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Adolescent Relationship Concerns and Perceived Gains from a Relationship Education Course

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ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP CONCERNS AND PERCEIVED GAINS

FROM A RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION COURSE

by

Jenny Harris

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent Relationship Concerns and Perceived Gains

from a Relationship Education Course

by

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Utah State University, 2017

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This study provides a qualitative analysis of adolescent concerns about romantic relationships. It also examines adolescents' perceived gains from participation in a relationship education program for singles, *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK). A phenomenological approach was used to analyze short-response data from middle adolescents (ages 15-17) in participating high schools ($N = 605$). Results indicated that adolescents were concerned with avoiding relationship risks and with gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to build healthy relationships. Some also indicated concerns about self, peers, or parents in relation to their own romantic relationships. The alignment between concerns and reported gains suggests that the PICK program successfully addressed adolescent concerns about skills and knowledge, relationship risks, and the role of peers and parents in relation to romantic relationships.

(87 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Adolescent Relationship Concerns and Perceived Gains

from a Relationship Education Course

Jenny Harris, Master of Science

This study was conducted with survey data drawn from a relationship education initiative in the state of Utah. Teenagers participated in the *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK) program (also known as *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk or Jerk-ette)*, a program designed for single individuals. They answered questions before and after the course, and I used their responses to answer two questions: (1) What concerns do middle-adolescents (ages 15-17) have about romantic relationships? (2) What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK?

Data from 605 participants were combined and analyzed for themes. Teenage participants expressed concerns about gaining the skills and knowledge necessary for healthy building relationships. They also wanted to avoid risky relationship behaviors such as cheating, abuse, jealousy, and sexual coercion. They were interested in how relationships with peers and parents affect romantic relationships. These concerns aligned with the gains that they reported from participation in PICK.

Taking their responses together, participants said that PICK addressed their concerns by providing training in relationship skills and knowledge to help them avoid risky relationships. They were especially appreciative of the Relationship Attachment Model, a visual tool created to help them evaluate pacing, sequence, and behaviors in healthy relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships in adolescence impact adolescents' personal well-being (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) as well as later relationship outcomes (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Healthy adolescent romantic relationships are correlated with positive outcomes including relatively higher self-esteem, confidence, and a positive romantic self-concept (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Negative outcomes range from self-silencing and rejection sensitivity to psychological maltreatment, depression, and poor academic performance (Collins et al., 2009, Williams, Connolly, & Cribbie, 2008). An important negative correlate in youth relationships is adolescent relationship abuse, which may be present in as many as two-thirds of adolescent romantic relationships (Taylor & Mumford, 2016).

Empirical research suggests that the processes of adolescent relationships have important implications for personal well-being. The timing and sequence of relational events promote either risk or health. For instance, in adolescent romantic relationships, the normative sequence of events is first being together in a group, then private and social identification as a couple, then being alone with one's partner, and lastly kissing and other forms of physical expression (O'Sullivan, Mantsun, Cheng, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). Parent and peer relations inform romantic relationship processes as well. High quality parent-child relations have been found to promote high quality romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Moreover, peers serve as models of close relationships, and mixed-gender peer groups typically facilitate a setting for romantic dyads to form (Brown, 1999; Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986).

Adolescent romantic relationships are also correlated with later relational outcomes (Conger et al., 2000; Madsen & Collins, 2011). For instance, adolescents with negative early relationships are likely to experience rejection sensitivity (i.e., fear of being rejected), which predicts future relationship rejection (Hafen, 2014). Conversely, warm, nonhostile interpersonal behaviors during adolescence predict higher quality relationships in early adulthood (Conger et al., 2000). One study found that adolescent dating experiences predict 19% of variance in young adult romantic relationship quality (Madsen & Collins, 2011). It is likely the impact of these early relationships reach even further, since early adult relationships are linked to adult well-being, and eventually to the well-being of offspring (Brown, Manning, & Payne, 2015; 2016).

Very little research regarding adolescent relationship concerns has been published (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1994). Studies about similar constructs (i.e., attitudes, ideals, expectations) suggest that relationship cognitions influence relational behaviors and outcomes (Ali, Swahn, & Hamburger, 2011; Bredow, 2015; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Most U.S. adolescents view marriage and marriage preparation favorably (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007; Silliman & Schumm, 2004), though we know little about their relationship concerns or whether relationship education addresses those concerns. Familiarity with relationship education may be an important means of influencing relationship concerns and attitudes for the better (Bass, Drake, & Linney, 2007).

Recognizing romantic relationships as key correlates of developmental outcomes (and later relationship success), relationship educators have stepped up their efforts to offer programming targeted to youth. Relationship education is often preventative, with

the aim of increasing skills and knowledge (Coie et al., 1993; Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Among adults, relationship education has been shown to be an effective means of promoting healthy relationship skills and outcomes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Stanley, 2001). Examples of relationship education for adolescence are scarce, but at least two have been evaluated: *Love U2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts* (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007) and *Connections: Relationship and Marriage* (Gardner & Boellaard, 2007)*.* Outcomes of these adolescent relationship education programs include higher self-esteem, lower levels of dating violence and verbal aggression, higher family cohesion, and better recognition of unhealthy relationship patterns (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). Since relatively few relationship education curricula have been developed for youth, evaluative research is limited.

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the experiences of a sample of adolescent participants who engaged in the *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK) curriculum (Van Epp, 2015). PICK is an empirically-derived curriculum designed for individuals who are not yet in long-term committed relationships. Manuals and curriculum have been tailored specifically for an adolescent audience (Van Epp, 2015). The program is based on the Relationship Attachment Model, and teaches adolescents to build relationships in a balanced, sequential way (Van Epp, 2015).

The experiences of adolescents were evaluated with a phenomenological lens. Phenomenology was chosen as a qualitative method to capture the essence of the

experiences among this relatively large sample (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

Data collected from 605 middle-adolescent PICK participants were used to answer the

following questions: (1) What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about

romantic relationships? (2) What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK?

Thus, the purpose of this study was to contribute to the limited research regarding

adolescent relationship education programming by examining adolescent relationship

concerns, and by exploring adolescent perceptions of how PICK addresses these

concerns.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Romantic relationships first emerge during adolescence within specific developmental and social contexts. Romantic relationships are described as ongoing, dyadic, voluntary, and typically mutually-acknowledged relationships (Collins, 2003). They are characterized by intensity and affection, and may or may not include sexual relations. Adolescent romantic relationships are important because they affect individual and relational life outcomes such as self-concept, future relationship quality, and mental health (Collins et al., 2009; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Madsen & Collins, 2011). This chapter reviews processes and outcomes of adolescent romantic relationships as they promote both risk (e.g., relationship abuse, depression, rejection sensitivity) and positive development (e.g., identity development, relationship satisfaction; see Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Erikson, 1950; Hafen, 2014; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Research related to adolescent relationship concerns is also reviewed. Relationship education programs for adolescents are discussed as mechanisms for promoting healthy adolescent romantic relationships. The *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK) program is highlighted as needing further evaluation, especially with an adolescent audience. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the research questions relative to this study.

Adolescence

Adolescence is characterized by dramatic biological and social changes. The body may as much as double in size, and emerging sexuality is marked by both physiological and psychological maturation (Simpson, 2001; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). As adolescents age, romantic relationships become more common. While only 25% of 12 year-olds have engaged in romantic relationships, the percentage grows to 75% by 17-18 years (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). From a theoretical perspective, the primary task of adolescence is to gain a sense of identity (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1950). Concomitant with identity-development, peers become more important and adolescents identify less with parents and more with social groups (Brown et al., 1986; Suleiman & Deardorff, 2015). Same-gender friendships of childhood tend to transform into mixed-gender peer groups, which eventually give way to dyadic romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009). Early adolescents are more likely to date for social status while older adolescents tend to be motivated by intimacy (Collins, 2003). It is against the backdrop of emerging sexuality, identity-building, and the centrality of peer relations that adolescent romantic relationships emerge.

Adolescent Romantic Relationships

For many individuals, adolescent romantic relationships mark the beginning of a lifetime of romantic relationship experiences. Youth and emerging adults today remain in the mate selection phase for longer than previous generations (Sassler, 2010). In the U.S., the median age for first marriage is 27 for women and 29 for men, up approximately 6.5

years from what it was in 1960 (Wang & Parker, 2014). Since nearly half of adolescents have experienced romantic relationships by age 15 (Carver et al., 2003), this means that many will engage in romantic relationships for 12 or more years prior to marriage. The extended period of time spent dating could help explain the effect that adolescent relationships have on personal well-being and on long-term relationship trajectories.

It is important to study adolescent romantic relationships because they have a marked impact on individual and relational trajectories (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Adolescent romantic relationships have sometimes been trivialized because they are often temporary (Collins, 2003), but they are important because the impact of romantic relationships outlasts the duration of adolescence. Madsen and Collins (2011) used a prospective longitudinal design to investigate the relationship between adolescent dating experiences (number of partners and quality of relationships) and the quality of romantic relationships in young adulthood. Results indicated that adolescent dating experiences predicted 19% of variance in young adult romantic relationship quality. The influence of adolescent dating experiences on the quality of young adult relationships held up after controlling for sex, peer relations, and parent relations. Such results document the influence of adolescent romantic relationships on later-life relationships and provide compelling reasons to study adolescent romantic relationships.

Both healthy consequences and risks follow adolescent romantic relationships, depending on variables such as the quality of relationships and number of dating partners (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Healthy adolescent romantic relationships have been found to follow certain patterns of timing, sequence, and quality. Parents and peers likewise

influence adolescent romantic relationships via socialization (Conger et al., 2000;

Suleiman & Deardorff, 2015).

Components of Health

Healthy adolescent romantic relationships are characterized by affection,

intimacy, and support. They are associated with outcome measures of well-being and

individual functioning (Collins et al., 2009). Though little is known empirically the

mechanisms by which adolescent romantic relationships promote well-being and

individual functioning, scholars are generally informed by theories of adolescent

development. In theory, for instance, adolescent romantic relationships are exercises in

identity-development (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1950). Furman and

Shaffer (2003) further theorized that experiences in adolescent romantic relationships

facilitate the development of a romantic self-concept, promote global self-esteem, and

shape one's gender-role identity. In a test of Erikson's psychosocial theory, Beyers and

Seiffge-Krenke (2010) found empirical evidence that "identity develops in a web of

relational contexts," (p. 406), which acts as a precursor to intimacy in later life.

Healthy outcomes of adolescent romantic relationships may be influenced by the

timing and sequence of relationship events. In one study of adult relationships, it was

found that delaying sexuality until other relational aspects of the relationship were more

fully developed supported better relationship outcomes such as better communication and

higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Busby et al., 2010). Similar patterns have been

noted among adolescents. In a study of over 18,000 high school students, O'Sullivan et

al. (2007) found that romantic and social events occur in somewhat predictable patterns,

even among racially diverse adolescents. Among this large sample of youth, the typical progression of the romantic relationships was first being together with one's partner in a group, then holding hands, and then privately or socially identifying as a couple. These events typically preceded any sexual relations (O'Sullivan et al., 2007). Such results underscore the importance of understanding youth relationships in the larger context of social and romantic mores.

Components of Risk

Unfortunately, adolescent romantic relationships also have potential for negative outcomes such as rejection sensitivity, depression, and relationship abuse. Adolescents with unhealthy first dating experiences may experience rejection sensitivity, which diminishes relationship self-efficacy and predicts future relationship rejection (Hafen, 2014). There is also a connection between adolescent romantic involvement and rates of depression. A longitudinal study found that youth who became romantically involved over time were relatively more depressed than their noninvolved counterparts, with girls being more vulnerable than boys to depression (Joyner & Udry, 2000). The researchers found that for boys, higher depression stemmed from having more than one romantic partner in 18 months, and for girls, from deterioration of their relationships with their parents. Heavy sexual behaviors (i.e., genital stimulation) in early adolescence have been found to be associated with depression, violence, and substance abuse (Collins et al., 2009). Most serious, however, is the risk for adolescent relationship abuse. In a recent, nationally representative study, adolescent relationship abuse (comprised of victimization and perpetration of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse) was reported by 69% of

adolescents who had experienced a romantic relationship within the past year (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Psychological abuse was most common (60%).

Psychological maltreatment includes undermining the partner's self-esteem, verbal abuse, social and emotional control, and jealous behaviors (Gallaty & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2008). Psychological aggression may be a precursor to other types of aggression; in adults, psychological aggression strongly predicts physical aggression (O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Among youth, higher levels of psychological maltreatment are associated with higher rates of depressive symptoms, higher negative affect, and perceived discontent ("hassles") with friends and family (Gallaty & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2008). An important purpose of the current study's qualitative method was to broadly examine components of both health-related and risk-related phenomena in adolescent relationships.

Influence of Parents and Peers

Parents and peers influence adolescent romantic relationships in significant ways. Parents influence romantic relationships primarily through the parent-child relationship (Conger et al., 2000). According to research using observational ratings, nurturant-involved parenting predicts supportive adolescent romantic relationships that are warm and low in hostility (Conger et al., 2000). Conversely, conflict, negative emotionality, and aggression in parent-child relationships are correlated with similar negative behaviors within romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009). The mechanism of parental influence on youth romantic relationships is thus more likely explained by parental socialization via

parent-child interactions, rather than through observational learning (emulation of parental romantic relationships; Conger et al., 2000).

The peer system is typically the staging ground for romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009). Peers serve as models of close relationships, and often, mixed-gender friendships can evolve into dyadic dating relationships (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1986). In qualitative interviews with 40 adolescents, adolescents described the influence of peers on romantic relationships in multiple ways: pressuring friends into relationships, using relationships as currency for social status, and establishing norms and expectations (Suleiman & Deardorff, 2015).

Adolescent Relationship Concerns

There is very little research regarding adolescent relationship concerns. One exception is a study of Australian high school seniors that found that youth tended to use problem-focused strategies and seek social support for general relationship concerns (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1994); nonetheless, the authors called for better measurement of this concept. Similar constructs have been examined, however. For instance, research does exist about relationship "attitudes "ideals," and "expectations." This section reviews these related constructs in attempt to provide context about adolescent romantic relationship concerns. It should be noted that "concerns" are not synonymous with these cognitive constructs, nor is much of the research drawn from an adolescent sample.

Research suggests that attitudes and ideals about relationships are indicative of behavioral outcomes. It may also be true that concerns about relationships are indicative

of behavioral outcomes. For instance, are adolescent concerns about dating violence related to a disposition for dating violence? Ali and colleagues (2011) found that adolescent attitudes about violence were indeed related: They observed a significant association between attitudes about dating violence and the perpetration of dating violence. Ideals about one's partner likewise influence relationship behaviors and quality. Consistency between relationship ideals and perceived partner/relationship characteristics was found to be associated with greater perceived quality of partner and relationship (Fletcher et al., 2000). Conversely, harboring unrealistic standards during the mate selection phase is associated with partnering difficulties such as lower quality romantic relationships and lower investment later on in marriage (Bredow, 2015). It remains to be seen how relationship concerns may influence relationship quality and interactional behaviors. These may be important questions for which the current study is only an initial step.

Most adolescents expect to eventually enter into long-term romantic relationships. Although adolescents are more accepting of out-of-wedlock childbearing and cohabitation than adolescents of previous generations (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007), past research reported that 84% of girls and 77% of boys in the U.S. expected to marry, and most placed high value on having a good marriage and family life (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007). However, little is known about what concerns these adolescents may have about romantic relationships, or how these concerns will promote or hinder the realization of their relationship expectations. In light of the impact of adolescent relationships on individual well-being and later relational trajectories (Furman & Shaffer,

2003; Madsen & Collins, 2011), some scholars have advocated for preventative relationship education for youth (e.g., Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). Relationship education programs may be a helpful avenue for addressing adolescent relationship concerns, but adolescents are less likely than adult cohorts to be familiar with these programs (Silliman & Schumm, 2004).

Relationship Education

Relationship education is designed to promote healthy relationships. Relationship education is considered to be primarily preventative, at either the universal level of intervention (i.e., designed for general populations) or at the selective level (i.e., designed for those at risk; Bradford, 2012). Its general aim is to increase protective factors and minimize risk factors (Stanley, 2001). Designed to provide information to many individuals at the same time (Markman & Rhoades, 2012), there is evidence that relationship education is becoming the most commonly used form of professional relationship intervention (Stewart, Bradford, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Jackson, 2014). Dimensions of relationship education include timing, content, and target audience (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). While research regarding relationship education typically targets adult audiences, there is increasing support for relationship education for adolescents.

Relationship Education for Adults

In general, relationship education has been shown to result in moderate improvements in relationship outcomes in adults. In a meta-analysis, premarital

prevention programs were found to have a mean effect size of .80 (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). A more current evaluation of premarital education programs reported an effect size of $d = .58$ for published control group studies, with the greatest impact being on improving couple communication (Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010). Outcomes of relationship education include improvements in communication processes, conflict management skills, relationship quality, and individual functioning (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Stanley, 2001). Relationship education is used more often by help-seeking couples than therapy, but is used less often than advice from books, family, or friends (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009).

Relationship Education for Young Adults

For young adults, relationship education has been shown to influence attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge about romantic relationships. Using a pre-post design, Bass, Drake, and Linney (2007) conducted a study among college undergraduates to assess the impact of a relationship education course on participant beliefs and knowledge. The 212 participants showed decreases in irrational beliefs (ideas that increase the likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction) and increases in knowledge about communication, gender differences, and sexuality. A similar study was conducted to evaluate the impact of a semester-long relationship course for college students (Polanchek, 2014). Pre-post comparison showed positive change in five of seven measured attitudes about relationships. The authors concluded that course content shapes the manner in which certain relationship attitudes are influenced. These studies were conducted with college-

aged participants. More research is needed to assess the impact of relationship education courses on adolescent beliefs and attitudes.

Relationship Education for Adolescents

Although relationship education for adolescents is becoming more common, most empirically-evaluated intervention programs aim to reduce serious risks such as dating violence and abuse (De La Rue, Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2014). There are far fewer programs that have a positive, preventative approach of building healthy relationships. Still, emerging research suggests that these healthy relationship programs for adolescents are effective in both addressing risks and in promoting skills for healthy relationships. In a four-year longitudinal evaluation of the *Connections* program, high school participants had higher levels of self-esteem, less dating violence, and higher family cohesion than individuals in the control group (Gardner & Boellard, 2007). Another study, implementing *Love U2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts* was administered to 340 high school students with positive post-program assessments (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007). Compared to a control group, students who received relationship training were better able to identify unhealthy relationship patterns, had more realistic beliefs, and reported lower levels of verbal aggression. Students benefitted equally regardless of race, household income, or family structure (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007).

PICK

The *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK) curriculum is designed for individuals who are not yet in long-term committed relationships, which

makes it well suited for adolescents. PICK gives special attention to the pacing and sequence of romantic relationships (Van Epp, 2015). The program is based largely on the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM), an empirically-derived model that teaches adolescents to balance knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment, and touch. A RAM chart helps adolescents visualize the sequential development of healthy relationships using these five elements (refer to Appendix C). PICK also teaches individuals to consider the following factors as they select romantic partners (FACES): family background, attitudes and actions of the conscience, compatibility potential, examples of other relationship patterns, and skills for building and maintaining relationships (Van Epp, 2015).

Approximately three quarters of a million individuals have attended a PICK course (J. Van Epp, personal communication, October 5, 2016), but only a few outcome studies have been published. Outcomes of PICK participation include increased knowledge and more realistic beliefs. For instance, Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, and Higginbotham (2016) administered retrospective pre-post surveys to 682 PICK participants from a community sample. Relative to those in a comparison group, PICK participants increased in knowledge about relationship skills, partner selection, partner's relational patterns, and partner's relationship behaviors and attitudes. Among single army personnel, Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, and Campbell (2008) found that participants had more realistic beliefs about relationships, better understanding of family background and compatibilities, and greater confidence in relationship decisions. Only one small study exists examining the impact of the PICK program on adolescents: in a posttest-the-retrospective-pretest study, significant increases in knowledge of relationship skills were

found for both male and female youth (Brower, MacArthur, Bradford, Bunnell, & Albrecht, 2012). While these studies capture outcomes in terms of skills and knowledge, relatively little is known about the subjective experiences of individuals receiving PICK.

More studies are needed to evaluate PICK, and in particular, more studies are needed to assess the impact of relationship education for adolescents. This study offers both. Previous quantitative evaluations of PICK have reported limited outcome variables, as defined by researchers. In previous research, questionnaires have only captured forced-choice feedback about adolescent skills and knowledge (e.g., Brower et al., 2012). Qualitative research may provide insights for other variables that may be influenced by relationship education. Qualitative inquiry is a mode of research that delves into topics that are "emotion-laden, close to people, and practical" (Creswell, 2013, p. 51). This study utilizes qualitative methods to assess adolescent relationship concerns and perceptions about a relationship education program. Using responses drawn from adolescent PICK participants, I took a phenomenological approach to answer the following questions:

1. What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about romantic relationships?
2. What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine adolescents' relationship concerns and their experiences in relationship education. Specifically, this study provides a general report of adolescent concerns about relationships, and a broad, qualitative exploration of their experiences of participating in the PICK program for adolescents. This chapter describes the design, procedures and participants, and analytic strategy for the study.

Design

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used as a tool for evaluating many viewpoints. In this section I describe the qualitative assumptions and philosophy of phenomenology.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research both philosophically and methodologically. Philosophically, qualitative research subsumes multiple ways of knowing. According to this experiential epistemology, the preferred manner of discovering truth is to gather the viewpoints of many participants. This philosophical assumption directs the methods of qualitative research. Methodologically, qualitative researchers use themes and quotes in the words of participants to describe many perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Unique commentaries and universal themes emerge from participant ideas, and it is these themes that formulate research findings (Van Manen, 1997). Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when one's goal is to understand the

perspectives of participants as they address a specific experience or problem (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenology is a particular qualitative approach. Phenomenology is used when common meanings and experiences are of particular interest (Creswell, 2013). The version of phenomenology used here is characterized by social constructivism and by a pedagogical orientation. The social constructivist views reality as "inextricably related to one's consciousness of it" (Creswell, 2013, p. 77). In accordance with the qualitative search for common meanings among many viewpoints, the sample size in this study is relatively large. Van Manen (1990) proposed that phenomenology also serves a pedagogical purpose: as one comes to understand new meanings, the understanding then informs one's educational endeavors. In this study, the qualitative responses of adolescents were used to shed light on relationship education efforts. Most importantly, the words of participants themselves were used for understanding adolescent romantic relationship experiences. Their viewpoints may ultimately inform the pedagogical efforts of those who provide relationship education to other youth, according to the pedagogical nature of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990).

Procedures and Participants

Participants were recruited through public high school health or adult roles classes in a Western state. Relationship education facilitators instructed students in the *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge* (PICK) program, also known as *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk* (Van Epp, 2015). PICK is a research-based program designed

to help single individuals make informed decisions about romantic relationships. In particular, PICK engages adolescents in skill-building and reflection about family background, compatibility, and relationship patterns (Van Epp, 2015).

PICK facilitators were certified through one- to two-day video or in-person trainings. All facilitators held at least a bachelor's degree in a family-related field. A total of twenty-four classes received instruction; class sizes ranged in size from 15 to 37 students, with a mean of 28 students ($SD = 6.83$). Dosage varied in response to public school schedules, but ranged from three to six hours of instruction, administered in one-hour sessions. The majority of participants (68%) received four hours of PICK instruction; the mean number of hours received, however, was 4.32 ($SD = 1.30$).

The sample was drawn from high school students who participated in the PICK program from November, 2014 through October, 2015. Seven high schools participated in the PICK program during this period, and 665 surveys were completed. The focus of this study is on middle adolescence (15- to 17-years-old). This particular developmental stage was selected for three reasons. First, romantic relationships in middle adolescence become developmentally normative, with a majority of youth entering relationships by the end of middle adolescence (see Collins et al., 2009). Second, important shifts regarding choice and expectations in relationships are thought to occur during this stage of adolescence: dating increases, motivations for partner selection change, and interactional abilities mature (Collins, 2003). Finally, given prior evidence that adolescents' relationship experiences appear to differ by stage (i.e., early, middle, and late adolescence; Collins, 2003), perspectives of participants might potentially be overly

broad and heterogeneous if early- or late-stage youth were included. Though the

participants ranged in age from 14-18 years, 91% of participants were in middle

adolescence (ages 15-17). These participants were selected for inclusion in the study ($N =$

605); those not considered to be in middle adolescence were dropped from the dataset (N

$= 60$, 9% of participants).

Participation was voluntary, and no incentive was offered. Participants were

primarily Caucasian (73%), with 15% Hispanic/Latino participants, and approximately

9% African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native American (2% nonresponse).

Most participants (66%) reported living with both parents; 13% lived with one parent,

16% were in stepfamilies, and 5% lived with grandparents or other guardians. Males and

females were represented fairly equitably—49% male, 51% female. As stated above,

middle-adolescent participants ranged in age from 15- to 17-years-old, with 45% 15-year-

olds, 41% 16-year-olds, and 14% 17-year-olds. Twenty-four percent of participants

reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship, while 76% reported that they

were not currently in a romantic relationship. Of those who affirmed current relationship

participation, approximately half reported a relationship duration of six months or less.

Only 8% reported a relationship of two years or longer.

Of the 605 adolescents who participated in this study, approximately half

provided interpretable responses to the free-response questions. Two-hundred and sixty-

seven adolescents (44%) responded to the pretest query ("What is your biggest

relationship concern, problem, or question"), while 301 (50%) responded to the posttest

query ("What is the most important thing you gained from PICK?"). A test of

demographic differences between respondents and nonrespondents was conducted, with results depicted in Table 1 (Appendix A). Significantly more girls than boys provided responses to both free-response questions ($p = .00$ and $p = .01$, respectively). In response to the question "What is your biggest relationship concern, problem, or question," adolescents from single or blended families were significantly more likely to have provided a response than those from two-parent homes ($p = .00$). Respondents to this question were also more likely to be in a romantic relationship than nonrespondents ($p = .04$). Older adolescents were significantly more likely to respond to the second free-response question ("What is the most important thing you gained from PICK"; $p = .00$), and more likely to respond to this question if they received 5-6 hours of instruction rather than only 3-4 hours of instruction ($p = .00$).

Data for this study were drawn from the free-response portion of a hard-copy survey (Appendix A). Students were asked to fill out a two-page, self-report survey prior to and following PICK instruction. Parental letters of information were distributed to students prior to instruction and self-reports. The survey consisted primarily of quantitative Likert-scale items, along with several free-response questions including demographics, items regarding relationship attitudes and knowledge, and evaluations of course content and facilitators.

Responses to two free-response questions were used to answer the research questions for this study. The first research question was, "What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about romantic relationships?" This question was answered by using written feedback from the free-response question: "What is your biggest

relationship concern, problem, or question that you hope this course will address?"

(collected prior to education). The second research question was "What do middle-

adolescents gain from participation in PICK?" Another free-response portion was used to

evaluate this question: "For you, what is the most important concept, or result you gained

from this course? Please explain why" (collected after education). Only two to three lines

of space were provided for answers to each free-response question, so responses were

relatively brief.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis followed the phenomenological traditions of Van Manen (1990) and

Moustakas (1994), each of whom contributed principles and steps for phenomenological

analysis. To establish qualitative trustworthiness, data analysis and coding were

undertaken by two coders, including the author and an undergraduate research assistant

(Golafshani, 2003). The latter steps of writing and interpretation were conducted

independently by the author. First, the coders repeatedly read the data to search for

emerging themes. The author independently practiced horizontalization, in which unique,

nonoverlapping statements were collected (Moustakas, 1994), searching for emerging

commonalities.

Themes were distilled to reflect the most essential ideas voiced by participants,

and also for their pedagogical import (Van Manen, 1990). As Van Manen described,

"[M]y interest in themes—my fundamental research orientation—is not primarily

epistemological or methodological, but pedagogical" (1990, p. 89). As such, themes were

generally shared by one-fourth or more of adolescent participants, but occasionally

constituted a smaller group of responses. This phenomenon seemed often to be due to the

relative heterogeneity of the data among the large sample size. In circumstances where a

theme represented a minority of responses, it was retained on the basis of having

pedagogical import. Since the level at which participant responses attain pedagogical

significance is subjective, the number of responses in each coded theme and subtheme is

reported throughout. I considered these smaller themes potential sources of information

for relationship educators, and important considerations for inclusion in future curricula

(Van Manen, 1990).

Once themes were distilled, coders came together to review themes and prepare

for coding. Independently, each coder coded the free response data according to the

themes. Generally responses were coded into just one theme, but where there were

multiple ideas in one sentence, responses were occasionally split into two themes. The

level of agreement in coding (Cohen's kappa) was calculated at $k = .87$ for the first

question and at $k = .90$ for the second question. Next, coding discrepancies were

discussed until both coders came to full agreement. The coded data were then organized

according to themes, beginning with the strongest theme. This final list guided me to

repeatedly read the coded data, then proceed to write a report of the essence of the themes

through "the art of writing and rewriting" (Van Manen, 1990). Attitudes and beliefs about

romantic relationships have been shown to vary significantly according to gender

(Bredow, 2015; Hertzog & Rowley, 2014; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007) family structure

(Ali et al., 2011; Polanchek, 2014), and relationship status (McElwain, 2015). Based on

this evidence, concerns about romantic relationships may also vary according to gender, family structure, and relationship status. Accordingly, coded responses were evaluated for potential differences among these three categories.

Written Analysis

As a researcher, I engaged in the iterative process of written analysis. Moustakas (1994) describes two elements of interpretive writing: a textural description, and a structural description. In the textural description, I described the experiences of adolescent romantic relationships in the textured language of the participants. In the structural description, I added my own contextualized view as author/observer. In this way, I engaged in the phenomenological tradition of moving beyond description, and offering possible meanings (Van Manen, 1997). The final goal of the written analysis was to draw out the "essence" of the experience by combining the textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997). Once data were coded and the results described in written narrative form, three additional researchers reviewed the findings, discussed and challenged the assumptions of those who coded, and explored hidden biases. All three researchers have experience in research and in program evaluation. Each has participated in PICK programming at some level, through grant-writing, program evaluation, and survey creation. The data were consulted throughout the process to ensure fidelity to participant perspectives.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents results in two sections. The first section answers the research question: "What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about romantic relationships?" Of the 605 participants, 267(44%) provided meaningful responses to an inquiry about relationship concerns, problems, or questions. Two-hundred and sixty-six students (44%) did not respond to the question, and 72 (12%) provided overly general (e.g. "I don't know," "I don't care") or uninterpretable responses (e.g. "You're the only one that I talk to"); these 338 instances were coded as nonresponses and were thus not included in analysis. Only the 267 participants who provided meaningful responses were considered for phenomenological analysis.

The second section answers the research question: "What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK?" Of the 605 total participants, 301 (50%) provided meaningful posttest responses to an inquiry about the most important thing that they gained from participation in the PICK program. Two-hundred and sixty-three did not respond to the question (43%), and 41 (7%) provided nonspecific answers such as "everything" or "nothing." These nonspecific responses were not included in analysis. Only the remaining 301 participant responses were included in this analysis.

Concerns about Romantic Relationships

To better understand adolescent concerns about romantic relationships, participants were asked **"**What is your biggest relationship concern, problem, or question

that you hope this course will address?" prior to PICK instruction. Three themes emerged from adolescents' written responses. The most common theme reflected a desire for skills and knowledge about relationships. The second theme suggested concern about risky relationship behaviors such as abuse, cheating, and relationship dissolution. Lastly, the smallest theme consisted of concerns about self, peers, and parents. Responses were evaluated for demographic differences according to gender, family structure, and relationship status. Demographically, adolescent concerns varied somewhat according to relationship status and family structure.

Skills and Knowledge

The first and most prominent concern that adolescents expressed about romantic relationships centered on skills and knowledge. Specifically, 110 of the 267 adolescents (41%) indicated that their biggest relationship concern, problem, or question was related to building skills and gaining knowledge about romantic relationships. Their responses reflected questions about "how" to enact a healthy relationship, and issues of "who" (choosing) and "when" (timing) to have a relationship, with a desire to know what a healthy relationship is and how to gain the skills necessary for building such a relationship.

How? The responses in this section ($n = 65$) dealt with the "how's" of having a healthy relationship. Major themes included relationship initiation and termination, discerning between healthy and unhealthy relationships, relationship maintenance, communication and problem-solving, and sex.

Eighteen adolescents expressed questions and concerns about how to initiate or end a relationship. "What is the best way to start a relationship?" asked a 17-year-old girl (not currently in a relationship). "How in the heck do you get a guy to like you? What are guys looking for??" asked another girl (15-years-old). Other adolescents were concerned with ending a relationship. A 15-year-old posed the question, "If you are in a rough patch with someone, should you end it? Or wait and see if you can get through it?" Another girl (15-years-old) expressed a similar concern: "When do you know when to stop liking someone?"

Some participants ($n = 16$) wanted to know how to discern between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Half of the responses in this category dealt with avoiding bad relationships, and the other half expressed concerns about warning signs of bad relationships. One 16-year-old said that her biggest concern was "what the biggest warning signs in a relationship are and how to handle them." Another adolescent (15-years-old) said that her biggest concern was, "How to avoid bad relationships. What are some signs that you're in an unhealthy relationship?" she asked. Eight adolescents wanted to know how to recognize a healthy relationship. "What is considered a 'healthy' relationship?" was a common query, though phrased differently by different participants.

Similar to those who wanted to know what a healthy relationship looks like, 15 adolescents inquired about maintaining good relationships. A 15-year-old girl (not currently in a relationship) asked, "How do I not mess it up? How do I establish a healthy non-serious relationship?" Another (15-years-old) commented that her main concern was "keeping relationship/marriage healthy once I have it." Eleven adolescents specified

communication and problem-solving issues as topics of concern. A 16-year-old girl said that she wanted "to know how to make sure that in future relationships my partner and I will be able to communicate freely," and another 16-year-old mentioned that she would like to know "How to deal [with] situations in a calm way." Only five adolescents in this category mentioned sex as a major concern.

Who? Thirty-three adolescents described questions and concerns about potential partners. Their words showed interest in compatibility, partner characteristics, and the definition of love. Concern about choosing the right partner was evident in many responses. A 17-year-old boy (not currently in a relationship) asked simply, "How can I tell if someone is worth a relationship?" Another 17-year-old boy (also not in a relationship), commented "My biggest concern is finding someone who can be loving and tolerant so I don't fall in love with someone that cannot love and accept me and themselves for who they are…" One adolescent (16-years-old) posed a situation of choosing between various partners. Her biggest concern was "when you're stuck between two people and you don't know which one to choose. How do you know which one to choose or even tell them you don't want a relationship without hurting them?"

Several adolescents posed questions about how to deal with a romantic partner's personal characteristics. "How do you help a partner through serious depression?" asked a 15-year-old boy about his romantic partner. Another (15-year-old) asked what to do "if a partner is depressed/emo." A few reported that their biggest relationship concerns dealt with perceived incompatibilities between themselves and a partner. For instance, a 16-year-old girl described her own situation: "He's Mormon and I'm not. How do I tell him I

don't want to get married in the temple and do I end my relationship now?" Two adolescents likewise expressed worry about incompatibility when they asked, "What happens when someone is right for the other person but they're not right for them?"

The apparent concern in finding and choosing an appropriate romantic partner was expressed by many in a desire to recognize real love. When asked about her greatest relationship concern, one 15-year-old girl said, "True love, I guess. How to tell if someone is genuinely into you." Others responded, "What is love really?" "How does one know when you're truly in love?" and "…how do people know if they're really in love or if they are just feeling wanted?"

When? Twelve participants had concerns pertaining to timing and the development of the relationship. For instance, a 15-year-old girl asked, "When's the right time to become physically intimate?" and a 16-year-old girl asked, "How fast are relationships supposed to move?" Another girl (16-year-old) expressed that her concern was "How to properly pace a relationship to give a better long term chance." A few adolescents expressed concern for mismatched timing between partners. A 17-year-old girl asked, "When pacing a relationship what if someone wants to go faster but you don't want to rush and have a potential breakup?" Another (a 16-year-old girl) said that she was concerned with "pacing relationships at a speed right for both partners."

In essence, adolescents seemed to be asking for a healthy relationship script, to know how to pick a partner, pace the relationship, and perform relationship skills in healthy, mutually-fulfilling ways. They sought basic information to guide their romantic relationships. As one adolescent summarized, "How to have a good relationship" was a

major concern for adolescents. Another (15-year-old) stated that her primary relationship

concern was, "Being able to identify when enough is enough and how to act in certain

situations—a better understanding of life and relationships."

Relationship Risks

The second theme within adolescent relationship concerns centered on

relationship risks. Ninety-nine of the 267 adolescents (37%) indicated a relationship risk

as their biggest relationship concern, problem, or question. Their responses revealed

apprehensions about cheating, sexual coercion, abuse, debilitating break-ups, and other

unhealthy relationship practices. The overall tone was one of worry and a desire for

something better.

Cheating. The most-mentioned relationship risk was cheating. Thirty-five of the

99 relationship-risk responses include the terms "cheat[ing]," "lies"/ "lying", or mention

of broken trust. Several adolescents referred to cheating as something that they had

experienced or were currently experiencing. A 15-year-old girl in a romantic relationship

of one year asked, "How do you know what to do when your boyfriend cheats on you but

then says sorry…Drives me nuts." Another adolescent, a 17-year-old girl in a one

month```-long relationship, said that her biggest relationship problem was, "being

used/played and cheated. It's caused me to have trust issues." Other adolescents indicated

that cheating was something that they are afraid of experiencing in future relationships. A

15-year-old boy (not currently in a relationship) said that cheating was his greatest

relationship concern, and then explained, "I would never want to be cheated on. Nor

would I want the thought of cheating in my head." A 17-year-old girl likewise expressed

fear of the future when she stated that her biggest relationship concern was "getting married and getting cheated on."

Coercion. A notable number of responses ($n = 25$) indicated concerns about controlling partners and/or "jealousy." Most suggested sexual coercion as the primary issue. "I feel like my boyfriend would not love me if I did not fulfill his physical pleasures and needs," expressed a 16-year-old girl. Sentiments such as this were common. "How do you know if the person only wants in your pants? I think I know and that's why I broke up with my last boyfriend, but I need to be sure!" expressed a 15-year-old girl. Several adolescents reported that their greatest relationship concern was knowing how to respond to unwanted physical advances. One 16-year-old girl said that her biggest concern was "That they will make me do something I don't want to do," and another 16-year-old girl asked "How to react when someone tries to force 'physical intimacy.'" Five responses included concerns about jealousy. A 16-year-old girl in a romantic relationship of over one year duration expressed a desire to know "if [relationships] are abusive." She further explained, "I get concerned with jealousy. I'm jealous of a lot and I would like to stop being nervous about things …"

Abuse. Seventeen of the 99 relationship-risk responses included mentions of "abuse." Adolescent remarks about abuse ranged from desire to know the signs of abuse to petitions to help self or others get out of an abusive relationship. "How can you tell if you're emotionally abused in a relationship?" asked a 15-year-old girl in a relationship of less than one month duration. In a similar vein, other adolescents asked "How to get out of an abusive relationship" and "how to prevent an emotionally harmful relationship."

Relationship endings. Twelve responses indicated concerns about divorce or painful endings. Three youth expressed specific concerns about divorce. "My largest concern in relationships is that after marriage the relationship will [dissolve] and leave me emotionally stranded," commented a 15-year-old boy. A 16-year-old said that her greatest question was, "How to heal. Yeah, I'm in high school and probably don't know a lot but I want to learn how to move on." A 15-year-old girl asked, "How do you get out of a harmful or dangerous relationship?" The remainder of responses ($n = 9$) captured other relationship risks: "being hurt," fighting, "rejection," being judged, and "STDs."

Self, Peers, & Parents

The third and final theme was the potential influence of various adolescent concerns regarding their own characteristics, their peers, and their parents. Only 56 of 267 responses (21%) comprised this last theme.

Self. Twenty-seven of the 56 responses include "me" or "I" as the focal point, and these responses reflect concerns about personal characteristics relative to romantic relationships. Several commented about personal weaknesses. A 15-year-old boy explained that he did not have "any problems that are big enough to care about besides my bad self-esteem." A 17-year-old girl commented, "I am intimidating so it's hard for people to talk to me and approach me." "Why am I just so unlikeable," bemoaned another. Some of these responses seemed to reflect rejection sensitivity (i.e., fear of being rejected as a result of past relationship trauma; Hafen, 2014): "I'm afraid to let people in because I feel that they will hurt me," said a 17-year-old girl. "I loved somebody once and will never do it again," said 15-year-old boy. In another vein, several adolescents

expressed strong individualism and a general disinterest in romantic relationships. "I will be single for life," replied a 15-year-old girl. In a lighter tone, a 16-year-old boy asked, "Is it publically acceptable to never be in a relationship, and instead spend my time eating ice cream?"

Peers. Eighteen of the 57 responses discussed friendships or made generalized statements, often (but not always) about the opposite sex. Several adolescents expressed concern for how romantic relationships might influence friendships with peers. "My biggest concern/question would be knowing if my relationship would mess with the relationships I have with friends," expressed a 16-year-old girl. A 15-year-old girl in a relationship of less than one month duration wanted to know how to "[have] my friendship forever and [have] my boyfriend forever." A few responses focused on friendships, rather than romantic relationships. A 15-year-old girl expressed, "I have few friends and I feel as if I am distant and they don't want to spend time with me." Another adolescent (a 16-year-old girl) asked, "How do you tell a friend, that they aren't a good friend?"

Generalized statements about the opposite sex often expressed exasperation. Examples included: "Why are girls so confusing?" "Why [are] girls so annoying?" "Why do boys suck?" and "Why do boys get turned on so easy?" A 17-year-old boy expressed a desire to "figure out the complexity of the female mind," and 16-year-old boy said, "I hope this course addresses how the female brain works." These responses reflected vexation and, at times, a desire to better understand the opposite-gender peer group.

Parents. Eleven of the 57 responses dealt with the role and influence of parents. Several expressed concern about intergenerational transmission. "How do I survive a marriage when everyone in my family has been divorced," asked a 16-year-old girl. "My dad cheated on my mom," explained a 15-year-old girl, "so I'm terrified it will happen to me. That's why I'm not in a romantic relationship." Three adolescents expressed worries about family-partner interactions. A 17-year-old reported that her greatest concern is, "Parent involvedness; importance of their opinion and direction. Parent's role in my relationships in general."

Demographic Differences

Responses about relationship concerns varied somewhat by relationship status and gender. For adolescents who reported that currently being in a romantic relationship, the most common relationship concerns were risks, and the least common concerns were about self, peers, or parents (48% concerned with risk, 36% concerned with knowledge and skills, and 16% concerned with self, peers, or parents). Conversely, for adolescents who were not currently in a romantic relationship, the most common relationship concerns dealt with knowledge and skills, with a modest representation concerned with risks or self, peers, and parents (43% concerned with knowledge and skills, 33% concerned with risks, and 23% concerned with self, peers, and parents). Relationship risks were an express concern of both boys and girls. However, a larger percentage of girls expressed concerns about relationship risks than boys. While 30% (31 of 99) of boys' responses were about risks, 42% (68 of 162) of girls' responses reflected the same.

Family structure also appeared to have some influence on adolescent relationship concerns. Comparing adolescents who lived with both birth parents ($n = 154$) with those who live with one parent, with one parent and a stepparent, with grandparent(s), or other ($n = 112$), the most common relationship concern for those living with both parents was knowledge and skills (47%), followed by risks (32%). Conversely, the most common relationship concern for adolescents not living with both birth parents was risk (44%), followed by knowledge and skills (34%). Adolescents were roughly equally likely to respond that their greatest concerns were about self, peers, and parents (21% and 22%, respectively).

Perceived Gains from Relationship Education

After receiving relationship education, adolescents responded to the question: "For you, what is the most important concept, or result you gained from this course? Please explain why." Responses to this question were used to evaluate the perceived gains of the PICK curriculum for adolescents. Four themes emerged from the responses provided. The majority of responses (53% or 159 of 301 total responses) detailed relationship skills and knowledge gained during the course. Another large portion of students (38% or 113 of 301 total responses) described some element of the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) and the associated chart. A small number of adolescents ($n = 22$) responded with statements that indicated personal application or insights gained as a result of the curriculum. Lastly, 11 responses reflected things learned about family relationships. The combined responses were assessed for differences based on

demographics of gender, family structure, and relationship status. No demographic differences emerged for these themes, with the exception of an age-related pattern (appreciation increasing with age) associated with perceived gains from PICK.

Skills and Knowledge

One-hundred and fifty-nine of the 301 adolescent responses (53%) dealt with the acquisition of relationship skills or knowledge. Adolescent responses depicted the PICK curriculum as a purveyor of valuable relationship skills and principles. Responses included knowing how to have a good relationship, recognizing the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and espousing certain relationship principles.

Skills. The largest number of responses in this category ($n = 93$) described an assortment of skills gained to help with relationships. Specific skills that were mentioned include: "Conflict management," "Delayed gratification," "How to sustain a relationship," "How to communicate," "How to solve problems," "How to introduce yourself," "Boundaries," and "How to control your emotions." Conversely, many of these responses were general, and did not list specific skills. For example, a 15-year-old boy said that the most important thing he gained was "Some of the ways to keep a healthy relationship." Similarly, a 16-year-old boy generalized that "Marriage help for the future" was the biggest thing he gained from the course.

A full 23 responses dealt with pacing the relationship. A 17-year-old boy (not currently in a romantic relationship) commented that he learned "how long to wait before really starting. I had no idea." Another adolescent iterated that she learned about "pacing

things because it's hard to know when to do stuff." "Take your time, don't rush things," commented a 16-year-old boy.

Another 21 responses dealt with mate selection and compatibility. A 15-year-old girl said that she learned to "[pick] who would and wouldn't be someone to have a relationship with because that's really important." In keeping with the title of the course, several adolescents responded that they learned how to avoid falling for a jerk. "Don't fall for jerks," said a 15-year-old boy, "that was the whole point." Many adolescents commented that they learned something about love and compatibility. "Love isn't all that matters," said a 16-year-old boy; "just because you love someone doesn't mean they're 'the one.'" In similar responses, a 15-year-old boy commented, "Love is more than just looks," and a 16-year-old girl said, "Love isn't all you need." "There are many things to weigh when determining whether or not to be with a partner besides just how much you love a person," summed up a 15-year-old boy.

Discernment. Thirty-eight adolescents responded that the most important thing they gained from the course was an ability to recognize healthy relationships and/or to avoid unhealthy relationships. As one 15-year-old boy put it, "[I learned] how to spot a bad relationship and how to ensure a good one." Many adolescents cited recognition of warning signs of a bad relationship as the most valuable take-away. Some referred to specific ideas from the curriculum. For example, a 17-year-old girl said that the idea of a 90 day probation period was important "because it's a great way to evaluate your relationship [and] pace it properly and decrease chances of getting hurt." Others mentioned "attackers and avoiders" and "the FACES concept" as helpful tools for

discerning between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Several adolescents expressed that the most helpful thing was simply knowing what to expect in a healthy relationship. "[I learned] what a healthy relationship looks / feels like," said 15-year-old boy. A 16-year-old girl corroborated that the most important gain for her was "How to see a healthy relationship. It helped me understand what to look for in future relationships."

Principles. The remaining 28 responses were primarily statements about healthy relationships. In general, these responses revealed how adolescents conceived of relationships after the PICK course. For example, "You both need to be healthy to bond," said a 15-year-old girl. "Relationships are risky but that's not necessarily a bad thing," said a 15-year-old boy. A 16-year-old boy observed, "Society has corrupted the way we should think about relationships. This can ruin people's social health and relationships." And in a simple equation, one adolescent (a 16-year-old girl) concluded, "healthy relationships = healthy life."

RAM

One-hundred of the 301 responses directly related to the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM). This model (see Appendix C), provided to students in the form of a magnetic chart, "is a picture of the bonding links that interact in a developing relationship" (Van Epp, 2015, p. 7). Adolescents are instructed how to establish an appropriate balance of five bonding links regarding the timing of how and when to know, trust, rely, commit, and touch. Responses referred to the overall model and to the five bonding elements.

Fifty-six adolescents described the RAM model and the accompanying chart as a useful evaluative tool. Many expressed appreciation for the chart itself. A 16-year-old girl said that the "most important concept was the RAM board. It helps explain the steps to take in a healthy relationship." Others said that the chart "makes sense," "answers a lot of questions about relationships," and "give us an order to a safe relationship." A 17-year-old girl said that it "helped me evaluate my relationships." "The RAM board…explained it all for me," said a 15-year-old girl.

Know. Twenty-seven adolescent responses included statements about knowing one's partner, the first step to a healthy RAM model relationship. A 15-year-old girl in a relationship of four months said that the most important thing she learned was "that you need to know your partner. I never knew that you need to know your partner really well." "You should really get to know someone before getting serious," said another 15-year-old girl.

Trust. Twenty-eight adolescent responses included a discussion about trust. This was the most-reported of the five bonding elements. "If you're in a controlling relationship like with no trust, bad jealousy issues and you're constantly sad, it's not healthy," observed a 15-year-old girl in a relationship of nearly two and a half year duration. "Trust is a very big thing to have in any type of relationship," said another 15-year-old girl. Ten adolescents referred to the sequence of knowing-before-trusting. "You have to know a person a lot before you can start to trust them," commented a 16-year-old girl. A 16-year-old boy described knowing and trusting as prerequisites for all other

relationship growth. "Make sure you come to know them then trust before the rest," he said.

Commit & Touch. Commitment and touch were referenced by 11 adolescents. Five adolescents wrote that commitment was one of the most important things that they gained from the program. "The commitment talk was my favorite because it showed me how to stay faithful in a relationship," said a 15-year-old girl. Six adolescents reported information about touch or physical intimacy as one of the most important concepts gained from the course. A 15-year-old reported that she learned "why people get attached so fast in a relationship. The 'touch' brain chemicals."

Application and Insight

This theme captures comments that indicated some sort of personalized learning or application of content. Responses suggest a change in knowledge or behavior as a result of participation in the PICK program. Twenty-two of the 301 responses were included in this category. Although some of the youth mentioned RAM, skills and knowledge, or family themes, the responses that emerged in this theme were qualitatively different because of actual behavioral or attitudinal change. A striking response came from a 16-year-old girl in a relationship of nine month duration who replied, "I learned that I'm a jerkette." A flipped response from another 16-year-old girl indicated empowerment to not fall for a jerk: "I would not stay with a jerk because I can spot warning signs and I know how to walk away," she said. Such comments were common. A 17-year-old girl responded, "The most important concept I gained is how to deal with people. I would not know how to deal with my problems but now I do." A 16-year-old

girl in a six-month long relationship said, "I now realize some issues that need to be resolved in my relationship," and a 17-year-old boy (not currently in a relationship) reported that, "it helped me pinpoint my past mistakes and flaws."

Family

Only 11 of the 301 responses included family as the primary focus. In the preprogram question, adolescents mentioned self, peers, or parents with some frequency, but the postprogram question yielded responses only about family (no mention of self or peers). Most of the postprogram feedback referred to family background as an important factor in romantic relationship success. For example, a 17-year-old girl said, "Family impact[s] relationship[s] because it already starts off your opinions of what you want / don't want because of what you see in your own life / family." Another (a 16-year-old girl) reacted against her own family background: "I feel like it told me that I'm going to be a lot like my mom. Well, that's not true. I will be nothing like my mom is. Never," she insisted. A few students applied skills from the PICK curricula to family relationships. For instance, a 15-year-old boy said that the most important thing he gained from the course was "talking skills about solving problems because my sister fights with me so now I can be assertive."

Demographic Differences

On whole, adolescents reported substantial gains from the PICK curriculum. Participants of all ages responded affirmatively that they gained important things from the course. While 18 adolescents expressed that they gained nothing from the course

(these responses were not included in the coded analysis), the majority reported

meaningful gains in skills and knowledge. Results did not appear to differ by

demographics of gender, relationship status, or family structure. However, RAM was a

more commonly reported theme among older adolescents. While only 29% of 15-year-

olds responses indicated RAM as the most important gain, it was the most important gain

for 38% of responses from 16-year-olds, and for 51% of responses from 17-year-olds.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to assess adolescent romantic relationship concerns and their experiences in a relationship education course. Research about adolescent relationship concerns is lacking, but research on similar constructs suggests that relationship cognitions may be associated with behavioral outcomes (Ali et al., 2011; Fletcher et al., 2000). A better understanding of adolescent romantic relationship concerns should be used to help guide future relationship education efforts for adolescents. Additionally, the PICK course has been taught to hundreds of thousands of individuals (J. Van Epp, personal communication, October 5, 2016), but evaluation of this program is scant, especially among adolescents. This study provides a qualitative evaluation of adolescent relationship concerns, and an evaluation of what youth gained from the PICK program. It is to these ends that this study explored two research questions: (1) What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about romantic relationships? (2) What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK?

The themes derived from these research questions largely paralleled each other. Adolescents expressed concerns about how to do relationships, the risks of relationships, and how self and others (peers and parents) have impact on relationships. Findings relative to the second research question suggest that the PICK program often addressed those concerns through the curricular content. Qualitative findings were also consistent with extant research. Themes common in empirical research were noted in adolescent responses: normative timing and sequence of relationship milestones (O'Sullivan et al.,

2007), the prevalence and correlates of relationship risks (e.g., adolescent relationship abuse; Collins et al., 2009; Taylor & Mumford, 2016), the primacy of identity development in adolescent romantic relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1950), and the influence of parents and peers on adolescent romantic relationships (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1986; Conger et al., 2000; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005).

Alignment of Themes

The concerns that adolescents expressed in the pretest largely aligned with the gains that they reported after participating in PICK. Initial concerns about gaining skills and knowledge corresponded with reports of new relationship skills and knowledge after participating in PICK. Some of the youth concerns about relationship risks were directly and indirectly addressed by the Relationship Attachment Model, which provided an evaluative tool for avoiding risk and building safe relationships. Concerns about self and identity expressed in the pretest were paralleled by gains expressed in the form of personal application of the PICK curriculum. And concerns about family in the pretest were paired with knowledge gained about how family relationships influence romantic relationships in the posttest. The alignment of these themes is depicted in Table 2 (Appendix A). The correspondence between organically-derived adolescent concerns and their reported gains from a relationship education program suggest that PICK effectively addresses adolescent concerns.

Adolescents expressed interest in gaining skills and knowledge about relationships, and follow-up responses suggest that their interest was largely answered by the PICK curriculum. Adolescents expressed particular appreciation for the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) and the accompanying chart. They described the RAM board as an invaluable visual, helping them "see" and "evaluate" their own relationships according to a healthy relationship script. Many adolescents seemed to be asking for just this thing—a relationship script. They wanted to know the "hows," "whos," and "whens" of relationships. That is what the PICK curriculum and, more specifically, the RAM model provided. Adolescents described how the RAM model acted as a relationship script in comments such as: "it shows how much and the right way you should get and put into a relationship," "I can see if it's healthy or not," and "It answers a lot of questions about relationships." Feedback like this provides evidence that there is a correspondence between adolescent concerns and what adolescents gain from the PICK curriculum. Their gains seem to reflect responses to their concerns.

The second pretest theme related to adolescent relationship concerns suggests that adolescents want to avoid relationship risks (cheating, abuse, coercion, jealousy, and inevitable endings) and to learn the skills necessary for building healthy relationships. This emergent theme suggested that youth wanted to be able to recognize warning signs of bad relationships and to know what good relationships look like, to know "what is considered a 'healthy' relationship" and "how [to] spot warning signs." In the posttest, adolescents responded that the PICK program content addressed risks and promoted healthy relationship skills, both of which are prevalent concerns in adolescent responses.

Participants indicated a resounding appreciation for these principles. Although none of the adolescents responded specifically that they had received information about cheating, abuse or jealousy, many of them shared principles to help them avoid unhealthy relationships. Their responses included principles of discernment, mate-selection, and getting to know one's partner as valuable concepts gained. For instance, 38 adolescents responded that the most important concept or result that they gained from PICK was an ability to discern between health and unhealthy relationships. They referenced "the FACES concept," "90 day probation period," "the safe zone," and "warning signs" as valuable take-aways. Another 27 responses dealt with knowing one's partner (prior to trusting, committing, relying, or touching). Principles of taking time to know one's partner is an empirically-founded principle of relationship health. In at least one study, knowing one's partner was associated with supportive behaviors and negatively correlated with divorce among newlywed couples (Neff & Karney, 2005). These same healthy relationship skills may help inoculate against relationship abuse, although more research is needed in this area.

Identity and family relationships were the last emergent themes in both adolescent concerns (pretest) and adolescent gains (posttest), and again, there was a degree of alignment to these themes. In the pretest, some adolescents expressed identity concerns in statements of insecurity or relationship disinterest. In the posttest, identity statements emerged in the form of personal gains and insights (such as the girl who identified herself as a jerk-ette). Although the theme of identity was expressed somewhat differently when adolescents described relationship concerns compared to when adolescents described

what they gained from the curriculum, there was a definite correspondence between the two themes.

Family relationships likewise emerged in both research questions, though with some discordance. In their concerns, adolescents primarily discussed worries about unhealthy parental examples of romantic relationships. In gains, adolescents mostly reported that they had learned that family relationships have an impact on romantic relationships—not necessarily that they knew how to address unhealthy parental examples. One adolescent (a 16-year-old girl) criticized, "I feel like it told me that I'm going to be a lot like my mom. Well, that's not true. I will be nothing like my mom is. Never." The correspondence between adolescent concerns and gains could perhaps be strengthened if the PICK curriculum specifically addressed how to break the cycle of unhealthy relationships for adolescents who have unhealthy examples.

Connections to Extant Research

The concerns that adolescents expressed about relationships can be placed within the larger body of research on adolescent relationships. This section details how the adolescent relationship concerns described in this study fit with extant research about the timing sequence of relationship events, relationship risks, identity development, and the influence of family and peers.

Timing and Sequence

The most-reported relationship concerns, problems, and questions in this study pertained to the timing and sequence of relationship milestones. Related subthemes

emerged as the "hows," "whos," and "whens" of having relationships. Answers to these questions are provided, in part, by empirical research. For instance, while there is no single relationship script describing *how* one should conduct a healthy relationship (i.e., sequence), research confirms the pacing put forth in the RAM model. This research suggests that romantic and social events tend to occur before sexual events (O'Sullivan et al., 2007) and that delaying sexual involvement promoted better outcomes in other areas of the relationship, such as communication and stability (Busby et al., 2010). The "whens" of healthy relationships (i.e., timing) are likewise informed by research. For instance, heavy sexual behaviors have been associated with depression and violence in early adolescence; thus, this research also confirms principles of relationship pacing taught in PICK (Collins et al., 2009).

Relationship Risks

Adolescent relationship risks were one of the most-reported concerns, problems, and questions. Ninety-nine of 267 responses in this study (37%) dealt with cheating, coercion, abuse, and painful break-ups. This phenomenon is unsurprising considering that, in a nationally representative study, adolescent relationship abuse (defined as victimization and perpetration of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse) was reported by more than two-thirds of an adolescent sample of those who had been in a romantic relationship within the past year (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Psychological maltreatment in adolescent relationships (e.g., jealous behaviors, social and emotional control, and belittling words) has been reported at even higher rates in other studies (Gallaty & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2008). Given the high rates of relationship abuse reported in other

studies, it is almost surprising that relationship risks were not even more prevalent in this study. This may be due to the fact that the sample was drawn from a conservative Western state, or due to the heavy percentage of 15-year-olds. Break-ups have also been correlated with higher rates of depression in adolescents (Joyner & Udry, 2000), something that is reflected in the words of some respondents.

An important element of consideration is the prevalence of the term "cheating" in this study. Thirty-five adolescents referenced cheating as their primary relationship concern. The specific term "cheating" is not always included in quantitative measures of relationship abuse (Taylor & Mumford, 2016), psychological maltreatment (Gallaty & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2008), or intimate partner violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). The meanings and correlates of this phenomenon may be an important area of future adolescent research. Presumably, research on adolescent romantic relationships should include terms used by adolescents themselves. This study suggests that the term "cheating" is recognizable and meaningful to adolescents.

Identity Development

In keeping with theoretical and empirical research on adolescent identity development (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1950; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), a small portion of adolescents responded that their greatest relationship concerns related to matters of personal identity. Their self-concerned responses support the theory that adolescent romantic relationships are an exercise in identity development, precursory to later development of intimacy (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1950). For instance, several responses indicated a lack of confidence in one's self as commentary

about romantic relationships: "Why am I just so unlikeable?" "Why doesn't anyone love me?" Some of the responses reflected rejection sensitivity, in which negative early dating experiences perpetuate future relationship rejection (Hafen, 2014). For instance, a 15-year-old boy said, "I loved somebody once and I will never do it again." Such experiences may also hint at the mechanisms by which adolescent relationships have impact on later adult relationships (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Adolescent perceptions of self within the context of romantic relationships have been theorized to influence the development of global self-esteem and gender-role identity (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Although these responses represent a minority (27 responses), it is evident that identity and romantic relationships go hand-in-hand.

Influence of Parents and Peers

Current explanations of parental influence on adolescent romantic relationships differ from the responses provided by adolescents in this study. Conger et al. (2000) found greater support for the socialization theory than for observational learning—the opposite of what adolescents responded in this study. According to Conger et al. (2000), and Donnellan et al. (2005), parents influence adolescent romantic relationships primarily through parental socialization (parent-child interactions) rather than through observational learning (emulation of parental romantic relationship). The adolescents in this study, however, primarily wrote in the language of observational learning. They expressed concern for failed relationships of their parents, and worry that they too would fail. For instance, a 17-year-old girl said, "I'm afraid I will end up in a marriage like my parents," and a 16-year-old boy said that his greatest concern was "keeping a stable

marriage, my mom can't ever do that so I want to know how to." Though quantitative research (Conger et al., 2000) may not show support for observational learning, responses like these seem to indicate that parents' romantic relationships have at least an emotional impact on adolescents.

Peer relationships are important variables in empirical research on adolescent romantic relationships because peers provide contexts for social interactions and help establish norms and expectations (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1986; Suleiman & Deardorff, 2015), and these qualitative findings were somewhat consistent with this trend. Adolescents were asked generally about "relationship concerns, problems, or questions," and some of the participants responded with concerns about close friends, rather than about romantic partners. For instance, a girl said, "I have few friends and I feel as if I am distant and they don't want to spend time with me." Although she did not discuss romantic relationships at all, this comment and others like it are valuable to our understanding of romantic relationships. Brown and colleagues (e.g., Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1986) hypothesized that peers serve as models of close relationships, and that romantic relationships often develop through mixed-gender peer relationships.

Peers serve another important function. Peers help to establish the norms and expectations that guide romantic relationships (Suleiman & Deardorff, 2015). In this study, there was evidence that adolescents want a better understanding of opposite-gender peers to help them navigate romantic relationships. Nine of the responses were generalized statements (usually exasperated) about the opposite gender: "Guys are so confusing!" "I hope this course addresses how a female's brain works," and so forth.

Limitations

Phenomenology is, in the words of Van Manen (1990), "[an] attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal" (p. 19). It is with this in mind that I explore limitations of this research project. Phenomenology is an impossible endeavor due to the impossibility of fully capturing the complexity of people's lives, and yet from phenomenological research we have a better view of the adolescent experience—what is meaningful to adolescents, given in their own words. This modest attempt to understand the essence of adolescent romantic relationships was limited by participant response rate and length, demographic confines, and researcher biases.

All responses were limited to two to three lines of handwritten response. The adolescent experience can scarcely be summarized in such a short space. However, brevity also permitted the analysis of a large sample size. Since the goal of phenomenology is to capture the essence of the adolescent experience (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997), sacrificing depth for breadth was especially appropriate for this study. Using the novel method of analyzing short responses, I was able to include a far larger sample than I could have with more in-depth methods.

The data, albeit drawn from a large sample of adolescents, was limited by large nonresponse rates. Although I drew from a sample of 605 participants, removal of nonresponses and uninterpretable responses decreased the number of responses for each

query down 267 and 301, respectively. The large number of nonresponses may have been due to time constraints, since facilitators and school instructors had only a short time to provide instruction and gather survey feedback. Nonresponses also changed the data from nearly equal male-female response rates to a heavier female respondent rate (male responses totaled to only 39% of responses for the first question and 44% for the second question, with all other responses coming from females). The preponderance of female responses may over represent the female viewpoint at the expense of the male viewpoint. It may be that other methods such as interviews better capture male responses.

The sample used for this study was also limited to middle adolescents (ages 15-17) in a Western state. Participants were primarily white (73%), and 66% reported that they live with both parents. This reflects a relatively homogenous group of adolescents. Additionally, it should be noted that only 24% of participants in this study reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship. This percentage seems low given data suggesting that nearly half of adolescents in the U.S. have experienced romantic relationships by the age of 15 (Carver et al., 2003). The low rate may reflect lower overall dating rates among these participants, or that the question ("are you *currently* in a romantic relationship?") failed to capture the past dating experiences of participants.

Finally, in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of measurement (Creswell, 2013). As such, these themes reflect my own personal biases and hunches about romantic relationships. It is highly likely that another researcher, given the same set of data, might derive different themes and insights. I strived to account for this by engaging an assistant to help me code. While we did achieve agreement rates of 87% and

90% for each question, respectively, the coding strategies and interpretive themes were

my own. This is both a strength and vulnerability.

Implications

I am not *just* a researcher who observed life, I am also a parent and a teacher who

stands pedagogically in life. Indeed, is it not odd that educational researchers

often seem to need to overlook the children's interests … in order to pursue their

research careers which are supposed to be in the interests of those very children?

(Van Manen, 1990, p. 90)

Phenomenology allows the researcher to adopt a pedagogical orientation (Van

Manen, 1990). Accordingly, I use this section to employ the results from this study to

make pedagogical recommendations for PICK and for adolescent relationship education.

Recommendations of this nature are valuable because relationship education for

adolescents is still relatively new, and will presumably be most effective if it directly

addresses adolescents' self-reported concerns.

One way of tailoring relationship education to adolescents is to approach them in

their own language. Specifically, the words and explanations used to describe adolescent

concerns could be used to address those concerns. For instance, "cheating" was a

pervasive phrase in student responses, and yet this specific phenomenon is not

specifically addressed by PICK. Similarly, the principle of "relying" is heavily

emphasized in PICK, but almost never emerged in adolescent feedback about the course.

The curriculum might be more useful to adolescents if it employed specific instruction

for the relationship issues that adolescents themselves state as concerns, and removed those elements that are not of interest.

These data suggest that to help adolescents, we should ask about their concerns, and then address them accordingly. In order to do this, however, more time is needed for evaluation. I began with a large sample for this study, but the response rate fell to 43% and 50% (for each question) and boys were underrepresented in the free-response data. Since writing a free-response takes more time and thought than bubbling in a forced-choice question, sufficient time is essential to improving response rates. It may also be worthwhile to provide small material incentives for those who provide qualitative feedback.

Phenomenology is "a philosophy of the personal, the individual" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7), and I suspect that much that is "essential" about adolescent experience in romantic relationships will be expressed by some, but not necessarily by most. At what level do participant responses merit attention from the curriculum? What percentage of total responses renders a theme pedagogically "significant?" For instance, only 11 students (4% of the total) expressed concerns about how parents influence their romantic relationships. Yet this subgroup of responses expands current theories of parental socialization versus observational learning (Conger et al., 2000) and highlights a place for potential curricular revision (an expressed desire to break intergenerational habits). Certainly one cannot include the entirety of adolescent-reported concerns in relationship education programs, but researchers should take special care to discern between

"incidental and essential themes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 106), recognizing that larger numbers do not always capture the sole essence of an experience.

Despite limitations, the results of this study illustrate the benefit of using large samples of short-response data, combined with focus groups and interviews. This method allowed me to hear far more voices and to capture more varied, honest responses than is possible through forced-choice questionnaires. In future research, focus groups and interviews might be used to triangulate written data from larger samples, and to inquire about effective methods of instruction.

Pacing tools such as the RAM model were well-received by adolescents, and similar tools might be employed in future curricula. In this study, a vast proportion of participants indicated that RAM was the most important thing that they gained from the PICK curriculum. They described specific elements that they enjoyed about the RAM chart: a visual, a means of evaluating their own relationships, and a guide as to the pace and sequence of relationship events. Similar elements could be incorporated into take-home visuals for other relationship education curricula.

Lastly, this study revealed alignment between adolescent concerns and adolescent-reported gains, which suggests that PICK successfully delivers the content that addresses adolescent concerns. Further work is needed to know how well knowledge and skills are conveyed and how long acquired skills and knowledge last. Bradford et al.'s (2016) evaluation of PICK among emerging adults suggests that participation in PICK results in increased knowledge, but similar studies are needed among adolescents.

Further work is also needed to ascertain whether participation in PICK influences actual relationship formation behaviors.

Conclusion

This study provided a rich panorama of adolescent relationship concerns and feedback about a specific relationship education curriculum. In their own voices, hundreds of adolescents expressed desires to build skills, and to avoid risks such as cheating, coercion, and abuse. Their concerns corresponded with the gains that they reported from the PICK curriculum, giving evidence that the program delivers content that addresses empirically-derived adolescent concerns.

Presumably, relationship education programs for adolescents are only useful insofar as the programs serve the interests of adolescents. More evaluative research about PICK and other relationship education programs is needed to better serve the interests of adolescents. This study is a modest endeavor to first understand adolescent interests and concerns. Building on the recommendations made in this study, future applied research can be used to improve adolescent relationship education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Tables

Table 1

Tests of Demographic Differences among Non-Respondents versus Respondents

"Biggest Concern"	Non-Respond. (N = 338)	Respond. (N = 267)			
	n	*n*	*df*	*F*	*p*
Gender					
Boys	195	103	1	23.48	.00
Girls*	143	162			
Age	-	-	1	1.59	.21
Race/ Ethnicity					
White	253	201	1	.01	.92
Non-White	85	66			
Family Structure					
2-Parent Bio	244	149	1	13.14	.00
Single/Blended*	93	108			
In Relationship?					
No	267	183	1	4.38	.04
Yes*	69	72			
Hours Attended					
3-4 Hours	243	187	1	.124	.73
5-6 Hours	95	80			
"Perceived Gain"	Non-Respond. (N = 304)	Respond. (N = 301)			
Gender					
Boys	164	131	1	6.04	.01
Girls*	139	170			
Age (older*)	-	-	1	21.16	.00
Race/ Ethnicity					
White	213	228	1	2.94	.09
Non-White	83	64			
Family Structure					
2-Parent Bio	199	197	1	.00	.95
Single/Blended	102	102			
In Relationship?					
No	231	225	1	.02	.89
Yes	72	72			
Hours Attended					
3-4 Hours	233	196	1	9.87	.00
5-6 Hours*	71	105			

Note: N = 605. An asterisk indicates the group significantly more likely to respond (*p* > .05).

Table 2

Emergent Themes: Alignment of Adolescent Concerns with Gains from PICK

What concerns do middle-adolescents report having about romantic relationships? (pretest)	What do middle-adolescents gain from participation in PICK? (posttest)
What is your biggest relationship concern, problem, or question that you hope this course will address?(n = 267)	*For you, what is the most important concept, or result you gained from this course?(n = 301)*
1) Skills and knowledge (110) a) *How (65)* b) *Who (32)* c) *When (12)*	**1) Skills and knowledge (159)** a) *Skills (93)* b) *Discernment (38)* c) *Principles (28)*
2) Relationship risks (100) a) *Cheating (35)* b) *Coercion (25)* c) *Abuse (17)* d) *Relationship endings (12)* e) *Other risks (11)*	**2) Relationship Attachment Model (113)** a) *Evaluative tool (56)* b) *Know (27)* c) *Trust (28)* d) *Commit and touch (11)*
3) Self, peers, and parents (57) a) *Self (27)* b) *Peers (18)* c) *Parents (11)*	**3) Application or insight (22)** **4) Family (11)**

Note. In some cases the response totals exceed the stated *n* because some responses were split and coded into separate sub-categories.

Appendix B

Instrumentation

Before Class Survey - HS

Please answer the following questions. Thank you!

1. **Your Username:** _____   **Example:** **1594Blue**

   Last 4 numbers of your phone number

   Your favorite color

2. **Age:** _____

3. **Gender:** ① Male ② Female

4. **Ethnicity:** ① White ② Black ③ Hispanic/Latino ④ Asian/ Pacific Islander ⑤ Native American ⑥Other_____

5. **Relationship status:** ① I'm in a romantic relationship   ② I'm NOT currently in a romantic relationship

6. **Time in current romantic relationship** (if applicable): *Years* ____ *Months* ____

7. **I live with:** ① One parent ② Both parents ③ One parent and a stepparent ④ Grandparent(s) ⑤ Other_____

8. **Including you, how many children live in your home (full or part-time):** _____

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am a happy person.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am satisfied with my life.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am satisfied with my relationships with others.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel loved and wanted.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel my love relationships are full and complete.	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
Talking, togetherness, and time are necessary for a well-rounded understanding of a potential partner.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Love is both emotional and rational.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I can identify the things that are important to get to know about a partner.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Previous relationship patterns often repeat in the next relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
My own family experiences will impact my future relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤

P.I.C.K

When in a relationship:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our feelings of love for each other should be sufficient reason to get married.	①	②	③	④	⑤
In the end, feelings of love for each other should be enough to sustain a happy marriage.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Only a fool ever walks away from marrying the person he or she loves deeply.	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know how to pace a relationship in a safe way.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I can spot warning signs in relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤
With romantic partners, I know how to weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤

What do you think:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
If a girlfriend/ boyfriend wanted to have physical intimacy, but I didn't, I would find it pretty hard to say "no."	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel good enough about myself that I can say "no" to physical intimacy even if my friends are pressuring me to say "yes."	①	②	③	④	⑤
Most people who are important to me think a person should be married before being physically intimate.	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would never try to keep a partner from doing things with other people.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would not forbid a partner from talking to someone of the opposite sex.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would not stay with a partner who tried to keep me from doing things with other people.	①	②	③	④	⑤

What is your biggest relationship concern, problem, or question that you hope this course will address?

_____

_____

_____

After Class Survey
P.I.C.K - HS

Your Username: _____ **Example:** **1594Blue**

Last 4 numbers of your phone number ← | → Your favorite color

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
Talking, togetherness, and time are necessary for a well-rounded understanding of a potential partner.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Love is both emotional and rational.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I can identify the things that are important to get to know about a partner.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Previous relationship patterns often repeat in the next relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
My own family experiences will impact my future relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤

When in a relationship:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our feelings of love for each other should be sufficient reason to get married.	①	②	③	④	⑤
In the end, feelings of love for each other should be enough to sustain a happy marriage.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Only a fool ever walks away from marrying the person he or she loves deeply.	①	②	③	④	⑤

BEFORE this course:					Please mark your level of agreement BEFORE and AFTER this course:	Now, AFTER this course:				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
①	②	③	④	⑤	I know how to pace a relationship in a safe way.	①	②	③	④	⑤
①	②	③	④	⑤	I can spot warning signs in relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤
①	②	③	④	⑤	With romantic partners, I know how to weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤

What do you think:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
If a girlfriend/ boyfriend wanted to have physical intimacy, but I didn't, I would find it pretty hard to say "no."	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel good enough about myself that I can say "no" to physical intimacy even if my friends are pressuring me to say "yes."	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please mark your level of agreement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would never try to keep my partner from doing things with other people.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would not forbid my partner from talking to someone of the opposite sex.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would not stay with a partner who tried to keep me from doing things with other people.	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please mark your level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe I will be able to effectively deal with conflicts that arise in my relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel good about the prospects of making a romantic relationship last.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am very confident when I think of having a stable, long term relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I have the skills needed for a lasting stable romantic relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am able to recognize early on the warning signs in a bad relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
With romantic partners, I weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Considering the pros and cons of each major step in a romantic relationship destroys its chemistry.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I know what to do when I recognize the warning signs in a bad relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am quickly able to see warning signals in a romantic relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is important to me to discuss with my partner each major step we take in the relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is better to "go with the flow" than think carefully about each major step in a romantic relationship.	①	②	③	④	⑤

What was your biggest *relationship* concern, problem, or question *before attending this course?*

_____

_____

How much did this course help with your concern, problem, or question?

    ① None   ② A little   ③ Some   ④ A lot

For you, what is the most important concept, or result you gained from this relationship course? Please explain why.

_____

_____

What did you like MOST about the relationship course?_____

_____

What did you like LEAST about the relationship course?_____

_____

Please mark how you feel.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would recommend this course to others	①	②	③	④	⑤
The information in this course was useful to me.	①	②	③	④	⑤
The facilitator(s) answered questions well.	①	②	③	④	⑤
The facilitator(s) managed the time well.	①	②	③	④	⑤
The facilitator(s) explained the material clearly.	①	②	③	④	⑤

Appendix C

Informed Consent

UtahState University
DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY, CONSUMER,
AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
LOGAN UT 84322-2705

Full AAHRPP

Letter of Information for Parents
Utah State University (USU) Relationship Education PICK Program – High Schools

Purpose, Procedures, & Voluntary Nature: In high schools who partner with Utah State University, USU educators are offering the P.I.C.K. (Premarital Interpersonal Choices & Knowledge) course. This course teaches about healthy relationship. We ask student participants to take a short survey to help us understand their experiences in the class. Dr. Bradford in USU's Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development is overseeing the evaluation. Youth are asked to complete a survey at the beginning of a course and at the end. The surveys take about 10 minutes each to complete. Some students may also be asked to participate in an interview about their class experience. Interviews may be audio recorded. Interview questions can be found at healthyrelationshipsutah.org/htm/parent-information-pick/

Participation in any and all aspects of this program is by choice; students may choose not to participate in any part of program, or stop at any time. Students may skip questions they do not want to answer. Neither the survey, nor the potential interview will have any impact on grades, and none of the information will go to school staff. A copy of the survey and course information are available online at healthyrelationshipsutah.org/parent-information/

Risks, Benefits, & Confidentiality: There is minimal risk to participating. Participants will learn about making healthy relationship choices based on assessing knowledge and trust. Research records are kept confidential, in keeping with federal and state regulations. Only Dr. Bradford and his research team will have access to completed surveys and attendance information which will be kept in secured locked storage facilities. We use only codes, not names, on surveys, interviews, and attendance information. If the results are published or presented, codes will never be listed. Surveys and audio recordings will be kept for three years following the end of the project to ensure accuracy of data, and then they will be destroyed. Unidentified data may be kept indefinitely. We are required by state law to report child abuse and neglect as well as domestic violence witnessed by children.

IRB Approval & Investigator Statement: The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at Utah State University has approved these surveys. If you have questions about the survey(s), you may reach Dr. Bradford at (435) 797-5454 or k.bradford@usu.edu. This letter is to inform you that your child/student has the choice of participating in this education and survey(s). They are not required to participate and may ask any questions about this study now or later. If you have any questions or concerns and want to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu.

Kay Bradford, PhD, LMFT
Project Evaluator

UtahState University
DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY, CONSUMER, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
LOGAN UT 84322-2705

Full AAHRPP Accreditation

Letter of Information
## USU Relationship Education Programs - HS

Thank you for taking this survey. It helps us better understand the experiences of people who took relationship courses. Dr. Bradford in USU's Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development is overseeing the research evaluation. Participants are asked to complete a survey at the beginning of a course and at the end. The surveys take about 10 minutes each to complete. Participation is voluntary. Taking the survey or not taking it will have no impact on your grades. None of this information will be shown or be available to school staff.

There is minimal risk to participating. You may benefit by learning about making healthy relationship choices based on assessing knowledge and trust. You may skip questions you do not want to answer. We use only codes on surveys. You may possibly be asked to participate in an interview about your experience in the class; this would take place at your school 2-4 weeks after the class. Interviews may be audio taped. Participation in any and all aspects of this program is by choice: You may choose not to participate in any part of program, or stop at any time without consequence. We are required by state law to report child abuse and neglect as well as domestic violence witnessed by children. Research records are kept confidential, in keeping with federal and state regulations. Only Dr. Bradford and his research team will have access to completed surveys and attendance information which will be kept in secured locked storage facilities to maintain confidentiality. If the results are published or presented, codes and names will never be listed. No names will appear on any study documents. ID codes and surveys will be kept for three years following the end of the project to ensure accuracy of data. De-identified data may be kept indefinitely.

If you have questions about the study, you may reach Dr. Bradford at (435) 797-5454 or k.bradford@usu.edu. The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at Utah State University has approved this research study. A letter of information about the study is provided for your parent(s) or guardian(s), including a copy of the survey questions. You don't have to take the survey, and no one will be upset if you don't want to. You can ask any questions about this study now or later. If you have any questions or concerns and want to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu. Taking and returning the survey means you agree to participate, that the study has been explained, and that any questions have been answered.

Kay Bradford, PhD, LMFT
Project Evaluator

Continue to survey, next page. Thank you!
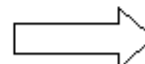
Appendix D

Relationship Attachment Model

Relationship Attachment Model

(Van Epp, 2015, p. 7)

HOW TO AVOID FALLING FOR A JERK| THE RELATIONSHIP ATTACHMENT MODEL

How the RAM
Explains Relationships

the RAM exposes jerks, protects you from blinding love, and provides you with a map for pacing your relationship

R.A.M.
Relationship Attachment Model

Know   Trust   Rely   Commit   Touch

The Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) is a picture of the bonding links that interact in a developing relationship. Please explain the five relationship links below:

Know_____

Trust_____

Rely_____

Commit _____

Touch _____

Session 1: A Bird's Eye View of Dating | It is illegal to reproduce this material in any way without permission from Love Thinks, LLC   7