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Parental Marital Status and Perceived Parental Marital Stability as Predictors of Avoidant Attachment Style in Young Adult Romantic Relationships

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PARENTAL MARITAL STATUS AND PERCEIVED PARENTAL MARITAL STABILITY

AS PREDICTORS OF AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT STYLE IN YOUNG ADULT

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

by Eden Jacobson

Department of Psychology

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

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    April 20, 2020   Dr. Christine Tsang

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether parental marital status and perceived marital stability were predictors of avoidant attachment in young adult romantic relationships. It was hypothesized that young adults from intact stable marriages will have the least avoidant attachment style (securely attached), while young adults of intact unstable marriages will have the most avoidant attachment style. It was also hypothesized that the young adult children of divorce will have variable avoidance levels. There were 238 participants in the present study (18-30 years old). Participants completed a Qualtrics survey which included a demographic measure and a revised version of the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) (Collins & Read, 1990). Two separate 2 X 2 analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted, the first for parental marital status and participant relationship status, the second for perceived parental marital stability and participant relationship status. The first ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect for marital status, with young adults with married parents reporting significantly lower avoidance scores than those from divorced households. There was also a significant main effect for relationship status, demonstrated by participants in a committed relationship displaying the lowest avoidance scores. The second ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect for perceived parental marital stability, with participants from an intact stable marriage reporting significantly lower avoidance scores than those from an intact unstable marriage. Implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: avoidant attachment, romantic relationships, parental environment

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Introduction

The relationships formed in the early years of life are of critical importance because they set the stage for our future relationships, including those of adulthood. Our first relationships contribute significantly to who we are as individuals, our ability to trust and engage with others, and our overall happiness. Originally, the notion of attachment was theorized to be a stable or fixed concept that is formed in early life and remains unchanged thereafter (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978). The present study, however, explores the possibility that attachment is open to both influence and change due to environmental factors.

Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby (1969) and further developed by Ainsworth (1978), is a widely accepted theory in developmental psychology explaining the origins of human attachment in relationships. Bowlby (1969) posits that one's attachment style stems from their emotional bond with their primary caregiver, theorizing that the nurturance and responsiveness of one's caregiver determines one's attachment style. He also suggests that infants are wired to have a strong emotional bond with their primary caregiver; the stronger the bond, the greater chance of survival. In addition, an infant's attachment is characterized by specific behavioural patterns. For example, when a child is anxious, they immediately return to their primary caregiver to seek comfort. These early experiences with a primary caregiver establish a model or "relational template" (Herzog, 2012) for all subsequent relationships. Bowlby theorized that an infant's need to form an attachment is innate rather than learned, and that this drive originates from evolutionary processes that promote survival in childhood. The research of Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978) expands on Bowlby's work by delineating patterns of attachment and identifying three attachment styles in infants: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. When further defining attachment style,

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) created a Four-Category Model using two interacting subscales of attachment styles: avoidance and anxiety. Those with both low avoidance and low anxiety were deemed to be securely attached (comfortable with intimacy and autonomy), those with low avoidance and high anxiety were considered preoccupied (fixated on relationships), those with high avoidance and low anxiety were considered dismissive (dismissive of intimacy and counter-dependent), and those with both high avoidance and high anxiety were considered fearful (fearful of intimacy and socially avoidant).

Three common dimensions underlying theories and models of attachment are the notions of avoidance, anxiety, and security (Ainsworth et al.,1978; Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Avoidance seems to be the most conceptually straightforward dimension of the three because the act of avoidance manifests itself behaviourally and is therefore likely to be the most externally evident (either through avoiding relationships or engaging in them, impacting the relationship status). On the other hand, both anxiety and security seem to be more complex and more internal, (characterizing relationship quality). Thus, studying avoidant relationships or avoidance of future relationships would appear to provide the clearest window into an individual's attachment style, and arguably, the most measurable.

The idea of attachment style remaining consistent throughout one's life due to early life experiences has been presented in the literature, (for example, Ainsworth et al.,1978), but has been accompanied by minimal supporting evidence. Studies typically focus on the repercussions from attachment style in the parent-child relationship for other significant relationships (such as romantic relationships) during young adulthood (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Pistole and Vocaturo, 1999). Generally, the literature has shown that those who are securely attached report more satisfaction in their romantic relationships compared to those

with avoidant or anxious-ambivalent attachment styles (Simpson, 1990; Hammond and Fletcher, 1991; Kazmierczak and Blazek, 2015). In a study conducted by Hazan and Shaver (1987), it was found that people with secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant attachment styles all experienced romantic love differently, with different emotions being associated with romantic love and relationships. Relationships with secure attachments were associated with the most positive emotions and experiences. Pistole and Vocaturo (1999) found that securely attached individuals reported stronger dedication to their partner compared to those with anxious-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles. These studies are relevant to the developmental model of attachment because they demonstrate the ways through which one's attachment to their primary caregiver in early childhood affects overall satisfaction and success in future relationships.

It may be overly simplistic to base attachment styles in young adult romantic relationships on parent-child relationships in isolation, without taking into account the contextual characteristics of the parental-marital relationship. An individual's parents' marital status is one major factor that affects attachment style in adult relationships, specifically romantic, that is not addressed in attachment theory, but is prominent in the literature. Several studies examine how parental marital status (divorced versus married) affects young adult children's romantic relationships. Jacquet and Surra (2001) found that young adults' participants from divorced households reported less trust and satisfaction in their relationships as well as more ambivalence and conflict. Furthermore, young adults who engaged in casual dating (a romantic relationship without commitment) showed the strongest effects of parental divorce by demonstrating an avoidance of commitment to a single partner. It thus appears that their parents' dysfunctional marital relationship impacts young adults' subsequent romantic

relationships by causing avoidance, trust issues, and dissatisfaction. Similarly, Crowell, Treboux, and Brockmeyer (2009) found that parental divorce increased the likelihood of having an insecure adult attachment style. Moreover, among the adult children of divorce, those who were classified as insecurely attached were more likely to get divorced themselves in the early years of marriage compared to securely attached participants, demonstrating similar findings to those of Jacquet and Surra (2001). When examined in unison, the results of the above studies strongly suggest that parental marital discord impacts the adult child's future romantic relationships.

Divorce is not necessarily the only event that can trigger change in their attachment style. Another factor that potentially alters attachment style, warranting further research, is the child's perception of parental marital stability**.** In the last few decades, several studies have examined the effects of parental marital conflict on young adult children's attachment style and have found significant results. A study conducted by Weigel (2007) examined the influences of commitment-related messages gained from families of the participants. Young adults were asked what they learned about relationships from their family environment. The results indicated that participants from households with divorce or intact unstable marriages were more likely to report receiving messages such as "relationships are not permanent, one must approach relationships with caution, and relationships fall apart due lack of trust and devotion" (Weigel 2007, p. 15). They were less likely to report receiving messages such "as marriage is enduring, relationships need love and happiness, and relationships should be partnerships" (Weigel 2007, p. 15). These results suggest that exposure to an unstable parental relationship causes individuals to be more hesitant about entering relationships because they have witnessed what a failed relationship looks like, and do not want to have this negative experience

themselves.

Cui and Fincham (2010) studied the distinct effects of both parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult children's romantic relationships. It was found that parental divorce and marital conflict contributed independently to the young adult children's perception of romantic relationships. Parental divorce was also associated with young adults' poor relationship quality caused by a negative attitude toward marriage and lack of commitment to their own current relationships. Marital conflict was associated with young adults' poor relationship quality by causing adversarial behavior with their partner. These findings suggest that parental divorce and marital conflict each detrimentally affect the romantic relationships of the children of these marriages. This is because having a negative mindset regarding marriage (and an accepting mindset regarding divorce), as well as experiencing excessive conflict with one's partner, can result in major difficulty forming and maintaining relationships. The results of this study clearly demonstrate how the subsequent relationship difficulties experienced by young adults exposed to parental divorce and marital conflict potentially lead an individual to avoid relationships altogether.

When analyzing the effects of divorce, Cui, Fincham, and Durtschi (2010) proposed that parental divorce does not have an identical effect on all young adults' romantic relationships, that outcomes depend on how young adults perceive their parents' divorce. The results of the study suggested that, compared with those from intact families, young adults from divorced households regarded divorce more casually. Further, a positive attitude toward divorce was associated with less commitment to their romantic relationship, and subsequent relationship dissolution. Young adults' perception of parental divorce varied depending on interparental conflict and parental marital quality prior to the divorce. This variation was linked to

relationship dissolution, which raises questions regarding the association between one's attachment style and exposure to divorce.

The above literature demonstrates that the parental environment influences young adult attachment style in romantic relationships. The young adult child's attachment style is influenced by perceived conflict and unhappiness in their parent's marriage, and the event of parental divorce. Parental marital instability and divorce can shift the individual's attachment style from secure to insecure which can manifest in several ways: avoidance of committed relationships, changes in levels of commitment, positive attitudes towards divorce, and decreased levels of relationship satisfaction. Missing, is an explanation of the underlying mechanism that causes parental conflict to yield an avoidant attachment style in the child. This is best explained by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which proposes that children indirectly encode and potentially model the behaviour they observe through perceiving the behaviour of others in their environment, processing these behaviours internally, and then exhibiting these behaviours. It is possible that children process the emotional undertones of their parents' relationship, and then intuitively come to conclusions about relationships, based on their perception of their parents' relationship. Moreover, if their parents' relationship is characterized by conflict and unhappiness, Bandura's theory postulates that they will also regard romantic relationships as potentially negative, which can lead to subsequent relationship avoidance, or engaging in relationships, but then having difficulty maintaining them due to preconceived maladaptive notions about relationships from their parents' marriage. Conversely, young adults raised by parents in a happy stable marriage (low conflict, high relationship satisfaction) are likely to emulate their parents' positive attitudes and behaviours in their own romantic relationships.

An interesting development in modern neuropsychology is the discovery of "mirror neurons" (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, and Fogassi, 1996), which amounts to biological support for Bandura's theory (1977). The concept of "mirror neurons", that humans have dedicated neurons that fire when others are observed performing various behaviours as though the individual is performing that behaviour, provides a neurobiological underpinning for observed behaviour and the physical enactment of what was observed. It should also be noted that the primary difference between Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), is that the former is about an individual directly experiencing relationships, whereas the latter is about an individual learning from modelled behaviour (potentially through a mechanism involving mirror neurons).

Applying both attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al. 1978) as well as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a richer framework with which to examine young adult romantic relationships. The purpose of the present study is to examine attachment the style in young adult romantic relationships, assess parental environment, and to determine whether avoidance levels differ as a result of parental marital status and perceived marital stability. It is hypothesized that young adults of intact stable marriages will have the most secure attachment style (low avoidance scores), while young adult children of intact unstable marriages will have the most avoidant attachment style (highest avoidance scores). The children of divorce will be expected to have variable levels of avoidance.

Method

Participants

There were 246 participants in the present study. There were 58 males and 188 females. Of the total participants, only 238 participants (56 male and 182 female) completed the Qualtrics survey and so only these participants' data were included in the analysis. The age of the participants in the final sample for analysis ranged from 18-30 years old ($M = 21.25$ years, $SD = 3.16$). Fifty of the participants were recruited through the SONA system at Huron University College, where these participants received one course credit in a first-year introductory psychology course at Huron University College in exchange for participating in the study. The rest of the participants were either recruited through online social media platforms (Facebook social groups) or were recruited directly by the researcher and did not receive any type of compensation or reward for participating.

Materials

The Qualtrics questionnaire had two components: a demographic measure, and the "Adult Attachment Scale" (AAS), which was originally created by Collins and Read (1990) and revised for the present study. The demographic section of the Qualtrics survey asked participants their age, gender, and relationship status (are they in a committed relationship, a casual relationship, single and have had a previous romantic relationships, single and have had no previous romantic relationships). It also asked their parents' marital status (married or divorced), their perceived parents' relationship satisfaction (rated on a Likert scale from 0-10, with 0 indicating extremely unhappy and 10 indicating extremely happy), and perceived amount of parental conflict (rated on a Likert scale from 0-10, with 0 indicating no conflict and 10

indicating constant conflict). If the participant reported that their parents were divorced, they were then asked how old they were when their parents separated. The AAS asks participants a series of statements pertaining to how they feel in romantic relationships based on either their current relationship or any relationship they had had in the past (if any at all). Originally, the AAS created by Collins and Read (1990) had two subscales measuring attachment style: anxiety and avoidance. However, in the present study, only the avoidance subscale was used in the Qualtrics survey since the purpose was to measure the participant's level of avoidance. When completing the revised AAS, participants were asked to indicate which statement best fits them by rating each of them on a Likert scale with 1 indicating that it is not at all characteristic of them and 5 being highly characteristic. Some items in the measure were reverse-coded to control for participants who may simply rate every item without reading them.

Procedure

  After clicking the Qualtrics survey link, the participant was immediately presented with a letter of information and a statement of consent indicating that if they continued with the survey, they were consenting to be a participant in the study. The Qualtrics survey took approximately 5 minutes to complete. After completing the entire Qualtrics survey (both the demographic measure and revised AAS), the participants were presented with a debriefing form, describing the purpose of the study.

<div align="center">Results</div>

  Once all the data was collected, the researcher calculated each participant's avoidance score by adding up the scores for each item on the revised AAS and dividing the total by 12 (the number of items on the scale) to get a mean avoidance score that ranged from 1 to 5. If a

participant's avoidance score was close to 1 it demonstrated that they had a secure attachment style (not at all avoidant of relationships), and if their score was close to 5 then it indicated that they had an extremely avoidant attachment style (extremely avoidant of relationships).

A Pearson's bivariate correlation was conducted in order to determine if there was a significant relationship between level of parental conflict and an individual's avoidance score. A significant positive relationship was found between level of parental conflict and a participant's avoidance score, $r(236) = .28$, $p < .01$. Another correlation was conducted to determine whether there was a significant relationship between perceived marital relationship satisfaction and a participant's avoidance score. Based on this correlation analysis, a significant negative relationship was found between perceived marital relationship satisfaction and avoidance score, $r(236) = -.27$, $p < .01$. A third correlation was conducted in order to determine if there was a significant relationship between level of conflict and perceived marital relationship satisfaction. According to the correlate analysis, a significant negative relationship was found between level of conflict and perceived marital relationship satisfaction, $r(236) = -.72$, $p < .01$. For a complete correlation analysis see Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Correlation Matrix of Mean Avoidance Score in Relation to Predictor Variables*

	Avoidance	Parental Marital Status	Level of Marital Conflict	Perceived Marital Happiness	Participant's Relationship Status
Avoidance	1.00	-	-	-	-
Parental Marital Status	.08	1.00	-	-	-
Level of Marital Conflict	.28***	.31***	1.00	-	-
Perceived Marital Happiness	-.27***	-.58***	-.72***	1.00	-
Participant's Relationship Status	.26***	-.08	.21***	-.11	1.00

Note. One-tailed tests. *** $p < .001$.

A 2 X 4 between subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the avoidance score as the dependent variable, and parental marital status (married or divorced) and participants' current relationship status (in a committed relationship, or in a casual relationship, or single and have had a previous romantic relationships, or single and have had no previous romantic relationships) as the independent variables (the full ANOVA table may be found in Appendix 1). The results indicated that there was a significant main effect for marital status, F $(1, 230) = 4.19$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, with participants who had married parents reporting significantly lower avoidance scores ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .68$) than those with divorced parents ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .78$) (see Figure 1). There was also a significant main effect for participants' current relationship status, F $(3, 230) = 3.65$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, indicating a significant difference in avoidance scores between participants in a committed relationship ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .68$), participants in a causal relationship, ($M = 2.75$, $SD= .91$), participants who were single but had had previous romantic relationships ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .75$), and participants who were single and had never had a romantic relationship ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .54$) (see Figure 2). Finally, there was no significant interaction found between parental marital status and participants' current relationship status, F $(3, 230) = 1.11$, $p = .35$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.
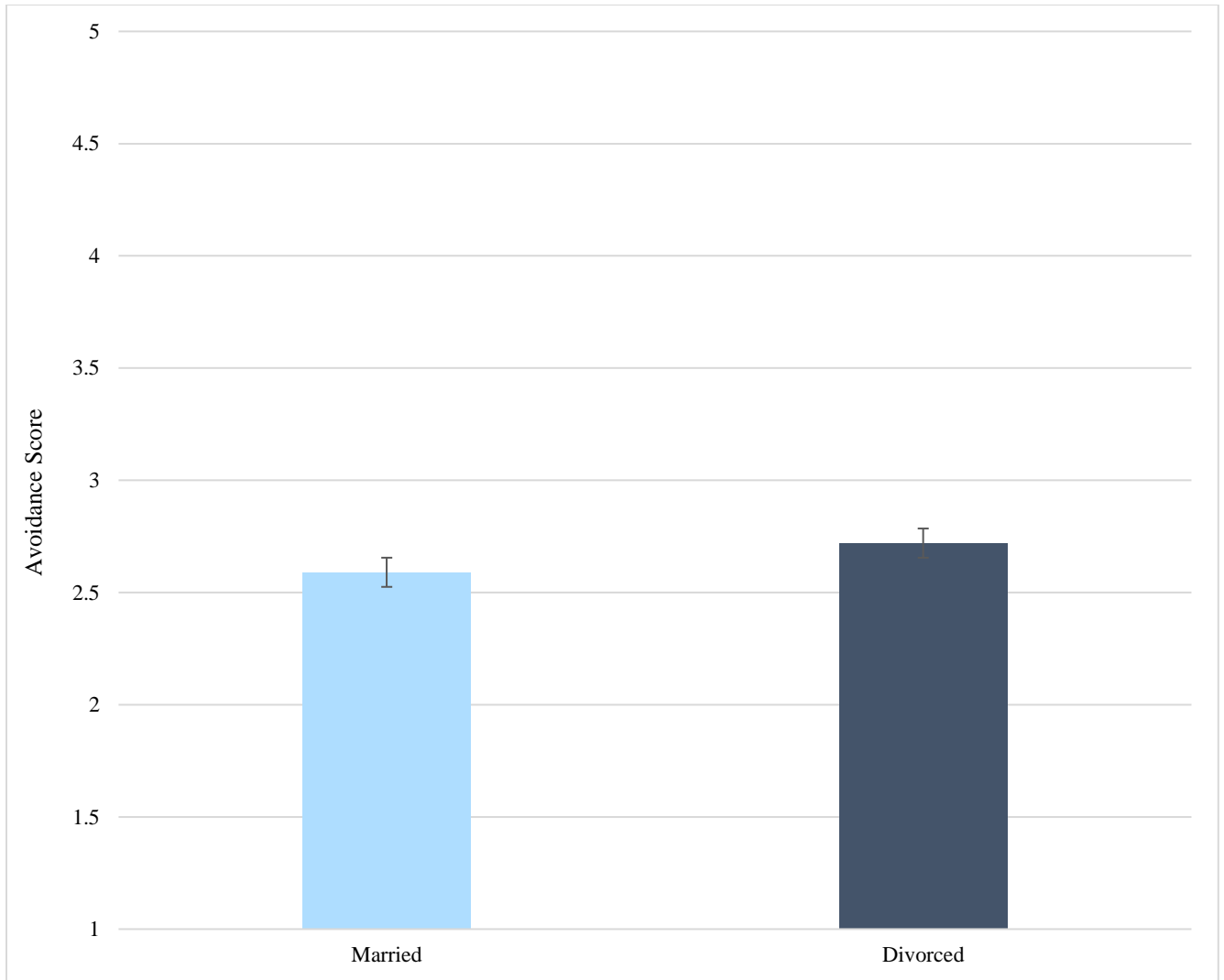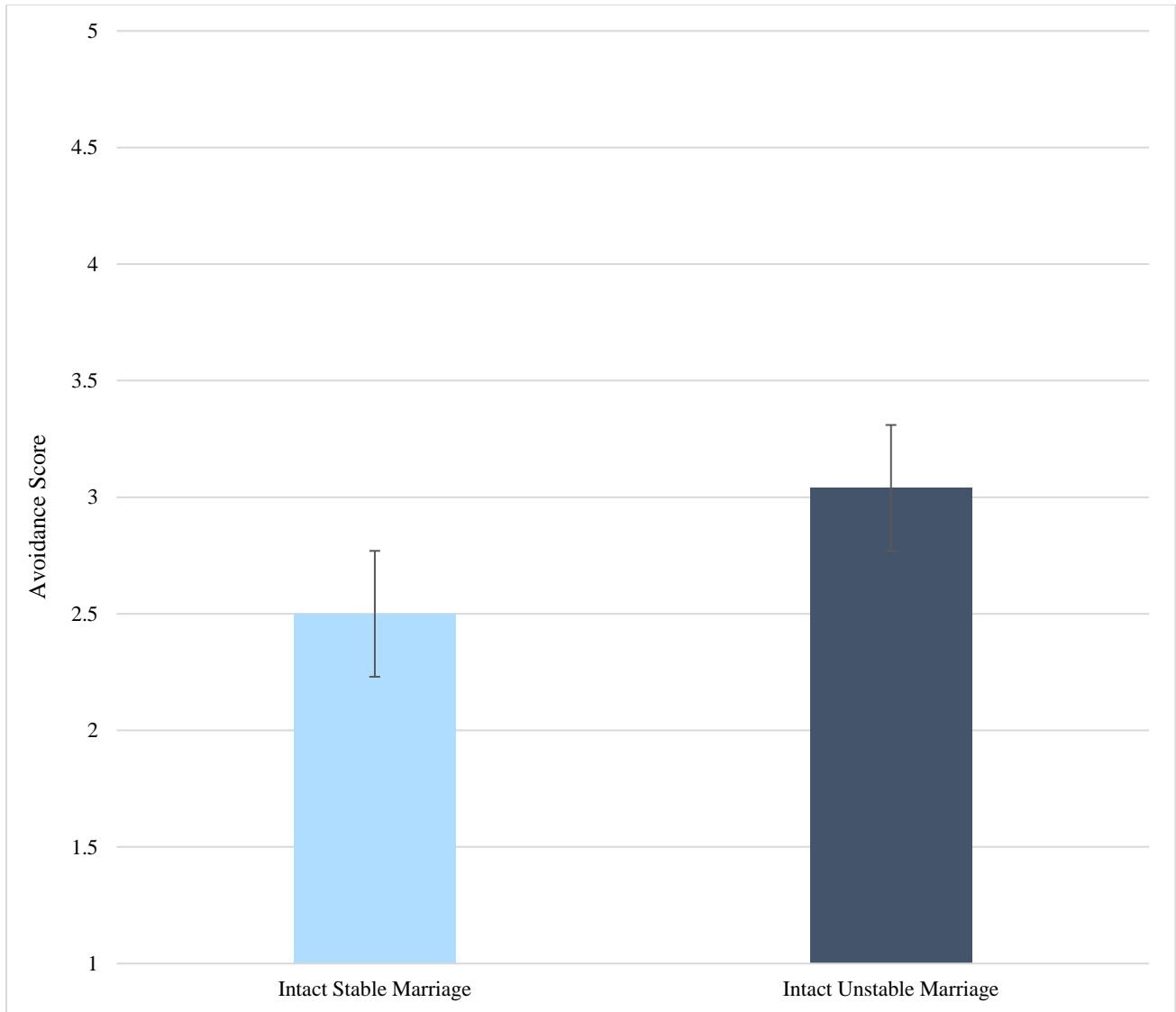
Figure 1. The differences between overall mean avoidance score for participants who reported having married parents and participants who reported having divorced parents. Error bars reflect standard errors.
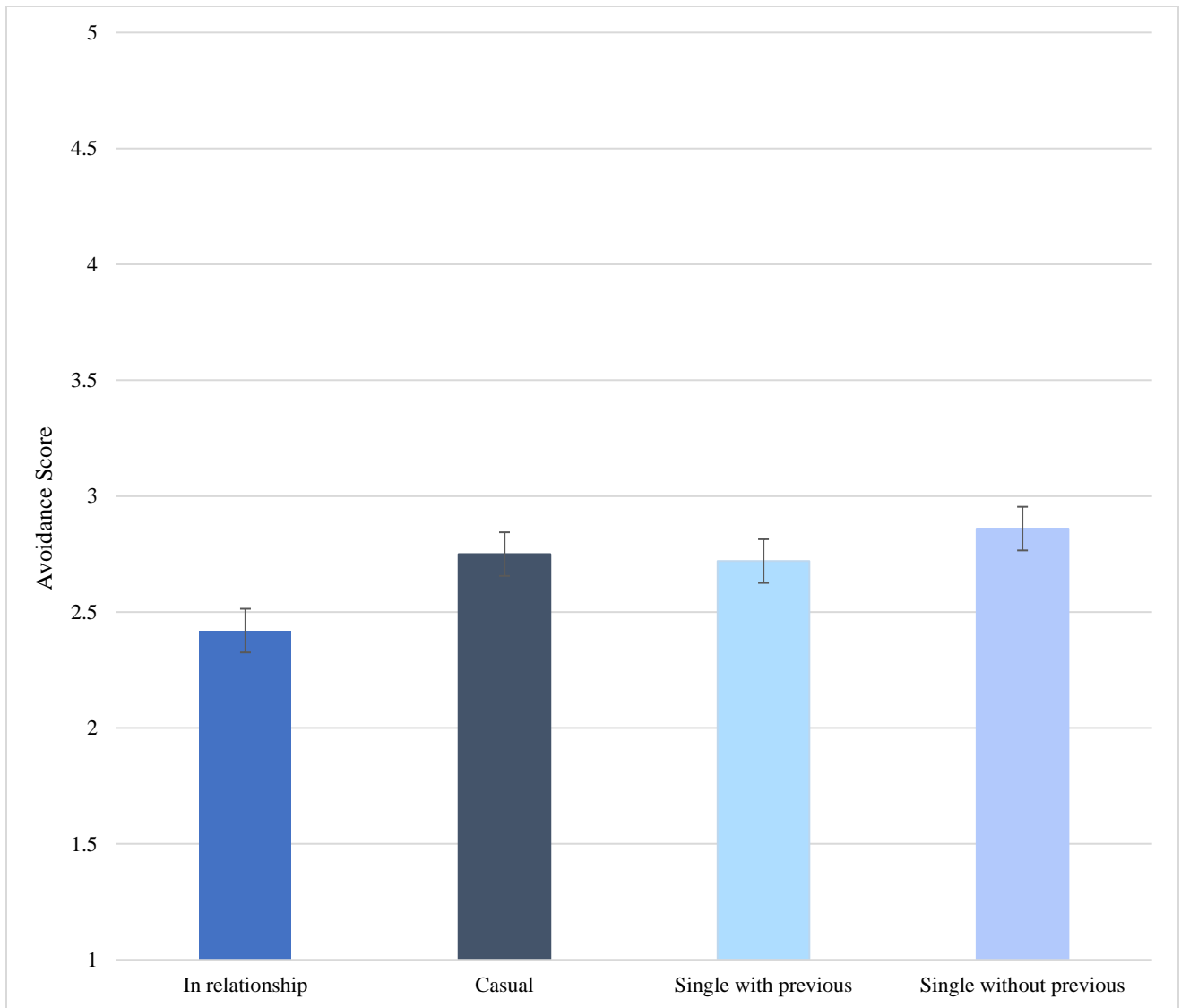
Figure 2. The differences between overall mean avoidance score for participants who reported

being in a committed relationship, being in a casual relationship, single (has had previous

romantic relationships), and single (has never had a romantic relationship). This graph illustrates

the mean avoidance scores for participant's relationship status in the first ANOVA (Parental

Marital Status X Participant's Relationship Status). Error bars reflect standard errors.

Another 2 X 4 between subjects ANOVA was conducted in order to more closely examine the differences in avoidance scores within the marriage category, analyzing perceived marital stability (the full ANOVA table may be found in Appendix 2). Two groups were devised within this category: the intact stable marriages (low level of conflict, high level of marital satisfaction), and the intact unstable marriages (high level of conflict, low level of marital satisfaction). These groups were then compared to participants' current relationship status. The avoidance score was the dependent variable, and perceived parental marital stability (intact stable marriage or intact unstable marriage) and participants' current relationship status (in a committed relationship, or in a casual relationship, or single and have had a previous romantic relationships, or single and have had no previous romantic relationships) were the independent variables. The results indicated that there was a significant main effect for perceived parental marital stability, F (1, 180) = 14.30, p = .00, partial η^2 = .07, indicating a significant difference in avoidance scores between participants whose parents had an intact stable marriage and participants whose parents had an intact unstable marriage, with participants whose parents had an intact stable marriage reporting significantly lower avoidance scores (M = 2.50, SD = .65) than those whose parents had an intact unstable marriage (M = 3.04, SD = .64) (see Figure 3). However, there was no significant main effect for participants' current relationship status, F (3, 180) = 2.07, p = .11, partial η^2 = .03, indicating no significant differences in avoidance scores between participants in a committed relationship (M = 2.41, SD = .66), participants in a causal relationship, (M = 2.32, SD = .80), participants who were single but had had previous romantic relationships (M = 2.67, SD = .71), and participants who were single and had never had a romantic relationship (M = 2.86, SD = .57) (see Figure 4). Finally, there was no significant

interaction found between perceived parental marital stability and participants' current relationship status, $F(2, 180) = 0.18$, $p = .84$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$.

Figure 3. The differences between overall mean avoidance score for participants who reported their parents as having an intact stable marriage (low conflict, high relationship satisfaction) and participants who reported their parents as having an intact unstable marriage (high conflict, low relationship satisfaction). Error bars reflect standard errors.
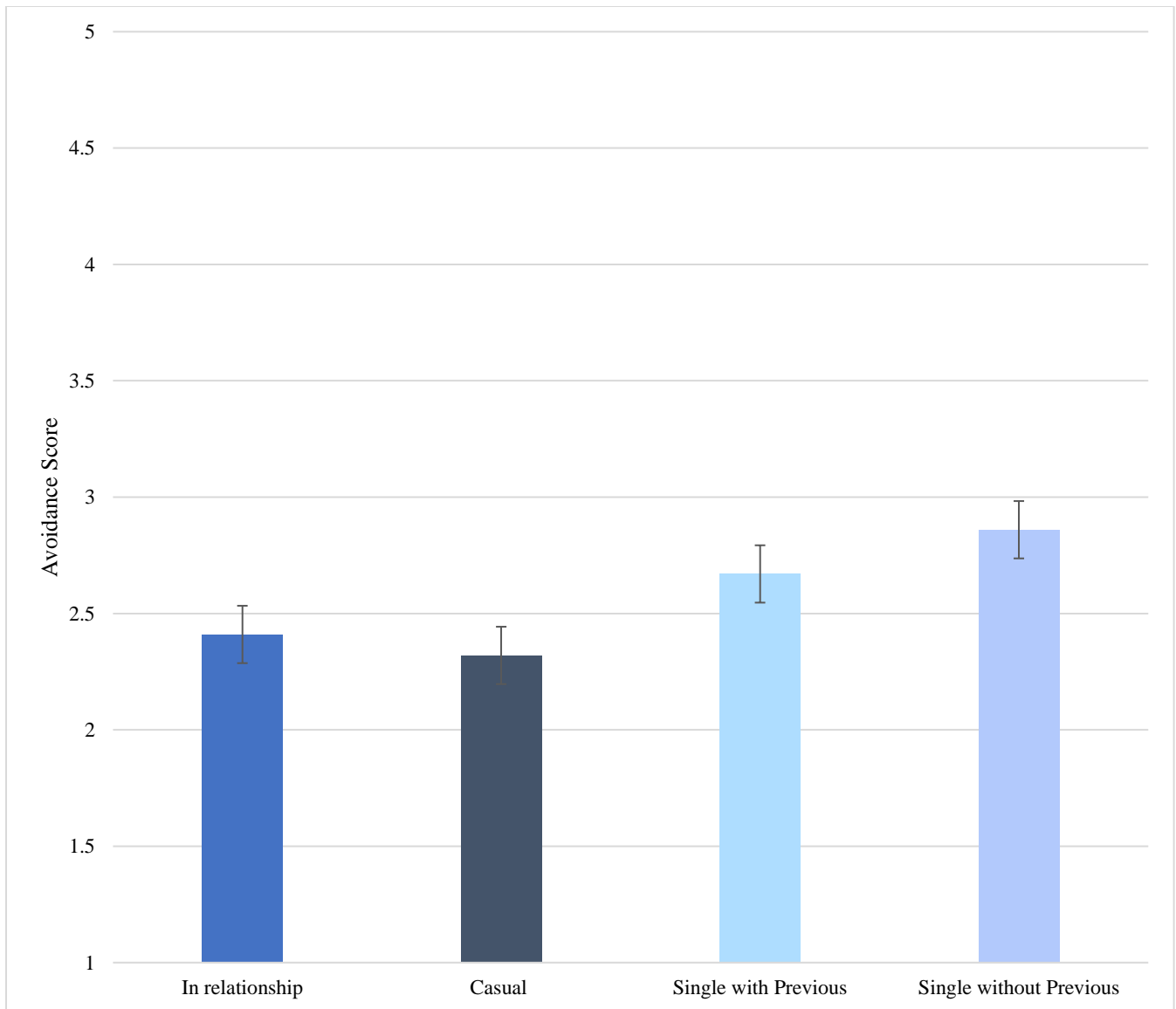
Figure 4. The differences between overall mean avoidance score of participants who reported being in a committed relationship, being in a casual relationship, single (has had previous romantic relationships), and single (has never had a romantic relationship). This graph illustrates the mean avoidance scores for participant's relationship status in the second ANOVA (Parental Marital Stability X Participant's Relationship Status). Error bars reflect standard errors.

Discussion

Results of the present study were strongly supportive of the hypothesis that young adults of intact stable marriages (low conflict, high happiness level) have the most secure attachment styles (low avoidance scores), while young adult children of intact unstable marriages (high conflict, low happiness level) have the most avoidant attachment style (high avoidance scores). Secondly, children of divorce were hypothesized to have variable avoidance levels, which was also supported by the results of the present study. This finding suggests that the perceived stability of one's parents' marriage may be a factor in determining how children form their own attachments in future relationships.

For the majority of children, their parental relationship constitutes their first model of a romantic relationship. Children are exposed to and learn from their parents' behaviour towards each other, and potentially form concepts or beliefs about how relationships are enacted and function, and later repeat this behaviour. This idea is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) which predicts that children encode and replicate the behaviour they observe. It is also based on the finding that children exposed to unstable marital relationships develop more negative attitudes towards relationships generally, and subsequently demonstrate more unstable relationships themselves, compared to children of stable marriages (Weigel, 2007). This idea of the influence of relationship exposure is also supported by a previous study that found that exposure of children to parental conflict is associated with less relationship satisfaction and stability in their own emerging romantic relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2016). Parental models of romantic relationships influence children's attitudes and perception of relationships, and more exposure to negative models generate more negative perceptions and attitudes. One key limitation of the present study is that it does not include other family structures such as single

parent families, and children who are raised by extended family. Those groups would be worth examining further in future studies.

Although the present study uses social learning theory to explain why parental conflict and perceived marital satisfaction influence attachment style, there are limitations to this theory when applying it to a young adult population. Firstly, in Bandura's "bobo doll" experiment (1977), his participants were preschool aged children, whereas the present study population consists of participants aged 18 to 30 years old. It should be considered that young children, such as the participants in the bobo doll study, are more likely to copy the behaviour modeled by adults, whereas the young adult participants of the present study are more likely to critically analyze the behaviour of their parental models, and may not replicate these behaviours, whether that decision is made consciously or not. Furthermore, it is conceivable that personality factors play a role here as well, with more introspective participants behaving differently from less introspective participants. Another noteworthy observation about the bobo doll study compared to the present study, is that it only examined physical aggression, while the present study examines a range of positive and negative behaviours, potentially verbal and non-verbal, in a relationship context. Therefore, it is possible that the bobo doll study is not fully representative of the behaviour of participants of the present study due to the complexity and variable contexts of modelled parental behaviours in their marriage compared to the simplicity of the bobo doll modelled behaviour. In short, whereas Bandura's social learning theory is an initial framework with which to predict the behaviour of the present study's participants, it does have the shortcomings of only modelling negative simple behaviours, only examining young children, and not providing a significant context for the modelled behaviour.

Previous research has shown that parental divorce increases the likelihood of children having an insecure adult attachment style (Crowell et al., 2009). In the present study, participants of divorced parents had higher mean avoidance scores than participants from intact stable marriages. Crowell et al., (2009), did not include a condition in which participants were from intact unstable marriages. However, further research showed that young adults' perception of parental divorce varied depending on parental conflict and parental marital quality prior to the divorce occurring (Cui et al., 2010), which is why, in the present study, an intact unstable marriage group was defined in order to determine the impact of a dysfunctional parental relationship regardless of marital status. The individual avoidance scores from the divorce group participants were likely more heterogenous ($SD = 0.78$) compared to the participants from intact marriages (both stable and unstable; $SD = 0.68$). This coincides with the results of Cui et al., (2010), who speculated that there was a lot of heterogeneity in participants' perception of divorce based on the circumstances of the divorce, whether there was significant conflict prior to divorce, or whether there were other main driving factors behind a divorce, such as unforeseeable circumstances (significant financial changes, family member illness, and so forth). Although divorce impacts children, the degree of impact varies significantly. An interesting direction for future research could be to compare children of amicable divorces to children of more contentious divorces.

Another predictor of avoidant attachment style was the participants' relationship status. Relationship status and how it relates to avoidant attachment style, specifically, was a unique area of this study because it had never been fully addressed in the literature. Previous research has shown that young adults who engage in casual dating demonstrate an avoidant attachment style (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). In the present study, the participants in a casual romantic

relationship had the second highest mean avoidance score after participants who had never been in a romantic relationship. When examining the mean avoidance scores of the participants in casual relationships, there was a significant difference between people who had married parents versus those who had divorced parents. Those with divorced parents demonstrating significantly higher mean avoidance scores. This finding is limited by the very small size of the casual relationship group (N=10). It is possible that this group is not entirely representative of people in casual relationships. However, based on the results of the present study and those of Jacquet and Surra (2001), it is plausible that there is a strong connection between casual dating, parental divorce, and avoidant attachment style, something to be further examined in future research.

In addition, the literature has shown that individuals who demonstrate a strong secure attachment to their partner are the individuals who are in the most satisfying relationships (Simpson, 1990). Consistent with the results of the study conducted by Simpson (1990), the present study found that the participants in a committed romantic relationship had the lowest mean avoidance scores, supporting the notion that those in the most satisfying romantic relationships (the most committed to their partner) have the most secure attachment style. Also, the present study found that participants who were single and had never had a romantic relationship had the mean highest avoidance scores. This result was expected since it is likely that a large portion of individuals with an avoidant attachment style would not seek out romantic relationships. Finally, those who were single but had previously been in romantic relationships had the second lowest mean avoidance scores. This was expected since it is the group with the most diversity. Many individuals may be single by choice and therefore more avoidant, and others may have a secure attachment style, but are just not in a relationship presently. One needs

to consider that there are a variety of reasons as to why these individuals are single which may not have anything to do with attachment style.

Similarly, although the present study examined how the parental environment influences the romantic relationships of young adult children, it was still necessary to include participants who were currently single, especially those who had never been in a romantic relationship. This was the group with the highest mean avoidance score, suggesting that they represent one end of the avoidant attachment spectrum. For the population with an avoidant attachment style, it is plausible that this attachment style manifests itself as individuals avoiding romantic relationships altogether. Therefore, excluding this group would unfortunately omit many participants with an avoidant attachment style. However, as mentioned above, it is possible that there may be other explanations for an individual not engaging in current or previous romantic relationships that are unrelated to attachment style, such as a high anxiety level, a very busy work life, or a tumultuous personal life (for example, caring for a high-needs ill relative). The measure used in the present study did not account for these other explanations, which would perhaps be fascinating to explore in further research. It is also possible that including the participants who were single for reasons unrelated to attachment may have impacted the overall mean avoidance score for these two groups. Perhaps excluding these participants would have yielded a greater difference in the mean avoidance scores for the participants who reported being single compared to the participants who reported being in casual and committed romantic relationships.

Initially, when designing the present study, it was a point of contention whether to include both anxiety and avoidance measures. Ultimately, the decision to only include avoidance was made for several reasons: First, as mentioned earlier, avoidance seems to be the simplest dimension (compared to security and anxiety) since avoidance manifests behaviourally and is therefore likely to be the more externally evident and measurable in a survey format. Second,

when searching for measures of anxious/avoidant attachment style, the most comprehensive measure was the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins and Read ,1990). A more thorough examination of this measure revealed that the majority of the items pertained to avoidant attachment rather than anxious attachment. Therefore, it seemed that participants' responses regarding avoidance were more richly and diversely representative of avoidant attachment. On the other hand, the items examining anxious attachment appeared to be relatively similar to each other. Essentially, there was a concern that the anxious attachment part of the measure did not have the same validity as the avoidance measure. Next, it was determined that for the purposes of simplicity and clarity, it would be preferable to examine only one dependent variable (mean avoidance score), which led to the removal of anxious attachment as a dependent variable from the study. Finally, given that these data were collected through an online survey, the questionnaire was designed to be as short as possible to prevent participant fatigue, non-completion, and random completion. As mentioned previously, the Adult Attachment Scale did not have a sufficient range or number of items measuring anxious attachment, so had anxious attachment been included as a dependent variable, it would have had to be included using an additional instrument in order to ensure the accuracy of the results. This would have made the survey overly lengthy and possibly affected the reliability and validity of the results.

In the present study there were eight participants who did not complete the survey. It is difficult to ascertain whether there are differences between people who completed the survey versus those who did not. It is possible that they were simply interrupted, but also possible that these participants did not complete the survey for more relevant reasons, (such as not wanting to disclose their relationship status). In addition to this, the study only focused on two specific parental structures: married parents and divorced parents. A follow up study could look at

multiple types of parental structures (such as single parents or widowed parents) as predictors of avoidant attachment style and determine if there are differences in comparison to the findings of the present study. Another limitation of the present study was that young adult children were asked to rate their parents' relationship stability. This may have resulted in their reports being too subjective. If this study were to be replicated, one should consider taking reports from the young adult child, the parents of the child, and a neutral third party in order to obtain a more rounded view of the relationship.

In light of the significance of the results of the present study, there are many opportunities for future research. While the study focused on a young adult's level of avoidant attachment in romantic relationships, predicted by parental marital status and perceived marital stability, it did not focus on the parent-child attachment itself. Furthermore, the parent-child relationship itself can be secure, the environmental factors pertaining to the marital status may play a role in disrupting this secure attachment. Another interesting follow up, would be to conduct a similar study with couples. The researcher would interview the couple about each partner's parental environment (parents' marital status, and perceived marital stability), as well as their current relationship, to determine if there are correlations between each individual's upbringing and their present relationship environment. An example of a question to ask each member of the couple would be "how would your parents resolve disagreements together?"

The finding that both parental marital status and perceived marital stability are strong predictors of avoidant attachment can be applied to a variety of domains. Firstly, it can be applied to developmental psychology. Attachment theory proponents, namely Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978), describe early attachment style as remaining consistent throughout one's life. Based on the results of the present study, this premise may need be reconsidered as the

results indicate that attachment style can be modified by parental marital status and perceived marital stability. This suggests that, attachment style is not solely determined by the parent-child relationship as Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) originally proposed, but that other factors in the family environment have influence as well.

The present research findings are also relevant to the clinical setting. Since the results suggest that parental marital factors play a role in predicting an individual's level of avoidant attachment, this may be beneficial to clinicians who are providing counselling to individuals, couples, and families. By having a better understanding of where an individual's attachment style originates and what factors can influence or strengthen it, psychologists can help their clients gain insight into how and why their attachments formed. Furthermore, therapists can provide couples and families with better advice regarding how to handle issues in their relationships, and how their behaviour affects their children's future relationships. For couples who do not have children, by having a better understanding of their partner's attachment style and level of avoidance of relationships, it may improve relationship satisfaction and allow them to handle conflict more productively.

To conclude, the present study supports the hypothesis that parental marital status and perceived marital stability are effective predictors of avoidant attachment style in young adult romantic relationships. It was demonstrated that young adult children of intact stable marriages have the lowest avoidance scores, while young adult children of intact unstable marriages have the highest avoidance scores, while young adult children of divorce have variable avoidance scores. Speculated explanations for this are based on the existing literature which suggest that children who are exposed to unstable parental marital relationships (characterized by conflict and

dissatisfaction), are adversely affected, making them more avoidant of romantic relationships altogether.

A significant main effect was found for relationship status between individuals with married parents and divorced parents. These results indicate that individuals in a committed relationship had the most secure attachment style, individuals who are single and who have never had a romantic relationship had the most avoidant attachment style, with individuals in casual romantic relationships and individuals who were single but with previous romantic relationships falling in between. Significant correlations were found between mean avoidance score and both parental marital conflict and perceived parental marital satisfaction, and parental marital conflict and perceived parental marital satisfaction. These findings suggest that an individual's avoidance of relationships is significantly impacted by both parental marital conflict and parental marital satisfaction. Further, both parental marital conflict and marital satisfaction are significantly affected by each other.

The present study provides opportunities for future research, including measuring anxious attachment, studying the level of avoidant attachment in couples as it pertains to each of their parental/family environments, asking additional parties about the parental marital relationship in order to gain a broader perspective of the relationship, and conducting a study inclusive of all types of parental configurations. Finally, the findings of the present study are applicable to multiple domains, including the field of developmental psychology, as well as in clinical settings for counselling and psychotherapy.

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Appendix 1

ANOVA Summary Table of Avoidance Score for Parental Marital Status X Participant's Relationship Status

Source	SS	*df*	MS	F	*p*	partial eta-squared
Marital Status	1.94	1	1.94	4.19	.04	.02
Relationship Status	5.06	3	1.69	3.65	.01	.05
Marital Status						
* Relationship Status	1.54	3	.51	1.11	.35	.01
Error	106.37	230	.46			
Total	1747.97	238				

Appendix 2

ANOVA Summary Table of Avoidance Score for Perceived Parental Marital Stability X Participant's Relationship Status

Source	SS	*df*	MS	F	*p*	partial eta-squared
Marital Stability	5.83	1	5.83	14.30	0.00	.07
Relationship Status	2.54	3	.85	2.07	.11	.03
Marital Stability						
* Relationship Status	.14	2	.07	.18	.84	.002
Error	73.39	180	.41			
Total	1339.75	187				

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