, love mentoring relationships require supportive adults who are willing to engage on romance-related topics with college students. Some adults may be tentative to engage with adolescents on these topics because they may feel that their romantic experience does not qualify them for such conversations, however the data does not seem to support these concerns. Having a "successful" romantic life is not a prerequisite for love mentoring. In fact, study participants greatly appreciated hearing about how LMs navigated significant relationship challenges and exhibited romantic resilience. As Richard Weissbourd and colleagues (2017) at the Making Caring Common Project note:

> Relationship failures can generate as much insight into the ingredients of healthy relationships as relationship successes. What's important is for adults to distill their wisdom, which often means reflecting and consulting with other respected adults about what their past relationships illuminate about, for example, their own vulnerabilities, hopes, dispositions, and misconceptions.

This type of internal work can be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually taxing, but important to the promotion of authentic and high quality love mentoring relationships. Surely, not every family member or university figure will be willing to do this work - some may not view it as an expected or reasonable part of their role. However, if adults opt to disengage with adolescents on romance-related topics, adolescents will look to other sources - namely, popular culture - to fill in the gaps. The problem is that the media landscape is teeming with misconceptions about healthy romantic relationships and deeply ingrained cultural myths about love. In this way, the failure of families

and educational institutions to promote healthy romantic development through love mentoring could result in far-reaching emotional and economic implications, including high rates of relational dysfunction, divorce, and intimate partner violence (Weissbourd et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, because the study aimed to provide an in-depth analysis of the presence, nature, and influence of love mentoring relationships in the lives of the study's participants; the results cannot be widely generalized. With respect to sampling bias, all participants for this study were recruited from the Journey program. Thus, any self-selection bias at play in the Journey program also impacts the present study (e.g., proclivity for mentorship, interest in women's issues). Further compounding the study's sampling bias is the fact that Journey participants were not required to complete the survey; and only 62.5% did so. Thus, there is the possibility of additional self-selection bias related to respondents' experience in the Journey program, their comfortability discussing romance-related topics, or other unknown factors.

Another limitation was the diversity of the sample. The data was collected from college senior women at a private, selective, religiously-affiliated, residential university in New England. The overall sample was overwhelmingly white and straight, as was the sub-sample of interview participants. The homogeneity of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings, as students' romantic lives can vary as a function race (Meier & Allen, 2009) and sexuality (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009), as can their mentoring relationships (e.g., Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Liang et al., 2006). Future studies on love mentoring should be conducted with larger and more diverse samples to ensure that the voices of people with marginalized identities, particularly BIPOC and LGBTQ students, are promoted and centered. Likewise, similar studies should be

conducted with college students from a range of universities to better understand the contextual influence of religious identity on love mentoring relationships, at the personal and/or institutional level.

There were also some limitations to the survey methodology - beginning with how participants were asked to identify and describe LMs. For example, participants were only permitted to identify and answer questions about three LMs. More information could have been captured about LM prevalence and types if participants were permitted to identify more than three LMs. Additionally, mentees were not asked to report on the identity-based characteristics of the LMs. This means that some mentor characteristics (i.e., gender) were interpretations based on qualitative descriptors (i.e., pronoun usage) and assumptions (i.e., assuming that all mothers were female). Subsequent research should collect this mentor data explicitly - ideally from LMs themselves. Indeed, the involvement of LMs in love mentoring research would reduce reporter bias and allow for a more nuanced understanding of how these relationships function.

With respect to methodology, different sampling approaches would allow researchers to ask necessary and important questions about love mentoring relationships. For example, stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) could illustrate what love mentoring relationships look like across particular identities of interest (e.g., gender, sexuality) and facilitate comparisons between subgroups (e.g., how men vs. women utilize love mentoring relationships to make meaning of their romantic experiences). Another direction for future research is to apply methodologies that can clarify the complex webs of love mentoring relationships in the lives of college students. This could involve qualitative and quantitative approaches consistent with social network analysis to reveal love mentoring developmental networks (Burt et al., 2013). Social network analysis emphasizes features of relationships over personal characteristics to explain individual and

collective outcomes, and is increasingly being integrated in the study of how mentoring operates in professional contexts (Soller et al., 2021). This type of analysis could be useful in the study of love mentoring relationships, as well. Finally, longitudinal analyses could be used to examine the stability or change in love mentoring relationships over time. This approach could offer insight into the evolution of love mentoring relationships before, during, and after the college experience, even into early or middle adulthood.

Conclusion

This foundational study on love mentoring offers insight into the role of adults in promoting the healthy romantic development of college students. The results provide an important contribution to the existing bodies of literature on college students' romantic relationships and mentoring. Continued study on these topics will further reveal and elucidate the landscape of love mentoring relationships, which will guide families and schools to better support young people's romance-related thinking, learning, and conversation throughout development.

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Table 1

Love Mentor Types, Examples, and Descriptive Statistics

Love Mentor Type	Example(s)	Total LMs Identified		Significant LMs	
		n	%	n	%
Family - Mother	My mom	33	36.7	27	53
University Figure	Journey mentor, Philosophy professor, Spiritual Director	25	27.8	11	21.5
Family - Peer Generation	Older sister, Cousin	13	14.5	6	11.8
Other	Pastor, Therapist, Friend's mom	8	8.9	4	7.8
Family - Father	My dad	5	5.5	0	0
Family - Older Generation	Grandmother, Grandpa, Aunt	4	4.4	1	1.9
Friend	Older friend	2	2.2	2	4
Total		90	100	51	100

Table 2

Content of Love Mentoring Relationships By Case Mentions and By Response

Content Category	By Case Mentions		By Response	
	n	%	*n*	%
Commitment	48	94.1	12	23.5
Intimacy	37	72.5	1	2
Passion	15	29.4	-	-
Sexuality	9	17.6	-	-
Other	3	5.9	-	-
Commitment, Other	-	-	1	2
Commitment, Intimacy	-	-	15	29.4
Commitment, Intimacy, Other	-	-	1	2
Commitment, Intimacy, Passion	-	-	11	21.5
Commitment, Intimacy, Sexuality	-	-	5	9.8

Intimacy, Passion, Sexuality	-	-	1	2
Commitment, Intimacy, Passion, Sexuality	-	-	2	3.8
Commitment, Intimacy, Passion, Sexuality, Other	-	-	1	2
Blank	1	2	1	2
Total	-	-	51	100

Table 3

RHI-M Descriptive Statistics

RHI-M Scale/Subscale	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Empowerment/Zest Subscale	51	2	5	3.931	.704
Engagement Subscale	51	1	5	4.131	.957
Authenticity Subscale	51	1.75	5	4.255	.646
RHI-M Overall	51	1.636	5	4.094	.669

Appendix A: Survey

Journey Program Survey

[Questions about demographic information]
1. How old are you? _____
2. Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be: *[White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Other (specify]*
3. Do you identify as Spanish, Latino, or Hispanic? *[Yes, No]*
4. What is your assigned sex?*[Male/Female/Nonbinary or third gender, Prefer not to say]*
5. What is your gender identity? *[One line text entry]*
6. Do you think of yourself as (please check all that apply): *[Heterosexual/Straight, Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian, Bisexual, Other (specify), Prefer not to say]*
7. What is your religion? *[Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox (e.g. Greek or Russian Orthodox), Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, Other (specify), Nothing in particular]*

[Question about Healthy Romantic Relationships]
8. Briefly describe what you believe to be the most important qualities of a healthy romantic relationship. *[Paragraph text entry]*

[Love Mentor Identification]
The next section asks you to identify adults in your life who have provided you space to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic relationships. For these questions, you are asked to think about people who are older than you (not same-aged friends or peers) or more experienced than you in some way. These people may be in your family (e.g., parent, cousin), your University (e.g., professor, mentor figure, retreat leader) or other communities to which you belong (e.g., spiritual advisor, high school teacher, family friend). These might be people who have shared with you stories about their own romantic lives, offered their perspective on love, dating, or intimate relationships, or posed questions to you on these topics. They could also be individuals with whom you have shared your thoughts, beliefs, or experiences regarding romantic relationships. You may have an enduring relationship with these people or engaged with them for a briefer period of time.
[The above description stayed visible through Question #23.]

[Love Mentor #1]
9. Is there an older and/or more experienced person in your life who fits the above description? *[Y/N]*
     ○ *If N → Skip to Question 24.*
10. What is your relationship with this person? (e.g., mother, older cousin, high school soccer coach, Portico professor, mentor in a leadership program): *[One line text entry]*
11. In no more than 2-3 sentences, briefly describe how this person has created opportunities for you to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships. *[Paragraph text entry]*

[Love Mentor #2]

12. Is there an ANOTHER older and/or more experienced person in your life who fits the above description? *[Y/N]*
    ○ *If N → Skip to Question 18.*
13. What is your relationship with this person? (e.g., mother, older cousin, high school soccer coach, Portico professor, mentor in a leadership program): *[One line text entry]*
14. In no more than 2-3 sentences, briefly describe how this person has created opportunities for you to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships. *[Paragraph text entry]*

[Love Mentor #3]
15. Is there an ANOTHER older and/or more experienced person in your life who fits the above description? *[Y/N]*
    ○ *If N → Skip to Question 18.*
16. What is your relationship with this person? (e.g., mother, older cousin, high school soccer coach, Portico professor, mentor in a leadership program): *[One line text entry]*
17. Briefly describe how this person has created opportunities for you to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships. *[Paragraph text entry]*

[Questions about Significant Love Mentor]
The next section asks you to consider one of the adults you have just identified who has been MOST SIGNIFICANT in creating opportunities for you to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships.
18. Which most significant relationship will you answer the next set of questions about? (Please define your relationship as you did before; e.g., mother, older cousin, high school soccer coach, Portico professor, mentor in a leadership program): *[One line text entry]*
19. Is this person a member of your family?
    ○ *If Y → Skip to Question 21.*
20. How did you come to know this person? *[Paragraph text entry]*
21. Which of the following components of romantic relationship topics have you discussed, learned about, or considered more deeply as a result of your relationship with this person? (Please check all that apply):
    ○ Commitment (decisions around partner selection; how to maintain relationships or love)
    ○ Intimacy (the emotional dimension of relationships; love; experiences of closeness and connection)
    ○ Passion (romantic and physical attraction; decisions around sex and related activities)
    ○ Sexuality (sexual orientation; navigating identity expression; experiences of marginalization)
    ○ Other: _____
22. Briefly describe the qualities this person possesses that makes them someone you are interested in thinking with, learning from, or talking to about romantic relationships. *[Paragraph text entry]*
23. Next to each statement below, please indicate the number that best applies to your relationship with this person. *[1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always]*
    1. I can be genuinely myself with this person.

2. I believe this person values me as a whole person.

3. This person's commitment to and involvement in our relationship exceeds that required by their social/professional role.

4. This person shares stories about his/her own romantic experiences in a way that enhances my life.

5. I feel as though I know myself better when it comes to my romantic life because of this person.

6. This person gives me emotional support and encouragement regarding my romantic life.

7. I try to emulate the values of this person when it comes to romantic relationships.

8. I feel uplifted and energized by interactions with this person around topics of romantic relationships.

9. This person tries hard to understand my feelings and goals for my romantic life.

10. My relationship with this person inspires me to seek other relationships that can help me think, learn and talk about romantic relationships.

11. I feel comfortable expressing my deepest concerns about my romantic life to this person.

[University Romance-Related Conversation Partners]

24. Have you had one or more conversations with an adult within the University about romance-related topics, including but not limited to: love, dating, hooking up, sexuality, or future relationship aspirations? This may include individuals you have already listed in this survey or any other professor/instructor, administrator, or graduate assistant that is affiliated with the University. *[Y/N]*
    ○ *If N → Skip to Question 26*

25. Have you engaged in conversation with your Journey mentor about romance-related topics, including but not limited to: love, dating, hooking up, sexuality, or future relationship aspirations? *[Y/N]*

[Estimation of Love Mentors]

26. Including any of the people you have just identified in this survey, please write the total number of older and/or more experienced persons who have provided you space to think, learn, and talk about romantic relationships: _____ *[One line text entry]*

[Contact Email for Follow Up]

Your email is requested here for two reasons. 1) So that you may be entered into a raffle to win one of three $100 gift cards for your completion of this survey. 2) Some survey respondents will be invited to participate in a follow up interview over the next 6 weeks (compensation $30). We would like to have a way to follow up with you should you be selected for an interview.

As soon as the interview participants are identified, email addresses will be removed from survey data to ensure anonymity of your responses. Submission of an email address is optional.

27. Email address: _____ *[One line text entry]*

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Healthy Romantic Relationships & Love Mentoring Interview Protocol
Interviewer: Ali Bane Hammond

[Small talk with participant]

General Introduction
Thank you for participating in today's interview.

In addition to being the Director of First Year Experience and a mentor in the Journey program, I am a doctoral student in BC's Lynch School of Education studying Developmental Psychology. For my dissertation, I am hoping to learn more about college students' romantic lives and the people in their lives who support them around romantic relationships.

As you know, you completed a survey on these topics in early March. After reviewing the responses, a small number of respondents were invited to interviews in order to more fully explore these topics. So, I am really excited to speak with you today and to learn more about you!

Explaining the Interview Process
Something to keep in mind is that this interview isn't going to be like a regular conversation, where you and I go back and forth and we each get our turn to talk. Since this is an interview about you, I won't talk that much! For that reason, please feel free to keep yourself off mute, since you will be doing most of the talking. I will likely mute myself between asking questions for the same reason. The other thing that might happen to make this not feel like a normal conversation is that at some points there might be periods of silence. I want to let you know that I'll be pausing to make sure you have plenty of time to think about your answers. Additionally, throughout the interview, I may reference certain responses from your survey, as a jumping off point.

With your permission, I will record the interview - which we will talk about shortly. However, I will also be taking notes - on my computer and maybe on a notepad. So if I look down at any point, please know that I am just taking notes. I have nothing else up on my screen. And I am very interested in all that you have to say.

We will be speaking for about an hour and half. Please feel free to ask for a break at any time for any reason.

The last thing I want to remind you of, (that is also in the consent form) is that you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can end the interview at any point.

Consent Form
Speaking of the consent form, you should have received it yesterday in the reminder email I sent. However, I will go over it now with you, answer any questions you have, and ask for your verbal consent at the end. Sound good?

[Ali shares screen displaying consent form; reviews consent form with participant.]

Do you have any questions about this form? *[Answers questions.]*

Okay, great. Now, I will just ask you two questions:

1. Do you agree to participate in this interview?
2. Is it okay if I record the interview?

Wonderful. Any questions before we start?

Great, I'm going to press record now and say your participant number.

[Ali hits RECORD on Zoom and recording device.]

Great, we are recording. This is participant ##. Okay, let's jump in!

Introduction	In the spirit of getting to know you, I would love for you to tell me a little bit about yourself. ❏ What are some things that are important to who you are - with respect to your background, academic or co-curricular interests, hobbies, or professional goals? ❏ How important to you is your romantic life at [University] compared to other parts of your life, such as academics, co-curriculars, or friendships?
Beliefs about Healthy Relationships & Love and Influences on those Beliefs	❏ What do you believe are the qualities of a healthy romantic relationship? ❏ In the survey you wrote: *[Response to Question #8 - qualities of a healthy romantic relationship].* Is there anything else you would add or expand upon, that you haven't already mentioned? ❏ I would like you to think of a relationship that you have observed that has informed this perspective. Can you describe that relationship for me? ❏ Can you give me an example of a time when this relationship (anti-)modeled the qualities of a healthy relationship? ❏ *[If they have only identified an anti-model relationship]* Are there any relationships you have observed that you feel are a good example of a healthy romantic relationship? ❏ Who, if anyone, in your life have you talked to about healthy romantic relationships?* Tell me more about that. The next few questions are about romantic love.

	❏ Finish this sentence. "love is _____." Tell me more about that. ❏ Either drawing from your own experience, observation or imagination, what do you think it is like to be in a loving relationship? ❏ I would like you to think of a relationship that you have observed that you think is a good example of a loving relationship. Can you describe that relationship for me? ❏ Who, if anyone, in your life have you talked to about romantic love?* Tell me more about that.
Romantic Experiences and Influences on those Experiences	❏ What has your romantic life looked like during your time at [University]? Time spent single? Hooking up? Committed relationship(s)? Tell me more about that. ❏ *[If participant acknowledges previous romantic experience(s)]:* Can you tell me about one romantic experience you have had that stands out for you that stands out as meaningful or significant in some way? ❏ Did you talk to anyone in your life about this experience? Tell me more about that.*
Desires for their Romantic Lives	❏ Looking ahead to life after college, what are your aspirations for your romantic life? Future family roles? ❏ With whom, if anyone, have you discussed these aspirations?*

* If participant references known adult influences, move through LM Question Set (whether or not they were a LM identified on the survey).

Thank you so much for all of your response thus far.

As you have likely noticed, I have been asking you some questions about individuals in your life who have informed your perspective on relationships or been a source of conversation for you regarding your romantic life. In this next section, I have some more questions about people in your life who have shaped your thinking or decisions about romantic relationships - beginning with the individual(s) you identified on the survey.

In the survey, you were given the option to identify people who were older or more experienced than you who provide you opportunities to think, learn, and/or talk about romantic relationships. You identified *[Responses to Questions #10, #13 and #16 - relationship descriptors for all LMs identified]* and you identified your relationship with *[Response to Question #18 - significant LM relationship descriptor]* as being MOST significant in creating opportunities for you to think, learn and/or talk about romantic relationships. I would like to begin by inviting you to share more about that relationship.

LM Question Set
*This set of questions will be used as a follow up for any adult LM influence identified during the survey and in the interview.
 	
Highlighted questions only apply to the Significant LM relationship identified in the survey.
	❏ Can you tell me about your relationship with this person?
	❏ *[If not family]:* How did you meet them?
	❏ How often do you see/talk to them? When apart, how do you communicate?
	❏ Can you describe the qualities this person possesses that makes them someone you are interested in thinking with, learning from, or talking to about romantic relationships?
	  ❏ In the survey you wrote *[Response to Question #22 - description of LM's qualities]*. Can you tell me more about that?
	❏ Do you share any identities with this person that are important to you (e.g., gender, sexual identity, race or ethnicity)?
	❏ What aspects of romantic relationships have you considered more deeply, learned about, or discussed as a result of your relationship with this person? (e.g., commitment, intimacy/love, passion, sexuality)
	  ❏ In the survey you indicated that you discussed, learned about, or thought about the following aspects of romantic relationships as a result of your relationship with this person: *[Response to Question #21 - selected aspects]*. Can you tell me more about that?
	  ❏ Can you give me an example of a time when you discussed these aspects with this person? *[If no conversation]* How they have influenced you with respect to these aspects? (e.g., commitment, intimacy/love, passion, sexuality)
	  ❏ Are there any romance-related topics you do not or prefer not to discuss with this person? Tell me more about that.
	❏ Is conversation around romance-related topics with this person a two-way street? Do both of you share?
	❏ How has your relationship with this person influenced:
	  ❏ what you think is important to a healthy romantic relationship?
	  ❏ how you think about what it means to be "in love" or in a loving relationship?
	  ❏ your confidence when it comes to approaching romantic relationships?
	  ❏ Your romantic savvy or wisdom, when it comes to navigating potential or existing relationships?
	  ❏ What do you want in your romantic life - now or in the future?

Parental Influences	*[If participant has previously spoken about a parental figure as a LM, these questions can be amended or skipped entirely, if already covered. They can also be geared toward another parental figure.]*
	
	❏ I have a few questions about your relationship with your parents. To begin, could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your parents/guardians?
	    ❏ Do you talk about romance-related topics with your parents? Tell me more about that.
	    ❏ In your view, what has been your parents' approach to engaging with you about your romantic life? (e.g., do they ask questions, offer advice, not bring it up)
	        ❏ How do you feel about their approach?
	    ❏ Can you tell me about a time when a parent has been a helpful or supportive conversation partner around romance-related topics?
	    ❏ Can you tell me about a time when conversation with a parent around romance-related topics has not been productive, helpful, or supportive?

Friendship Influences	❏ What about your friendships? What role do your friends play in your thinking, learning, and conversation about your romantic life?
	    ❏ What do you talk to your friends about with respect to romantic relationships?
	    ❏ Can you tell me about a time when a friend was a supportive or helpful conversation partner around romance-related topics?
	    ❏ Can you tell me about a time when conversation with a friend about romance-related topics has not been productive, helpful, or supportive?

University-based LM & Journey Program	❏ Have you participated in any programs, courses, or communities at [University] where there has been space created for you to think, learn, and/or discuss romantic relationships? Tell me more about that. ❏ In the survey, you indicated that you have/have not [Question #24] had one or more conversations with an adult within the University about romance-related topics, including but not limited to: love, dating, hooking up, sexuality, or future relationship aspirations. Can you tell me more about that? ❏ In the survey, you indicated that the Journey program has been a space in which you have/have not [Question #25] engaged in

	relationships on romance-related topics. Is that still the case? Can you tell me more about that? ❏ When it comes to romantic relationships, what have you learned or gained through your conversation with your Journey mentor and group? ❏ Are there any romance-related topics you would have liked to discuss in the Journey program that did not come up?
LM Wrap Up	❏ Apart from everyone we have discussed so far, are there any other individuals that you know personally who have provided you space to think, learn, and talk about romantic relationships? ❏ In the survey you indicated that you have *[Response to Question #26 - # of LMs]* of people who are older who have served in this role in your life (outside of friendships). Would you say that number is still accurate? ❏ Are you satisfied with the quantity and quality of these relationships that support you in your romantic life? ❏ Besides people you know personally, do you have any other significant sources of learning, thinking or conversation about romantic relationships and related topics? (e.g., entertainment, social media, famous individuals)
Catch-All Question	❏ Is there anything else you think I should know about all that we have talked about today?

Interview Feedback & Logistics

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I just have a few final logistical questions and items for you.
- ❏ What did you think about the questions in this interview?
- ❏ Were there any questions that were unclear or that didn't make sense?
- ❏ And any last questions for me - about anything?

[Stop recording.]
Great, thank you again. Once I have made a transcript of this interview, I will send it to you so that you can read over it and let us know if there is anything that you want to clarify or change.

Your gift card will be emailed to you within 24 hours. Would you like it sent to your BC email?

Wonderful. Thank you again for participating in this interview. Have a great rest of your day.