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Sources of Anxiety in Emerging Adult Relationships: A Qualitative Analysis

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HONORS PROJECT

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Abstract

Anxiety is a fairly common experience for individuals, but when this anxiety is extreme or prolonged, it can have detrimental effects both emotionally and physically. Previous research has shown that romantic relationships can have both positive and negative impacts on the mental health and levels of anxiety for individuals and that a number of stressors can create anxiety between romantic partners. The aim of this study was to examine the causes and sources of anxiety experienced by emerging adults specifically within their romantic relationships. A sample of six respondents from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) who had the highest scores on the anxiety measures were selected to have their qualitative interviews analyzed. The goal of this analysis was to identify the events and experiences that cause anxiety for emerging adults. With a life course perspective in mind, I also examined how experiences throughout childhood and adolescence may impact the way individuals behave in relationships and what factors may lead to anxiety. The questions this study aimed to answer are: (1) What are the individuals anxious about?; (2) Is the anxiety discussed due to their romantic relationships or some other source? and; (3) Do men and women talk about their experiences with anxiety in different ways? Results showed a few common themes regarding sources of anxiety, including family conflict, mental or physical health issues, financial stress, divorce/break ups, and conflict/violence within romantic relationships. All of these sources were found to directly lead to stress and anxiety for individuals and to cause strain on romantic relationships. No significant gender differences were found. Interestingly, some of these variables were found to be a direct result of romantic relationships, such as mental/physical health issues and financial stress.

Keywords: anxiety, stress, mental health, romantic relationships, life course, emerging adulthood

Sources of Anxiety in Emerging Adult Relationships: A Qualitative Analysis

Anxiety is an emotion that every person experiences many times throughout their lives. Most people experience anxiety leading up to a significant event or when making a difficult decision. This emotion is a normal response to stress that is thought to have evolved as a helping mechanism in dangerous environments and as a reaction to possible threats ("Causes and effects of anxiety", 2016). With anxiety being such a common occurrence, it comes as no surprise that anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorders in children, adolescents, and adults (Merikangas et al., 2009). Through large population-based surveys, Bandelow and Michaelis (2015) found that 33.7% of the population experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. Another study reports that nearly 1 in 5 U.S. adults are impacted by anxiety disorders (Kessler et al., 2005). Individuals who experience these disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), describe being significantly impaired by both the emotional and physical problems brought on by the disorders (Hoffman et al., 2008). The high prevalence along with the detrimental effects of anxiety make it an important topic of interest for researchers and practitioners alike. Previous studies have shown that the effects of anxiety, and even specific anxiety disorders, can be lessened by relationships with friends, relatives, and romantic partners. However, research has also revealed that these relationships can be detrimental to an individual's well-being and may act as a source of anxiety. The current study aims to investigate what sources cause anxiety between partners in these relationships, and the role that romantic relationships play in creating this anxiety between partners and for individuals.

Literature Review

Gender Differences in Anxiety

Research has indicated that there are gender differences in prevalence rates of anxiety and the impact it has on individuals. Merikangas et al. (2009) assert that girls have higher rates of all types of anxiety disorders compared to boys across all ages. Similarly, McLaughlin and King (2014) found that female adolescents had higher levels of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), physical symptoms, separation anxiety, and social anxiety. Through epidemiology studies, McLean et al. (2011) found that women were significantly more likely to meet the criteria for all anxiety disorders except for social anxiety disorder for which no significant gender differences were found. Specifically, women had higher rates of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder (PD), agoraphobia (AG), specific phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Wittchen (2002) reports that generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) affects women at higher rates than men with the highest prevalence occurring at age 35 (10%). In a self-report study with adolescents, prevalence rates for both anxiety and depression symptoms were higher for girls than for boys. However, other research has found gender to be a moderator between anxiety/depression symptoms and well-being, self-esteem, academic problems, and psychosocial functioning, with males reporting higher rates of all these outcomes (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011). This finding suggests that while females may experience anxiety at higher rates, the impact anxiety has on different aspects of functioning may differ by gender. Based on all of these findings, the current study examines whether there are gender differences in how respondents talk about their experiences with anxiety.

Life Course Perspective and Emerging Adulthood

According to the life course theoretical perspective, an important sociological paradigm, individuals are influenced by the other people in their lives, the historical time period in which they live, the timing of significant events in their lives, and the sense of agency that comes from

being human (Elder, 1994). Scholars, such as Mortimer and Moen (2016) have recently added to the life course perspective by emphasizing that the life course is characterized increasingly by diversity and is more individualized than it has been in the past. In particular, while the pathway to adulthood may be smooth for some individuals, it may be more difficult for others. Importantly, transitioning to adulthood is a pivotal point for psychological vulnerability and stress. Pearlin (2010) has asserted that stressors can lead to feelings of anxiety. Most research has focused on the influence of economic problems as sources of anxiety as well as sources of relationship problems including conflict (Blossfeld et al., 2005; McMillin et al., 2018; Sevareid et al., 2019), and breaking up (Eads & Tach, 2016). Fewer studies have specifically emphasized intimate relationships themselves as sources of individuals' feelings of anxiety, which will be the main focus of the current study.

In line with the life course perspective, extensive research on romantic relationships and mental health has shown the influence that previous life experiences can have on functioning later in life. For example, in a longitudinal study by Shulman et al. (2014), negative romantic experiences at the initial measure were positively correlated with negative romantic experiences at time 3 when measured over a five-year period. Similarly, those who report never having a romantic relationship, not having a current partner, or having more negative interactions with romantic partners show higher levels of dating anxiety (La Greca & Mackey, 2007). Romantic relationships in adolescence have been linked to both positive and negative outcomes in adulthood. When studied from adolescence to adulthood (from 17-27 years old), adolescents who were supportive of romantic partners during times of need showed a reduction of externalizing behaviors during the transition into adulthood. On the other hand, those who experienced higher levels of conflict during adolescent relationships exhibited an increase in externalizing behaviors,

such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, and worry (Kansky and Allen, 2018). This research exemplifies the impact that romantic encounters during earlier stages of life can have in later stages, especially from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Therefore, longitudinal studies similar to the one the current study is pulling data from (TARS study) are useful when looking at romantic experiences over the life course.

The parent-child relationships formed in childhood and adolescence has also been an area of focus regarding functioning in romantic relationships, specifically attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety is a form of attachment insecurity in which chronic worries about rejection and need for reassurance are present in an individual. Those with high levels of attachment anxiety tend to struggle in romantic relationships, which in turn has impacts on their psychological health and overall well-being (Park et al., 2019). Marchand-Reilly (2012) has added to this idea, finding that those who experience more anxiety over abandonment and rejection report more depressive symptoms. Higher quality parent-child relationships with more support and less strain are associated with higher quality communication about romantic relationships, and higher quality communication is associated with lower levels of attachment anxiety (Luerssen et al., 2019). Additionally, Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2010) found that connectedness in romantic relationships was predicted by earlier mother-child relationships that were characterized by high support and low conflict. Earlier father-child relationships had a strong impact on anxious love, which is characterized by emotional extremes and jealousy; distant father-child relationships were linked to higher levels of anxious love in later romantic relationships. These findings exhibit how early experiences in childhood impact individuals throughout their adult lives.

Emerging adulthood, the stage of the life course the current study focuses on, is a critical period for individuals. For many, it includes the transition between completing full-time education, settling down, and creating a family (Shulman et al., 2014). Mernitz (2018) asserts that a key developmental task during this period is building a romantic identity and becoming intimate with romantic partners. Because this is a critical time of romantic development for adults, it is a good stage of the life course to examine when investigating relationship functioning. In a study examining emerging adults' personal goals, Ranta et al. (2014) found that goals related to romantic relationships were third most important, with only education and work goals being more prominent. However, in a study conducted by Seiffge-Krenke and Luyckx (2014), participants who were involved in a steady relationship lasting an average of 5.2 years showed higher levels of commitment to partners than to work and education. This suggests that when individuals become involved in romantic relationships, commitment to that relationship may become increasingly more important to them than educational or work goals.

Romantic Relationships and Mental Health

Previous research indicates that romantic relationships can have positive psychological benefits for individuals. Beckmeyer and Cromwell (2019) found that emerging adults who were involved in romantic relationships reported less loneliness and greater life satisfaction than those who were single, regardless of whether or not the single individuals expressed interest in a romantic relationship. Braithwaite et al. (2010) report that college students who were in committed romantic relationships experienced fewer mental health problems than those who were single. In a structured interview including participants with high and low levels of social anxiety, Gordon et al. (2012) found that regardless of anxiety level, romantic relationships had a positive impact on overall well-being and made individuals more comfortable when interacting

with acquaintances and strangers. Those who reported high levels of social anxiety described that their relationship improved their social anxiety. The way romantic partners deal with conflict is one of the most important influences on well-being. Park et al. (2019) found that perceiving a higher amount of gratitude from a romantic partner can lead to a decline in levels of attachment anxiety. Furthermore, individuals with high self-efficacy in dealing with work and relationship conflict showed more commitment to both their profession and their partner. These individuals also remained in better physical health and had higher life satisfaction over a 3-year period than those who scored lower on self-efficacy and ability to resolve conflict (Seiffge-Krenke & Luyckx, 2014). This evidence suggests that when relationship quality is high and partners are able to deal with conflict successfully, these relationships can have positive mental health benefits.

Conversely, these relationships can also be detrimental to an individual's mental health and overall well-being. In Shulman et al.'s (2014) longitudinal study, negative romantic experiences were positively correlated with anxiety and depressive symptoms at both the initial and the final measures. With a sample of married or cohabiting individuals, lower relationship quality with their spouse or partner was associated with an increased risk of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic attacks, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Priest, 2013). The dissolution of a relationship can have negative consequences for individuals as well. Rhoades et al. (2011) found that going through a break-up was associated with increased psychological distress and a decrease in life satisfaction. Declines in life satisfaction were even larger when the individual was living with their partner or had plans for marriage. Additionally, Sbarra and Emery (2005) report that young adults who have recently gone through a break-up experience more sadness and anger than those involved in romantic relationships. Even if conflict between

partners does not end the relationship, it can still cause negative outcomes for individuals. When partners are not able to successfully deal with conflict, mental health quality can suffer. Individuals who utilize attacking behaviors to solve disputes with romantic partners and those whose partners utilize these behaviors report more depressive symptoms (Marchand-Reilly, 2012). Novak and Furman (2016) found that negative interactions with romantic partners were associated with victimization and perpetration of violence and that level of relationship satisfaction was predictive of victimization. These findings highlight that the quality of interactions and how individuals are treated by romantic partners has an important influence on what impact these relationships have.

Research suggests that there are gender differences in how romantic relationships impact mental health, but the results are mixed. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Mernitz (2018) found that average emotional distress scores for men were higher when respondents were in a long-term cohabitating relationship than when single. However, the opposite was true for women, who reported more emotional distress when single. This finding suggests that women may benefit more from their romantic relationships than men do. However, in a longitudinal study by Joyner and Udry (2000), females involved in romantic relationships experienced a larger increase in depression compared to males. Some scholars have found that the impact romantic relationships have on well-being for men and women may differ based on specific dimensions of the relationship. Simon and Barrett (2010) discovered that women's mental health was more impacted by breakups and current involvements, but men's mental health is more associated with support or tension in current relationships. These findings suggest that the way romantic partnerships impact men and women is complex, and more research should be conducted to get a clearer picture of the gender differences that exist.

Not only do past and present experiences with romantic relationships impact mental health, but mental health has also been shown to have an influence on these relationships. Rhoades et al. (2011) asserts that people who have more problems with their mental health and generally have lower levels of life satisfaction may have more trouble entering and maintaining romantic relationships. Research also supports the idea that an indirect pathway exists between social anxiety and functioning in romantic relationships. Young adults with more social anxiety report poorer functioning in both same-sex and opposite-sex friendships, which is associated with poorer functioning in romantic relationships (Hebert et al., 2013). Adolescents with less opposite-sex friends and more negative experiences with their closest friends have also reported higher levels of dating anxiety (Gordon et al. 2012). Poor functioning in other areas of life, such as mental health and even other types of relationships can have an influence on how individuals function in romantic relationships.

The Larger Study

The Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) has been an ongoing project for researchers in BGSU's Sociology department for over 20 years. Dr. Peggy C. Giordano, Dr. Monica A. Longmore, and Dr. Wendy D. Manning have conducted survey interviews with 1,300 individuals from the time they were teens through their early adult years. They have also conducted face-to-face interviews with subsets of individuals at six different times over the 20-year span. With its longitudinal design, it is an effective way to study individuals and see how they grow and change throughout the life course. This past summer, the TARS research team collected face-to-face interviews with both men and women in which the individuals were asked about experiences with intimate partner violence and the ways that individuals stopped this kind of behavior. This research project received federal funding from the National Science

Foundation and the National Institute of Justice. The person on the project who conducted these face-to-face interviews commented that many individuals talked about feelings of anxiety, even though anxiety was not the focus of the interview. The TARS research team was interested in investigating this finding, which is what the current study aims to do.

Current Study

The current study is an analysis of six (three men and three women) qualitative interviews from the most recent TARS interviews conducted in the summer of 2019. These interviews aimed to focus on experiences with intimate partner violence and to get an idea of the main events that occurred in respondents' lives since their last interview seven years ago. Since anxiety was found to be a common theme in these interviews, the current study investigates what sources are causing this anxiety for respondents. The three main research questions are: (1) What are the individuals anxious about?; (2) Is the anxiety discussed due to their romantic relationships? and; (3) Do men and women talk about their experiences with anxiety in different ways? Some research on sources of anxiety has found that financial resource loss leads to increased anxiety and that this anxiety predicts using passive-destructive behaviors and neglect during conflict in romantic relationships (Merolla, 2017). Financial problems create anxiety within the individual, which then creates conflict in their relationships as well. On a relational level, Bebanic et al. (2017) discovered that psychological and physical violence increased the risk of comorbid anxiety and depressive symptoms for both men and women. These external sources and events have been found to cause anxiety for individuals and between romantic partners. However, few studies have emphasized romantic relationships themselves as sources of individuals' feelings of anxiety. Instead of simply looking at the factors that lead to anxiety, this

study will look at how romantic relationships themselves create anxiety or how they can be the cause of some of these known factors, such as financial stress.

Based on the previous research about anxiety and what causes it in relationships, I expected to find that respondents might discuss financial problems, their own mental health issues, and possibly familial relationships. I also expected to find that violence and conflict in relationships would be sources of anxiety for respondents, especially because the TARS team specifically asked about these experiences in this wave of interviews. I was interested in finding whether the sources of anxiety individuals discussed were directly caused by their romantic relationships or whether the sources themselves created anxiety within these relationships. I was curious to see if the respondents would discuss their relationships as being sources of relief from their anxiety; I expected respondents to either say their romantic relationships caused anxiety for them or that they helped alleviate anxiety. I thought that some might say their partners have helped them deal with or overcome anxiety as opposed to causing or exacerbating it. Since the literature on this topic was mixed, I was not sure if I would find more of a positive or negative influence of romantic relationships on anxiety for these respondents. Additionally, I expected to find some gender differences in this data, since literature has found differences in the ways men and women experience anxiety and how it influences them.

Data and Methods

Respondents

Respondents' experiences with anxiety was of interest for the current study. In the TARS study, participants are regularly measured through self-report surveys to gather demographics and other important information. Prior to the wave six interviews, anxiety was measured using a five-scale survey based on the Symptom Checklist 90 (Derogatis, 1975), which is an inventory of

indicators of generalized anxiety disorder. Respondents were asked how often they felt distressed or bothered by the following issues over the past week: (1) "Feeling tense or keyed up"; (2) "Suddenly feeling scared for no reason"; (3) "Feeling so restless you could not sit still"; (4) "Spells of terror or panic" and (5) "Feeling nervous or anxious?" These items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "very often." Respondents received an overall anxiety score from 0-25. The three men and three women who scored the highest on these anxiety measures were selected to have their qualitative interviews from wave six analyzed. These six respondents had scores ranging from 15-21. Table 1 shows a breakdown of some of the important demographic characteristics of these six respondents.

Table 1

Respondent Demographics

Respondent ID	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Employed?	Currently with a partner?
0064	F	32	White	High school	No	Yes
0072	M	35	White	Some college (not attending)	Yes	No
0235	F	35	White	Some college (specialized training)	Yes	Yes
0830	F	35	Black	Some college (specialized training)	No	Yes
0891	M	32	White	High school	Yes	Yes
0905	M	34	White	Some college (not attending)	No	No

Note that the respondent in row two, 0072, said he was not currently with a partner at the time of the wave six interviews. However, he was married but currently separated from his wife, so he still had some romantic relationship involvement to some degree. This means that respondent 0905 (in row six) was the only individual who was not involved in any kind of romantic relationship at the time of the interview.

The age range presented in this table is higher than what is typically thought of as emerging adulthood, which is from the late teen years to mid- to late twenties. As Mortimer and Moen (2016) point out, the pathway to adulthood can be difficult for some and is not the same for each person. It is important to keep in mind the transitions that characterize this period are not universal, and they may vary based on socio-economic or other life conditions (Côté, 2014). Because of this, the transitions and developments that take place during emerging adulthood could be occurring at a later age for some individuals. In fact, some scholars such as Ferro (2016) include individuals up to age 30 in their sample of emerging adults. The current data represents events and relationships that have occurred in the respondents lives over the past seven years since their last interview. Seven years ago, these respondents were in the range of 25-28. Additionally, many of these respondents are still in the process of finishing their education, moving into their own place, and settling down and/or creating a family. Therefore, myself and TARS faculty I have worked with believed the emerging adulthood label was appropriate.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative interviews of these six respondents were analyzed with a focus on the events and experiences that caused anxiety for the individuals, specifically relating to their romantic relationships. Throughout this analysis, it was important to keep a life course

perspective in mind because this data was taken from a longitudinal study. Respondents have been interviewed six different times over the course of eighteen years, meaning they could possibly discuss experiences throughout childhood and adolescence that have impacted their relationships or levels of anxiety now. The process of analysis began with listening to the recorded qualitative interviews and editing the transcripts that were made through the Otter.ai transcription system, which records interviews while transcribing them. The system does not always distinguish well between the interviewer and respondent, and it makes some writing errors that need to be corrected by hand. While listening and transcribing, abstract summaries were written for each respondent. These summaries provide an overview of the most important topics discussed by respondents using direct quotes from the interview. The summaries are mainly used by the TARS team to assist in possible future analysis for the larger study but were also helpful for the current study by helping bring attention to similarities and differences between respondents.

While going through each interview, quotes where the respondents discussed anxiety were pulled out and placed into separate files, one for each respondent. After completely reviewing each interview, qualitative content analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in the data. Common sources of anxiety between all the respondents were discovered based on the anxiety quotes that had been pulled out. Then, using the conceptual files method, the quotes were separated and organized into separate documents based on each of the common sources of anxiety that had been identified. All of these sources were related to their romantic relationships in some way.

Results

There were five main themes identified as sources of anxiety for these six respondents and in their romantic relationships:

- Financial stress;

- Divorce/Break-ups;

- Violence and conflict in relationships;

- Mental or physical health issues;

- Family conflict

Interestingly, each of these sources of anxiety, with the exception of one, were discussed by all six respondents throughout their interviews. Family conflict was the only source of anxiety that was only talked about by three respondents, but the impact was very strong for these individuals, and it was even the main source of relationship anxiety for one respondent. Family conflict and familial relationships have been found to cause stress and anxiety in previous research as well, so I felt that it was an important source to include in the results of this study. All of these sources were found to both directly lead to stress and anxiety for individuals *and* to cause stress and anxiety in their romantic relationships. In support of my second research question, these sources of anxiety were also found to be directly caused by romantic relationships. Many respondents discussed how their mental and/or physical health issues, family conflict, and even financial stress were a direct result of their romantic partners and the dynamics in those relationships. More obviously, anxiety about divorce/break-ups and violence and conflict were a direct result of romantic relationships. No significant gender differences were found in the ways that men and women talked about anxiety or the sources that caused them anxiety. All of these five sources of anxiety were discussed by both men and women. The way respondents talked about their anxious experiences was also essentially the same with neither gender using different words to describe

their anxiety. Although there were individual differences in the events respondents experienced, there were no clear distinctions between men and women. Each of these sources of anxiety will be discussed in detail in the following sections, including examples of direct quotes from respondents. Please note that each respondent has been assigned a pseudonym (a fictitious name) to protect their anonymity. In other words, the names presented do not match the real names of these respondents.

Sources of Anxiety

Financial Stress

Financial stress was one of the most prominent issues that respondents discussed. It was expected that some individuals would discuss money as a source of stress, based on previous research. However, the literature only shows this financial stress in the context of not having enough money. These respondents had a few additional reasons they identified as the cause of financial stress for them. All six of them experienced anxiety over money for one or more of these reasons:

1. Not having enough money to support themselves and their children (5 respondents)

2. Not having a job or job does not pay enough (3 respondents)

3. An ex-partner stole money from them (2 respondents)

4. Having to pay child support (1 respondent)

All of these reasons for financial stress were either directly caused by their relationships (reasons 1, 3, and 4) and/or created anxiety within them (reasons 1 and 2). The main reason for financial stress was simply not having enough money to support themselves and their children, which stemmed from reasons 2-4. One respondent, David, 35, talks about stress over his income being reduced now that he has switched careers. He says:

I'm not making tons of money and so it's just- it's just survive at this point until I figure

out what next move I'm gonna make in life, but I went from making $67,000 the last year

I sold cars to making about 20.

Meanwhile, Maria, 35, tells the interviewer about how her ex-boyfriend stole money from her, which led to her house being foreclosed on. She explains:

That's why I'm losing my house. He stole $15,000 from me. All the money- everything I

had saved up. I trusted him, we had an account together. We had separate accounts, but

we had an account like for bills and I would put my money into the account and then we

were supposed to be paying out for these bills. He was supposed to be taking care of all

this shit. Come to find out, he wasn't paying shit for the last like eight months of our

relationship. He was taking all of my money and the money that he was supposed to be

putting for bills, not paying the shit… and hoarding it.

Jennifer, 32, explains that money was the biggest source of stress in one of her past relationships. She also has a similar story to Maria's about this same ex-boyfriend stealing money from her toward the end of their relationship. She states:

We never had any money and like I said, we were living off of my parents at the time, it

was horrible. So I'd be fighting about him getting a job and stuff… I thought things

would get better when I got my money or when- if he got a job and I mean, he went

through jobs, like he couldn't hold a job for nothing… he was just leeching off of all of

us. He ended up stealing $3,000 from me that I got from my Social Security back pay and

moved back to Marion. He- I didn't know he had stolen the money until he was already

gone, but if he- I let him stay here for two weeks until his ride could come and get him or

whatever.

Both Maria and Jennifer are clear examples of how romantic partners themselves can create or add to financial stress for individuals.

On the other hand, Tyler, 32, says that his wife is unhappy with his job situation whether he has one or not. He says:

> But then there'll be an argument that I don't work, and we had that argument before. I didn't work and then I got a job and I didn't make enough money and then I get a job now and now I- now I work too much and don't give her enough of my time.

In this relationship, there are issues between the two partners either due to not having a job, not making enough money, or having a job that pays well and then not having enough time to put toward the relationship. It seems to be a no-win situation for this respondent.

When asked what the biggest stressor in her life was, Rachel, 35, said, "Me not having a job or a car... I just will feel better when I start working." Financial issues were not only an individual stressor for Rachel, but money also caused problems in her most current romantic relationship as well. She explains:

> She would do stuff out of the kindness of her heart, but then throw it up later on down the line, oh I did this for you or I did that or I did this or we do- or I do more than you or you don't do this, you don't do that, like little things that matter to her. Like I might not have been spending no money, but you can't even fill out paperwork or you don't like filling out paperwork or you don't make appointments for these kids to go to the doctors… and take 'em places or do this or cook or clean and just all types of stuff. Nothing I did was good enough for her.

She says that her ex-girlfriend was in a better financial situation than she was and would often pay for things. Later on, however, the ex-girlfriend would use these acts of kindness against her

during arguments and try to make her feel guilty for not contributing more to the relationship

financially.

Stephen, 34, is one of the most prominent examples of how there can be many factors

causing financial stress for individuals. He explains why he was recently in jail for six months

and had just been released a few months before the interview. He describes:

> $8,000 of child support… technically over $5,000 is a felony. The thing is, though, it
>
> never happens unless the alternate parent pursues it, which mine was quite vigorously
>
> doing… And I occurred a $4,000 restitution judgment on top of it.

Although Stephen was not paying his child support, the poor relationship he has with his ex-wife

led to him getting into legal trouble and adding even more money to what he already owed for

the child support alone. He also explains why he does not currently have a job:

> Because of my problems, I have a lot of trouble working. I um because of nervousness, I
>
> sweat and shake profusely to the point where I can no longer work anywhere food related
>
> because it's not sanitary… And now since I got out of jail, I applied again for disability,
>
> but I am looking for a job in the meantime, you know, I'm gonna- if I can find a job I can
>
> work, I will work it.

The fact that he has trouble working certain jobs and does not currently have a source of income

is causing a lot of financial stress for Stephen that just keeps adding up over time.

Divorce/Breakups

This may be the most obvious source of stress and anxiety for individuals when it comes

to romantic relationships, and this finding is consistent with the literature. As previously

mentioned, Rhoades et al. (2011) found that going through a break-up was associated with

increased psychological distress and a decrease in life satisfaction. All six of the respondents

talked about at least one (often multiple) past or current divorces or break-ups that have added

anxiety and other negative effects to their lives. Maria exemplifies this when she says that she

had to postpone working toward her nursing degree because, "me and my kid's dad broke up."

Similarly, Stephen talks about how difficult his divorce was on him and how it impacted his

ability to work. He says:

> Well, back in 2010, um my- my now ex-wife and I separated, and I did not handle it well,
> I did not want to get divorced at that time. It was really bad… I had had so much trouble
> when I got divorced and then when I, you know, was seeking help through Unison, they
> recommended I apply for disability… in 2010 when I lost my job, instead of convincing
> myself that a big part of it was because of the marriage, I convinced myself and the
> doctors, which I'm not blaming them, convinced me that not only could I not work, I
> couldn't work any job.

This respondent talks about his struggles with social anxiety along with physical symptoms, such

as excessive sweating, that became increasingly worse during the time of this divorce. For these

reasons, he had trouble working certain jobs and decided to apply for disability instead of trying

to find a job that he could work. Stephen's story conveys the impact that the dissolution of a

marriage can have on an individual, especially when there are pre-existing mental health issues

involved.

Interestingly, two respondents discussed anxiety over deciding whether or not they

should divorce their current wives. Both of these male respondents explained that their wives

were causing them a great deal of issues with their friends, families, and especially their own

mental health. However, they claimed to still love the women and said they wanted to be with

them, despite all the negativity they are bringing to their lives. David says, "So why don't I just

get divorced? I guess I'm just not really ready to pull that trigger right this second… Sometimes you can't choose who you love, I guess." Similarly, Tyler describes the internal struggle that he and David, are both facing by stating:

> I love the girl to death. I'll always love her. I'll always love the girl, but I don't wanna be with someone like her caliber no more… Cuz I don't wanna deal with all the bullshit. I don't wanna deal with all the name calls. I don't wanna deal with all her bullshit I've been dealing with for four years... I don't want it to end in divorce because like I said, I pictured nothing more than to spend all my life with this woman… It's very complicated.

Tyler says that another reason for staying with his wife is so that he can continue being part of her kids' lives. He is not able to have children of his own, but he has raised her children and cares for them as if they are his own biological children. He explains:

> I stayed with her for the kids. Them kids deserve somebody they've been calling dad for the last four years, as opposed to meeting a different guy every fucking weekend… the thought of losing the kids again and her being her and bringing a bunch of different guys around them and confusing them and fucking them up more, it's very maddening.

The fact that he still loves his wife and wants to be part of the kids' lives are making it difficult for Tyler to decide whether to go through a divorce or stay in his marriage, despite all the problems and verbal abuse the marriage is bringing to his life.

Similar to David and Tyler, Rachel talks about how it was difficult for her and her ex-girlfriend to end their relationship. She says:

> We wanted to be together. It just was no way, shape, or form that, like we can't even be away from each other and not talk to each other. It just was not meant like it was just not gonna work like I can't be with somebody and just argue every day. It was starting to get

tiresome and overwhelming and just like I couldn't see my kids like I couldn't keep taking

my kids, her kids like through that like uh-uh. So the best thing to do was to walk away.

Even though they wanted to stay together and still had love for each other, they knew their

relationship was not right for either of them anymore. Rachel shows how break-ups can be even

more difficult when it is not something the individuals truly wanted to happen.

Violence and Conflict in Relationships

Finding that violence and conflict within relationships caused anxiety for these

respondents and in their relationships was not unexpected based on previous research.

Additionally, the TARS team member who conducted these interviews specifically asked

respondents about their experiences with violence and conflict in romantic relationships. Because

they were asked about it, respondents discussed violence and conflict, and these things ended up

being a source of anxiety for all six respondents. Physical violence includes forceful physical

contact ranging from low force pushes and slaps to serious beatings and deadly violence (Davila

et al., 2015). Contrary to the general belief that women are more often the victims and not the

perpetrators of violence in romantic relationships, these respondents showed that they can be

both. This is consistent with Novak and Furman's (2016) study which found that 54% of males

reported experiencing victimization compared to only 38% of females. In his interview, David

explains that his ex-wife was the perpetrator of violence in their marriage by saying:

> Not that I was 100% innocent, I was not. But what happened with her, more than
>
> anything, was she would try to fight me, and she would even punch me and scratch me
>
> and slam me in the back of the head with a stiletto, but I would push her to the ground
>
> and run… I don't know where her violent streak came from, but that point in time, I
>
> wasn't used to it… it just got way too violent.

He mentions that he and his ex-wife are still in contact because they have a daughter together. After being physically abused by a boyfriend after their divorce, he claims that, "She was like, thank you for not beating the life out of me all those times that you could have, and you would just push me down and run. I would just leave." Tyler tells a similar story of how he has attempted to stop his wife from being violent with him. He states:

> She grabbed me up by my throat, tried to slam me up against the wall, but unfortunately for her, I know shit, so I got out of it. I got out of the hold, grabbed her ass up, and just told her to stop. She wouldn't stop. She kept trying to swing and I was like, fuck it. We're done, and I walked away… I pushed her off of me and walked away. Like when I say I left her, I literally left her. I left everything I had there and walked two and a half miles in a rainy ass night with no glasses cuz she broke 'em.

Although both of these men admit to pushing their romantic partners, they claim that the sole purpose was to stop the violence being inflicted on them by these women.

Rachel and Stephen give two more examples of women being the perpetrators of violence. Rachel talks about the violent incidents between her and her ex-girlfriend. She explains:

> She pulled braids out my hair, I had a bald spot in my head, um, she said her lip was bleeding… I pushed her. I wasn't trying to fight her though. I was trying to get away to get home… I will never put myself through that again.

Similar to David and Tyler, Rachel describes pushing her ex-girlfriend in an effort to get away from her and stop the violence. The anxiety and issues from this violent conflict caused Rachel to decide she never wanted to be in a relationship like that again. Stephen also talks about a physical incident between him and his ex-wife in which she was the perpetrator. He describes:

Well, what had happened was she threw- she had like a pop or slushy or something. She threw it and hit me in the face with it and then she- and we got into it and she was like, clawing at me. I- my back was clawed, she broke my glasses, knocked my ring off.

Despite women being the perpetrators in these situations, Maria provides an example of how women can be both the victims and perpetrators of physical violence when she says:

Every day we fought over anything and everything. Arguing and yelling and screaming and name calling and just every fucking day for a whole year, every fucking day…. After that time, I started. Any time that he would say anything stupid to me, I'd hit him right up on his neck, punch him right in his face. You don't- you don't want that, then get out… Like, it's just a lot. I got tired of it cuz he was emotionally abusing me. He would break me down to nothing, to nothing.

This relationship is a clear example of how nonphysical conflict and physical violence can co-occur and how verbal conflict can escalate to physical fights. Maria explains that after the first time her ex-boyfriend physically attacked her, she began to hit him first any time he would insult her or argue with her. Comparable to Maria, Jennifer tells about how the physical confrontations between her and her ex-boyfriend were perpetrated by both of them. She states:

I would be like in his face and he would just like grab me, so it wasn't like hitting, but it would be like grabbing or like I would push him… sometimes he'd get in my face and then just like- and I'd have to like try to push him and, you know, that's when he'd push back or whatever.

She admits that she would often get up in her ex-boyfriend's face first or that she would push him first when he would get up in her face. These two women are the only respondents to describe the physical violence in a relationship as being mutual.

Mental or Physical Health Issues

Four out of the six respondents discussed how their own mental health issues were impacted by their relationships and how their relationships impacted their mental health issues. These respondents discussed a range of mental health issues, including social anxiety, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), generalized anxiety, and depression. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that the association between mental health and romantic relationships goes both ways. For example, Rhoades et al. (2011) report that people who have more problems with their mental health and generally have lower levels of life satisfaction may have more trouble entering and maintaining romantic relationships. Maria, who has bipolar disorder, supports this finding when she says her relationship with her children's father ended because she, "went manic." Stephen describes in more detail how his mental health issues negatively impacted his marriage. He says:

> I have pure social phobia, socialization, I have OCD, I have major depression and I was the only one working at the time. And I would come home and I just- I wasn't mean I just was very- it was so hard for me to go to- I would just want to be alone and I wasn't very emotionally available to her… I was not there like I should have been.

This is a clear example of how an individual's struggles with mental health issues can create problems in their romantic relationships.

On the other hand, Tyler exhibits how romantic relationships can have a negative impact on mental health and create anxiety for individuals. He talks about how emotionally drained and depressed he is because of how his wife treats him. He says:

> I emotionally am drained and exhausted and depressed... I just don't feel. I don't feel anything… Today I blocked my wife, I- I blocked her number because I didn't- I didn't

wanna read any of this bullshit… calls me a cheater because she says I ignore her um, oh,

a lot more shit than that. Oh, I'm not man enough because I don't give her enough

attention because I work 12 to 14 hours a fucking day and I'm sorry if I get off work after

working in 95 degree fucking sun that I don't wanna crawl up your fucking ass. Like she's

just very manipulative, vindictive, narcissistic, and I just- I'm done dealing with it.

When the interviewer asks Tyler if his wife adds to his anxiety and depression, he states, "Oh,

fuck yeah she does, you know, fuck yeah she does." This is a clear example of how romantic

relationships themselves can create anxiety for individuals and partners can be the cause of

anxiety in relationships.

Jennifer talked about a physical health condition she has called neuro cardiological

syncope, a condition in which fainting spells occur when the body experiences certain

circumstances, such as intense emotions. She explains that her spells are often brought on by

stress, and that when she was in a volatile relationship with a lot of fighting, she was fainting

very frequently. She explains, "But I was passing out quite frequently back then and he didn't

care of one bit… Stress is the biggest factor that's my- that's my point, so it's like now it's pretty

much under control." Now that she is out of this relationship and in a more stable one, she is not

experiencing these fainting spells nearly as often. It is interesting that these respondents provide

evidence that not only mental health, but also physical health can be negatively impacted by

romantic relationships.

Family Conflict

Only three of these respondents discussed family conflict as a source of anxiety in their

romantic relationships, but the anxiety was so significant for these respondents that it is

important to include. The main type of family conflict that occurred was conflict between the

respondent's family and their romantic partner. Jennifer exemplifies this when she says:

> He said a lot of our problems stemmed from living here when we moved in with my
>
> parents… because he felt like he was no good… there was like, a lot of us here with one
>
> income and I mean, I had food stamps, but other than that, we couldn't contribute
>
> anything for the bills or whatever and my brother, he couldn't hold a job at that time
>
> either so it was just like, we all felt totally worthless and useless and it caused a lot of
>
> problems I guess between me and him. He said it was that, but it was just the fact that he
>
> wouldn't get up off his lazy butt and get a job, man. He needed a job.

She explains that during that time, "it was pretty tumultuous" between her, her now ex-

boyfriend, and her family because of his unwillingness to contribute. She was not able to work at

that time because of her health issues, and her ex-boyfriend would not make an effort to get a job

either. The fact that Jennifer's parents and her boyfriend at the time did not get along, especially

because of these money issues, caused a lot of issues in their relationship.

At the time of his interview, David was experiencing a great deal of anxiety over the

conflict between his family and his wife, who he is separated from. He is debating whether or not

to divorce his wife or stay with her because of this conflict. He describes:

> I have to make a choice, either her or them. That's pretty much where it's at right now
>
> because they will be very pissed at me if I go back to her… I just hear tons of negativity
>
> that I don't really wanna hear because it's inevitably my decision. I mean, it makes it a lot
>
> more stressful just knowing that, okay, I understand 100% where you- where you stand
>
> on the issue and that's great and all, but what about me, you know… the stress of having
>
> to make these choices and sure, this side doesn't wanna be at fault, this side doesn't

wanna be at fault and really, the whole time, what's in the middle is me and my emotions,

you know?

The situation is taking an emotional toll on David, and he feels stuck in the middle; he claims

that neither side has even asked him how he feels or what he wants. David's experience shows

how much anxiety can be caused by conflict between an individual's family and their romantic

partner. The conflict has also caused strain in his marriage, leading to the possibility that it will

end in divorce.

Rachel mentions that her father used to physically abuse her as a child and that he was

very controlling of her. She also says that her mother is an alcoholic and her brother recently got

out of jail after serving 13 years. There have been a number of issues and conflicts in Rachel's

family due to these things. She also talks about experiencing and using physical violence in her

most current long-term relationship. Although she does not directly say that these two

experiences are connected, it would be an interesting thing to look at with this respondent and

possibly other participants from the TARS study in future studies.

Unexpected Findings

There have been a number of studies suggesting that parental anxiety can be passed on to

children, with Pereira et al. (2014) finding that both fathers and mothers have unique effects on

children's anxiety symptoms. In this study, I wanted to discover if children could also cause

anxiety for parents. It was expected that some respondents would talk about their children as a

source of anxiety, but none of the respondents in this sample did. Every respondent had at least

one child, and each one talked about how much they love their children. Respondents talked

about their children changing them and their lives for the better, making them happy, and

wanting to give them the best lives possible. For example, David says, "I just, I guess wanna be a

better person for my daughter." When Rachel is asked about some of the goals she would like to achieve in the upcoming years, she replies with:

> Just seeing my kids happy… That's my pride and joy right now… That's my focus to just get my life together, to start taking them on some trips to see different stuff and just my kids being happy. As long as my kids happy, I'm happy.

Similarly, Stephen describes the life he wishes to make for himself and his daughter. He says:

> I just want enough money that I can maintain my bills and have enough money that my daughter and I can do some fun stuff. That's all I care about. I don't give a damn about vacations, I don't give a damn about going places, I don't give a damn about having cars, houses. I want to be able to have some comic books and movies for my daughter and me to have fun with and not worry about the lights being shut off and that's all I care about.

Some respondents talked about a few disagreements with ex-partners about their children, but none of the respondents talked about children being a source of stress or anxiety. They talked about them as being solely positive aspects of their lives.

The literature shows that romantic relationships can have not only negative impacts but also positive impacts on individuals (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2010; Kansky & Allen, 2018; Park et al., 2019; Seiffge-Krenke & Luyckx, 2014). Therefore, it was surprising to find that only one respondent talked about their partner having a positive impact on their well-being. Jennifer talked about her past relationships causing her anxiety, but she praises her current partner for being communicative and being there for her when she's feeling down. She explains:

> He's amazing. We have great communication like he is fantastic at communication skills, which is hard to find in a guy, you know what I mean?... He'll actually sit there and have

a conversation, so I'm like, feeling sad, he's like, what's- what's wrong? You know, he'll

notice before I even say anything, and that's, I mean, like I said, it's like, we're connected,

intuition, that kind of thing.

The reason for this finding could simply be that Jennifer's current relationship is a healthy one,

whereas the other respondents discuss violence, conflict, and verbal abuse in their relationships.

Another interesting finding was that not all break-ups caused anxiety for these

respondents, showing that sometimes the dissolution of a relationship can actually put an end to

anxiety. The difficulty of putting an end to a romantic relationship can depend on the nature of

the relationship. Rhoades et al. (2011) claim that cohabiting relationships are harder to dissolve

both emotionally and logistically than dating relationships are. Maria provides a good example of

this when she talks about when she tried to end a violent relationship with her ex-boyfriend. She

claims:

I tried to get that man out for a year. I tried everything… I told him that I didn't want him

here. I kept telling him every day, I want you to leave, I hate you, you make me

miserable, you're gonna- and I started getting back on drugs and shit again because I was

just- I couldn't deal with life and I'm like you're making me a drug addict like get the fuck

away from me like stop please, just go. And he wouldn't leave, he wouldn't leave.

She finally asked her male friend to come over and help intimidate her now ex-boyfriend to the

point of leaving. After about a week or two of this friend coming over, the ex-boyfriend finally

left. Maria says, "The next day I went to work… and he was gone, and I ain't seen him since."

She experienced more anxiety over trying to end the relationship than she did when he left. This

is a contrast to literature that shows going through a break-up is associated with an increase in

psychological distress and lower life satisfaction (Rhoades et al., 2011). However, it suggests

that when a relationship is causing anxiety for an individual, ending it can be a better option and leads to a decrease in distress instead of an increase.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

Limitations of the Study

There are a few possible limitations of this study that could have impacted the results. First, the sample size is relatively small. Although the results of this study align with some findings from previous research about sources of anxiety, the results may be more generalizable if more respondents were included in the analysis. However, with the time constraints of this project and with myself being the only researcher, I was only able to analyze six interviews. These interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2 and a half hours in length. The small number of respondents may have also contributed to the lack of gender differences. Gender differences in the way anxiety impacts men and women have been found in past studies, but no significant gender differences emerged in this sample. This could also be due to the fact that all of the participants had similarly high scores on the anxiety measures with no gender differences. A sample with more respondents, including some with lower anxiety scores, may have shown some gender differences and made the results more generalizable.

Another limitation of this study was that I was the only researcher conducting this project, so I did both the transcribing and the analyzing for this data. I knew what the larger study was about, and I knew what information I was looking for. This could have caused me to be less objective when analyzing the data without realizing it. Having a second researcher review the data or having two separate researchers do the transcribing and analyzing could help eliminate some of this potential lack of objectivity.

A third possible limitation of this study is the disadvantages that come along with using qualitative data. There are two biases that can occur when conducting qualitative interviews that can impact the results of a study. The first is recall bias, which can occur when participants do not remember past events or experiences accurately or they omit details. Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, respondents discussed events from previous stages of their lives and those that occurred within the last seven years since their last interview. This bias could have been present for some of the six respondents. Another possible bias in qualitative interview data is participant bias, which occurs when participants respond to questions the way they believe the interviewer wants them to or in a way they think is socially acceptable. This can occur consciously or unconsciously, but either way, it can have an impact on the data. Since the respondents have known the interviewer for the past 20 years, it is possible that they may have wanted to answer her questions in a way that would not diminish her view of them. Because this data is qualitative, these possible biases should be noted. In addition to these biases, some research has suggested that when individuals attempt to report on their cognitive processes, they may be doing so with little or no true introspection. Therefore, verbal reports about cognitive processes, including remembering and judging, may not be completely accurate (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This is another limitation of qualitative interview data that should be considered in this study.

Directions for Future Research

Based on some of these limitations and what was identified in the data, there are a handful of ways this study could be expanded, with the first being to add more respondents to the sample. Since this data comes from a larger study with 1,300 participants, it would not be difficult to analyze additional qualitative interviews to discover whether the same five sources of

anxiety exist for other individuals. With this expanded sample, it would also be possible to include a handful of respondents with lower scores on the anxiety measures. This would allow for a comparison between how individuals with low and high anxiety discuss relationships. It could also give some insight into whether the sources of anxiety that were found in this study exist for individuals with low anxiety as well and how those impact them. One possible way to evaluate the generalizability of these results would be to administer a cross-sectional survey to a handful of respondents from the larger study. This survey could include items regarding the sources of anxiety identified in this study to see if other respondents indicate having these anxious experiences in relationships as well. Administering a survey such as this could help find whether these sources of anxiety exist for other individuals and evaluate the credibility of the analysis of this data, similar to what previous studies have done (Arcaro et al., 2018). Additionally, many respondents in this study mentioned that some of these sources of anxiety also brought on depressive symptoms. The literature shows that anxiety and depression often co-occur (Bebanic et al., 2017; Marchand-Reilly, 2012). Because of these previous findings, the co-occurrence of anxiety and depression in these respondents could be investigated in future examinations of this data.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that there are clearly five overarching themes that stand out as being the most impactful on the mental health of respondents and their levels of anxiety, including financial stress, divorce/break-ups, violence and conflict, mental or physical health, and family conflict. Evidently, there are some individual differences in the specific situations and experiences that cause these sources of anxiety for respondents. However, these themes reflect previous research about certain stressors causing anxiety, such as financial problems, violence

and conflict, and divorce/break-ups. The results also support the idea that relationships can negatively impact pre-existing mental/physical health issues and vice versa. Contrary to the literature on break-ups, the results of this study show that break-ups do not always cause anxiety but can sometimes alleviate it, particularly if a relationship already has a negative impact on an individual's mental health. Although there is research suggesting that romantic relationships can have a positive impact on mental health, only one respondent in this sample provided evidence of this positive influence.

This study helps to fill an important gap in the literature on anxiety and relationships. Previous studies have investigated certain stressors that can lead to feelings of anxiety, such as financial problems, relationship conflict, and breaking up, but few studies have looked at how romantic relationships themselves can be sources of anxiety for individuals. The current study and its findings contribute to the literature on anxiety in a significant way by providing evidence that romantic relationships themselves have the ability to create these sources of anxiety for individuals, such as financial issues and family conflict.

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