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Interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationships: the role of emotional dysregulation and relationship commitment.

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Master in Community Psychology and Protection of Children and Youth at Risk.

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Mariana Matoso

Resumo

A relação interparental fornece um modelo para os relacionamentos amoroso dos filhos e a investigação tem mostrado que o conflito interparental destrutivo tem implicações negativas para os relacionamentos amorosos dos adultos emergentes. Especificamente, os estudos nesta área têm mostrado efeitos nocivos do conflito interparental nas competências de regulação emocional e no compromisso relacional dos adultos emergentes, assim como na sua satisfação com, e na qualidade das relações de namoro. Contudo, pouco se sabe acerca do papel do compromisso relacional e das competências de regulação emocional, na relação entre a exposição ao conflito interparental e a satisfação e qualidade dessas relações. Com o objetivo de aumentar o conhecimento científico sobre este tema, o presente estudo analisou o papel mediador da desregulação emocional e do compromisso com a relação, na associação entre a exposição ao conflito interparental destrutivo e a qualidade e satisfação da relação de namoro de adultos emergentes. Participaram neste estudo 425 adultos emergentes entre os 18 e os 25 anos, que estão, ou estiveram nos últimos 6 meses, numa relação de namoro. Os resultados revelaram que o conflito interparental está associado a menor satisfação e a pior qualidade da relação de namoro através de maior desregulação emocional e menor compromisso com a relação. Este estudo reforça o papel do conflito interparental enquanto preditor de dificuldades nas relações de namoro de adultos emergentes, e salienta a importância das competências de regulação emocional e do compromisso com a relação enquanto mecanismos explicativos dessa associação, tendo assim importantes implicações para a prática.

Palavras-Chave:

Conflito Interparental; Relações Amorosas; Adultos Emergentes; Desregulação Emocional; Compromisso

PsycINFO Codes:

2800 Psicologia do Desenvolvimento

2900 Processos sociais & Questões sociais

3000 Psicologia Social

Abstract

The interparental relationship provides a model for offspring's relationships, and research has shown that destructive interparental conflict has negative implications for emerging adults' romantic relationships. Specifically, studies in this area have shown harmful effects of interparental conflict on emerging adults' emotional regulation skills and relationship commitment, as well as on their satisfaction with, and the quality of, their romantic relationships. However, little is known about the role of relational commitment and emotional regulation skills in the relationship between exposure to interparental conflict and the satisfaction and quality of these relationships. To address this gap in the literature, the present study investigated the mediating role of emotional dysregulation and relationship commitment in the association between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationship quality and satisfaction. Participants were 425 emerging adults, aged 18 and 25 years old, who were, or had been in the past 6 months, in a romantic relationship. Supporting our hypothesis, results revealed that exposure to destructive interparental conflict was associated with less satisfaction and worse relationship quality through greater emotional dysregulation and less commitment to the relationship. This study supports previous research by reinforcing the role of interparental conflict as a predictor of emerging adults' difficulties in their romantic relationships and highlights the importance of emotional regulation skills and commitment to the relationship as explaining mechanisms of that association, thus providing important implications for practice.

Keywords:

Interparental Conflict; Romantic Relationships; Emerging Adults; Emotion Dysregulation; Commitment

PsycINFO Codes:

2800 Developmental Psychology

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3000 Social Psychology

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INTRODUCTION

Interparental conflict, especially when destructive (i.e., frequent, intense, and poorly resolved) has consistently been shown to have deleterious effects on offspring long-term adjustment outcomes (Grych & Fincham 1990; Jobe-Shields et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Keeports & Pittman, 2017), including on emerging adults' romantic relationships (Maleck & Papp, 2015; Roisman et al., 2005; Weigel, 2007). Both theorists and researchers in the field of romantic and marital relationships converge in asserting that interparental interactions provide a model for offspring relationships (Bandura, 1978; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Delevi et al., 2012), which paves the way for the negative implications of destructive interparental conflict on the quality and satisfaction of emerging adults' romantic (Cui et al., 2008).

Furthermore, interparental conflict has been shown to play a role on offspring emotion regulation (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Padun, 2017), and relationship commitment (Braithwaite et al., 2016). However, little is known about the role of relational commitment and emotional regulation skills in the association between exposure to interparental conflict and the satisfaction and quality of emerging adults' romantic relationships. Thus, to increase understanding about how relational styles and scripts are transmitted from the interparental relationship to offspring's own romantic relationships, research examining more complex association among these variables to further investigate these associations is warranted.

The present research was developed drawing on the perspectives of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1978), emotional security theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994), and cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1993). Under this theoretical umbrella, this dissertation aimed to expand understanding of the intergenerational transmission of intimate relationship quality, by analyzing the association between emerging adults' exposure to destructive interparental conflict and their romantic relationship quality and satisfaction, and the role of emotion dysregulation and relationship commitment in this association.

In view of these research goals, this dissertation was organized in five chapters. Chapter I describes the relevant theoretical background on the effects of interparental conflict, in order to contextualize our research topic on the existing theoretical and empirical literature. Based on this literature review, Chapter II outlines the main research problems and objectives of this research project. Chapter III presents the methodology of this study, with a thorough description of the participants, the instruments used, and the procedures of data collection and analysis.

Chapter IV describes the study's main results, which are then discussed in Chapter V in light of the existing research literature. This chapter also highlights the main contributions of this study for this research field, acknowledges the study's limitation, and describes its implications for practice.

CHAPTER I – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Interparental conflict

Within the family context, marital and parenting processes are closely intertwined (Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham & Hall, 2005). Thus, it is quite difficult to understand them separately, as well as their influences on children and youth. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), the parent's marital subsystem is a part of the child's microsystem. Therefore, the parents' marital relationship is one of the main factors influencing the child's development outcomes (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Erel & Burman, 1995; Goldberg & Carlson, 2014).

One aspect of the interparental relationship that significantly impacts offspring's development outcomes is interparental conflict (van Eldik et al, 2020). Grych and Fincham (1990) conceptualized interparental conflict as a multidimensional construct that can vary in different types of intensity, content, frequency, and resolution, and it can be overt or covert. Cummings & Davies (2010, p.8) defined interparental conflict "as any major or minor interparental interaction that involved a difference of opinion, whether it was mostly negative or even mostly positive". All couple relationships have conflict, some can be negative while some can promote constructive problem-solving and conflict resolution. Therefore, interparental conflict can also be conceptualized as constructive or destructive, depending on its features: frequency, intensity, and resolution (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Regarding frequency, research in this field has indicated that children and youth who are repeatedly exposed to interparental conflict tend to become more sensitive potentially desensitizing or conversely leading to increasing distress, as well as acquiring negative affective expression and conflict resolution strategies (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fincham & Hall, 2005). However, theorists and researchers on the consequences of interparental conflict for children's development (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 1990) converge in proposing that frequency of conflict is a relatively mild risk factor compared with how parents manage their disagreements (van Eldik et al., 2020). With regard to resolution, studies have shown that the way parents manage their conflicts also has an impact on children and youth (Fosco et al., 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1990). On the one hand, parents that successfully manage their arguments provide positive models of constructive conflict to their children; on the other, unresolved or poorly resolved conflicts are more upsetting to children than the ones that are successfully resolved (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994). As to intensity, prior studies have reported correlations between higher intensity of interparental conflict and

child behavior problems, indicating that exposure to more intensive conflict (e.g., involving physical aggression) is associated to more emotional and behavior problems in offspring (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Based on the existing evidence about how different characteristics of interparental conflict associate with children's development outcomes, interparental conflict can be considered destructive when there is elevated verbal or nonverbal hostility, escalation of distress, high frequency of occurrence, parent aggression and use of physical violence, signs of threat to family safeness and it is poorly or unresolved (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies et al., 2012; Davies, Martin & Sturge-Apple, 2016; Kopystynska et al., 2020; Zemp et al., 2016). In destructive conflict situations parents may exhibit different types of negative conflict tactics. The most commonly displayed are anger and hostility, but forms of dysphoric behaviors (e.g., sadness) are also relatively common (Davies, Martin, Coe et al., 2016). Destructive conflict tactics may also be identified through predictors of child adjustment that evoke both negative emotions and behaviors, such as withdrawal, defensiveness, and detachment (Davies et al., 2012; Zemp et al., 2016).

When children are repeatedly exposed to destructive interparental conflict (i.e., with greater intensity, higher frequency, and less resolution) their emotional reactivity is heightened (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Martin, 2014). Over time, as a result, this is likely to deteriorate their psychological resources, their emotional and behavioral regulation skills, and their social competence (Amato, 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Rhoades, 2008; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011).

1.1. Interparental conflict impact on offspring development outcomes

A vast body of literature supports the claim that children and youth who are exposed to destructive interparental conflict may develop a wide range of adjustment problems (Davies & Cummings, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Rhoades, 2008; Zemp et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that when parents engage in destructive interparental conflict (i.e., intense, chronic, poorly managed and unresolved), their offspring are drawn into these interactions, resulting in violation of boundaries between family subsystems, distorted alliances between parents and their children, and less effective parenting skills (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). This type of conflict has also been associated with increased negative outcomes and more feelings of distress such as sadness, anxiety, and anger among offspring (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Keeports & Pittman, 2017).

Zemp and colleagues (2016) highlighted five reasons for why destructive interparental conflict is a form of stressful experience particularly harmful for children's development: i) interparental conflict is a stronger family risk factor than divorce itself, ii) interparental conflict is probably the most prevalent family risk factor, iii) interparental conflict cannot be hidden, children are highly sensitive to nonverbal signs of anger, iv) the sensitization hypothesis assumes that children's negative reactions progressively increase by repeated conflict exposure, v) interparental conflict affects children at all stages of development.

Across developmental stages, children, adolescents, and young adults display more maladjustment and worse outcomes when they are and/or were exposed to destructive interparental conflict (Grych & Fincham 1990; Keeports & Pittman, 2017, Van Rosmalen-Nooijens et al., 2017; Yárnoz-Yaben & Garmendia, 2016). It has lingering effects into adulthood, with individuals experiencing high levels of distress, internalizing psychopathology, and disrupted family processes (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018).

Research has shown that, even when young adults do not see their parents every day, exposure to interparental conflict is still associated with more internalizing symptoms (Keeports & Pittman, 2017). Keeports & Pittman (2017) suggested that, because young adults have less contact with their parents, brief negative interactions with parents could be harmful since young adults weren't exposed to conflict resolution, which would make them feel continued tension. On the other hand, young adults may also form rigid cognitive conceptualizations of their parents at younger ages which endure throughout young adulthood despite a decreased exposure to interparental conflict (Keeports & Pittman, 2017).

Most research on the influence of interparental conflict on offspring's adjustment outcomes has been developed based on three main theoretical frameworks – the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1978), the cognitive contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Fosco et al., 2007), and the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2010). The main contributions of these theories to advance understanding of the explanatory mechanisms underlying the effects of interparental conflict on offspring's adjustment outcomes will be briefly outlined below.

1.1.1. Social learning theory

According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), children learn how to behave and interact with others through modeling by observing others' behavior, especially that of parents and other caregivers. Thus, when parents exchange aggressive acts, their children model their own exchanges within social interactions, as they develop (Bandura, 1978). Davies &

Cummings (1994; Cumming & Davies, 2010) argued that parents' authority-figure status makes their behavior much more acceptable than those demonstrated by other models that children and youth may observe. Over time, children's internalized representations of the interparental relationship stemming from exposure to interparental conflict predict a range of difficulties in adjustment outcomes across life stages, including externalizing and internalizing disorders (Fincham & Hall, 2005).

1.1.2. Emotional security theory

The emotional security theory posits that interparental conflict has as a significant influence on offspring's functioning through offspring's emotional insecurity in the interparental relationship (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies & Martin, 2014). According to this theory, children' and youth's felt security within the family context is threatened by interparental conflict, due to its influence on their emotional and behavior regulation, and internal representations of family relationships. Prolonged operation of the emotional security system requires psychobiological resources, which may increase vulnerability for maladjustment (Davies & Martin, 2014; Zemp et al., 2016). For example, regulatory patterns developed through repeated exposure to destructive interparental conflict may result in offspring's emotional sensitization (i.e., intensified responses).

Literature on the emotional security theory has shown evidence supporting the implications of exposure to destructive interparental conflict for offspring's adjustment outcomes over different life stages, such as childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies & Martin, 2013; Dorn & Schudlich, 2019; Jobe-Shields et al., 2017; López-Larrosa et al., 2019; Padun, 2017; Schudlich et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2016; Silva & Calheiros, 2018; Suh et al., 2016). Furthermore, these implications have been shown to be dependent on the specific characteristics of the conflict, as well as on other social, cognitive and biological processes (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Davies & Cummings, 1994).

1.1.3. Cognitive-Contextual Framework

The cognitive-contextual framework (Fosco et al., 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1990) posits that effects of exposure to interparental conflict are best understood by taking the child's interpretation into consideration. Therefore, in this framework, offspring's cognitive appraisals are presented as mediators of the effects of interparental conflict, which modulate affect aroused by the conflict, consequently guiding emotional and behavioral regulation. A two-stage process is presumed to guide offspring cognitive appraisal: (1) awareness of conflict situation and

evaluation of its subjective relevance through contextual characteristics; and (2) attribution of cause and responsibility (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

According to this framework, repeated exposure to destructive interparental conflict leads offspring to perceive conflict as increasingly threatening; additionally, offspring self-blame appraisals regarding interparental conflict leads to increasing negative feelings (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Zemp et al., 2016). Empirical evidence on the cognitive-contextual framework has been supporting the negative impact of interparental conflict, through these cognitive appraisals, on offspring's adjustment outcomes across life stages (Fosco & Lydon-Staley, 2019; Grych et al., 2000; Keepports, 2017; Simon & Furman, 2010). Furthermore, these negative consequences have been shown to also depend on gender, age, context, and conflict dimensions (i.e., frequency, intensity, resolution, and content) (Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1993).

In all, the negative consequences that exposure to destructive interparental conflict may bear on offspring's emotional and behavioral adjustment over the life course (Van Rosmalen-Nooijens et al., 2017) may subsequently play a role on the development of intimate relationship dynamics (Kennedy et al., 2002; Xu et al., 2019).

2. Interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationships

2.1. Emerging adulthood and romantic relationships

Arnett (2000, 2015) coined the term *emerging adulthood* to propose a new development period to describe the developmental characteristics and tasks of youth aged between 18 and 25 years old. According to this author, *emerging adulthood* is neither adolescence nor young adulthood. Gradually leaving the dependency of adolescence but not having yet to carry adulthood responsibilities, emerging adulthood is characterized by a relative independence from social roles and expectations as well as exploration of emotional and physical intimacy (Arnett, 2000, 2015). Although individuals in this stage are physically and sexually mature, they have not yet taken on the long-term commitments that tend to constitute young adulthood, such as marriage and parenting (Fincham & Lucier-Greer, 2018).

This period is characterized by exploration, identity development, and the formation of new attachment figures, primarily a romantic partner (Ainsworth, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Lambert et al., 2010). Indeed, one of the main developmental tasks in this period is exploration of romance, which provides the individual with particular openness for relationships (Fincham et al., 2011). Although emerging adults may not yet be at a stage where they are supposed to settle into long

term commitments with a romantic partner, a substantial number of them are in highly committed romantic relationships (Arnett, 2015).

In this period, it is typical for individuals to develop close relationships involving strong and frequent interdependence in many domains of life (Alarcão, 2000), as well as psychological and physical intimacy, nourished by self-disclosure, support and validation (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Meuwly & Schoebi, 2017). In romantic relationships, the couple subsystem is formed by articulating individuality and differentiation from the couple's families of origin, as well as reconstructing each individual's family models into a new one (Alarcão, 2000).

2.1.1. Romantic relationship quality and satisfaction

Regarding the quality of romantic relationships, scholars have moved beyond a bipolar conceptualization of relationship quality, as a dimension ranging from extreme dissatisfaction to extreme satisfaction, to propose that romantic partners can simultaneously experience both negative and positive feelings towards their romantic partners and their relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Fincham & Rogge 2010). Indeed, developing satisfying romantic relationships comes with challenges such as managing disagreements and difficult situations.

The potential for conflict resides in every relationship, and its manifestation demonstrates how people negotiate their responsibilities and assessments of each other. In romantic relationships, with interdependence, potential areas of conflict increase (Canary et al., 1995). Conflict may occur in the midst of a crisis and it can provide an opportunity for growth and evolution or risk and dysfunctionality (Dupont, 2018; Minuchin et al., 1979). Indeed, when subsystems sustain moments of crisis, there is a need for the transformation of their relational model of interaction (Alarcão, 2000).

When partners communicate with each other effectively, they are able to prevent potentially conflictual topics from turning into destructive disagreements (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Negative attributions to one's partner and unwillingness to accommodate constructively towards the relationship may contribute to a cycle of conflict, as each partner responds to the other's destructive behavior with equally destructive behavior (Noller & Ruzzene, 1991). In contrast, couples who show better conflict resolution skills generally report higher quality in their romantic relationships (Domingue & Mollen, 2009).

Romantic relationships quality has also been studied in the light of constructs such as autonomy, responses to relationship disagreements and dissatisfaction after conflict (Knee et al., 2005). Conflict behaviors in romantic relationships have been shown to strongly determine

attributions about the messages and the communicators, the partner's subsequent behavior and, ultimately, the relationship quality (Canary et al., 1995). Results have demonstrated that both negative conflict style and not satisfactorily resolved conflict are significantly associated with relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2000).

Specific characteristics of the family context that could affect quality of emerging adults' romantic relationships are relevant to understand developmental precursors that increase the likelihood of developing stable and satisfying romantic ties (Conger et al., 2000). Overall, evidence shows that interparental relationships during childhood help establish individuals' expectations and beliefs about future romantic relationships, which supports the notion that family background holds important consequences for emerging adult intimate relationships' quality (Roisman et al., 2005; Weigel, 2007; Maleck & Papp, 2015). A couple's style of intimate relationship, characterized by the individuals' marital interactions, is "passed down" between generations (Amato, 1996), which means exposure to interactions between parents provide a model for dating relationships. With regard to this, research has consistently shown that interparental conflict has significant implications for emerging adults' ability to manage conflict and establish healthy romantic relationships (Kingsfogel & Grych, 2004).

2.2. Intergenerational effects of interparental conflict on offspring's romantic relationships

Research on the intergenerational transmission of marital quality has typically relied on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain how individuals' experiences with the interparental relationship predict their romantic relationship behavior style (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Whitton et al., 2008). Bandura's (1978) concept of modeling has been consistently supported as a mechanism through which parents' behavior in the interparental relationship may be replicated by their offspring in their own romantic relationships (Cui et al., 2010; Kingsfogel & Grych, 2004).

Previous research shows that interparental conflict affects emerging adults' romantic relationship functioning by affecting the parents' ability to provide a proper model on how to be romantically competent (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). Children who are exposed to interparental conflict develop cognitive scripts for couple conflict behaviors, which later get activated in the context of emerging adults' romantic relationships, serving as base for their negative behavioral reactions during conflicts (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Delevi et al., 2012). Indeed, emerging adults generalize behaviors previously learned from observing interparental interactions to their romantic relationships (Picci et al., 2018).

Offspring learn a variety of conflict behaviors from observing their parents arguing, and the exposure to these interactions is likely to shape their conflict behavior in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Existing evidence shows that individuals not only imitate their parents' behavior, but also understand and experience their parents' relationship by interpreting beliefs, desires and meanings attributed to their overt behaviors, with which they construct a scheme for intimate relationships (Einav, 2014). When parents have problems in communicating, restraining criticism and resolving conflict, exposure to this type of conflict is likely to increase their offspring's risk for displaying similar negative dynamics in their own romantic relationships, given their limited prior relationship experience in healthy, nonviolent ways (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2017).

Accordingly, the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission of interparental conflict proposes that children's exposure to destructive interparental conflict predisposes them for future involvement in similarly conflictive intimate relationships (Cui et al., 2008). Consistent with this hypothesis, interparental conflict has been shown to be strongly associated with emerging adults' conflict behavior with their partner, which in turn was linked to decreased romantic relationship quality (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2017; Rivera & Fincham, 2015). Research has shown that witnessing higher levels of destructive interparental conflict is associated with higher levels of destructive conflict in emerging adults dating relationships (e.g., involving violence perpetration and victimization; Rivera & Fincham, 2015) and systematically predicts more negative expectations, problematic communication, verbal and physical aggression and engagement in negative conflict management skills in romantic relationships (Delevi et al., 2014; Duggan et al., 2001; Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010; Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Maleck & Papp, 2015).

However, researchers in this field have argued that social learning processes alone are insufficient to adequately explain the intergenerational effects of interparental conflict on offspring romantic relationship quality, and have shifted this line of research to focus also on the developmental origins of those effects (e.g., Kim et al., 2009). Specifically, studies have highlighted emotional dysregulation and relational commitment as relevant mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of interparental relationship dynamics.

2.2.1. Emotional dysregulation as a potential mediator

According to the emotional security theory, exposure to interparental conflict may lead offspring to become more emotionally reactive and to increase their difficulty regulating their affective states, which in turn has been shown to be associated with increased adjustment

problems (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kingsfogel & Grych, 2004). Emotional dysregulation can, thus, be conceptualized a product of adaptation to environments and relationships that motivates patterns of emotional experience and expression that often lead to long-term maladaptation (Thompson, 2019; Thompson et al., 2020). Indeed, research has demonstrated that emotional dysregulation mediates the association between exposure to negative interparental conflict resolution styles and offspring's adjustment outcomes (Buehler et al., 2007; Harold et al, 2004; Siffert & Shwarz, 2011), which include the subjective quality of their romantic relationships (Kim et al., 2009).

Communicating to a partner about being unsatisfied with some of the relationship's dynamics may arise strong negative emotions (such as anger) that can contribute to generate negative conflict behaviors (Richards et al., 2003). Poor anger regulation strategies have been shown to increase negative affect and decrease the regulation of aggressive behavior impulses (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Pond et al., 2012). Indeed, research has shown that emotion dysregulation has a negative impact on couple relationship quality, in particular on couple intimacy (e.g., perception of partner's willingness to communicate), and predicts fear of emotional involvement, dependency and control (Tani et al., 2015).

In addition, evidence has shown associations between emotional dysregulation and violent conflicts in intimate relationships (Lee et al., 2020). Accordingly, in a sample of adolescents and emerging adults, results showed that adolescents' emotion dysregulation, namely impulse control difficulties, mediated the association of retrospective authoritarian parenting styles and dating violence perpetration (Cucci et al., 2019). Taken together, this body of research evidence indicates emotion dysregulation as an explaining mechanism of the intergenerational transmission of relationship conflict, thus explaining the continuity of romantic relationship conflict across generations (Bridgett et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2009).

2.2.2. Relationship commitment as a potential mediator

Relationship commitment may be described as including features such as thinking of the implications of current actions for the relationship's long-term maintenance (Rusbult, et al., 1998); taking into account rewards from the relationship vs potential rewards from alternative relationships (which entail relationship satisfaction), investments that would be lost by the end of the relationship (which entail the barriers to ending the relationship), and desires to maintain a strong emotional bond with one's partner (Agnew et al., 1998); motivation to overlook the partner's flaws; psychological intimacy; sharing of self-disclosure; behaviors of comfort and

support for each other; and changings in behaviors in order to help the relationship (Smith & Mackie, 2000).

Commitment can also be characterized through intimate relationship dedication, which encompasses an intrinsic desire to be with a partner; relationship agenda, which is the degree to which a person wants the relationship to continue over time; meta-commitment; couple identity; relationship primacy; satisfaction with sacrifice; and consideration of alternatives (Jorge, 2013; Stanley & Markman, 1992). The lack of clearly formed commitment in emerging adults' romantic relationships emphasizes the need for active decision making (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Commitment and pro-social behaviors grow together allowing partners to gain trust in each other, which may increase willingness to be dependent on one's partner (Monk et al., 2014). Indeed, dating couples that apply constructive behaviors linked to commitment are more likely to stay together than couples who behave in a less constructive way (Berg & McQuinn, 1986; Erber & Erber, 2016).

Research has demonstrated that commitment in relationships is associated with benefits for the couple. Relationship efficacy and satisfaction have been found to be related to commitment in relationships (Lopez et al., 2007); commitment and satisfaction with sacrifice has been associated with relationship health and stability in early romantic relationships (Monk et al., 2014); increasing commitment is associated with greater self-reported subjective well-being in dating relationships (Dush & Amato, 2005); and college students in committed relationships experience fewer mental health problems, are less likely to be overweight/obese and engage less in less risky behavior (e.g., driving while intoxicated) than their single peers (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Furthermore, conceptualizing commitment as a two-person construct, one can also describe it in terms of symmetry between partner's commitment towards each other. In fact, Stanley and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that lower levels of commitment in asymmetrical committed relationships explained lower relationship adjustment, more conflict and more aggression in their relationships.

Social learning theory suggests that emerging adults' attitudes towards their intimate relationships may be shaped by observing their parents' relationship, and that such attitudes may affect their own romantic relationships through their commitment to their relationships (Milles & Servaty-Sei, 2010). Thus, emerging adults may decide to leave a less satisfying relationship rather than work on it, based on their perception of their parents' behavior on similar situations (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Kapinus, 2005).

Consistent with these notions, research has demonstrated that one of the main factors influencing commitment in offspring romantic relationships is divorce in interparental

relationships (Miles & Servaty-Sei, 2010). In a sample of young adults, Cui and colleagues' (2010) study results suggested that, compared to intact families' offspring, exposure to parents' divorce was associated with lower levels of relationship commitment, which in turn were associated with higher probability of relationship dissolution. Yet, Braithwaite and colleagues (2016) showed interparental conflict without divorce was still associated with less commitment and, in turn, with less satisfaction and stability in offspring's emerging adult romantic relationships.

CHAPTER II – RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

There is a solid body of literature review on the topic of the influence of interparental conflict on children (Harold et al., 2004; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011; Zemp et al., 2016). Most literature has circled around the associations between exposure to interparental conflict and adjustment outcomes across life stages (van Eldik et al., 2020; Fincham & Hall, 2005; Keepports & Pittman, 2017; Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). Theoretical frameworks have taken into account how children's cognitive appraisals of interparental conflict (Grych et al., 2000; Grych & Fincham, 1990) children's emotional adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Schudlich et al., 2019) mediate the impact of interparental conflict on children.

According to social learning theory, behavior is learned through modeling by observing one's parents (Bandura, 1978), which means children model their own intimate relationships through internalized representations of the interparental relationship. Despite research documenting influences of interparental conflict (e.g., involving divorce, interparental aggressive behavior, and destructive conflict) on offspring's romantic relationships (Amato, 1996; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Duggan et al., 2001; Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Weigel, 2007), there is a need for more understanding on the accountability of specific emotional and cognitive features on these effects.

Literature on the effects interparental conflict has on offspring across life stages (i.e. childhood, youth, adulthood) (e.g., Dorn & Schudlich, 2019; Silva et al., 2016; Zemp et al., 2016), has ultimately failed to investigate these associations on specific and important age gaps such as emerging adulthood. Some evidence shows that exposure to interparental conflict influences emerging adults' romantic relationships (Fidalgo, 2014; Jorge, 2013). Thus, our study focuses on analyzing the effects of exposure to interparental conflict on emerging adults' romantic relationship quality.

Research on the exposure to interparental conflict has shown that it affects offspring's emotional regulation (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Padun, 2017) and that emotional dysregulation mediates the association between interparental conflict and offspring adjustment outcomes (Buehler et al., 2007; Harold et al., 2004; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011; Suh et al., 2016). Emotion regulatory strategies are applied when in conflict couple situations (Richards et al., 2003), and findings on the intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship conflict have shown emotion dysregulation as a significant mediator in the transmission of relationship conflict (Kim et al., 2009). However,

there is still lack of evidence on how offspring relationship quality may be indirectly influenced by interparental conflict through emotional regulation.

Furthermore, interparental conflict also seems to play a role on relationship commitment (Braithwaite et al., 2016; Jorge, 2013). However, most studies have focused on the specific effect of divorce (Cui et al., 2010; Milles & Servaty-Sei, 2010) on offspring romantic relationship commitment, and on the weight of commitment on romantic relationship outcomes (Amato et al., 2001; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Monk et al., 2014; Dush & Amato, 2005). Therefore, suggest it might be insightful to analyze the specific role of exposure to destructive interparental conflict (regardless of parental divorce) on emerging adults' romantic relationships outcomes, and to investigate their relationship commitment as a potential explaining mechanism of that role.

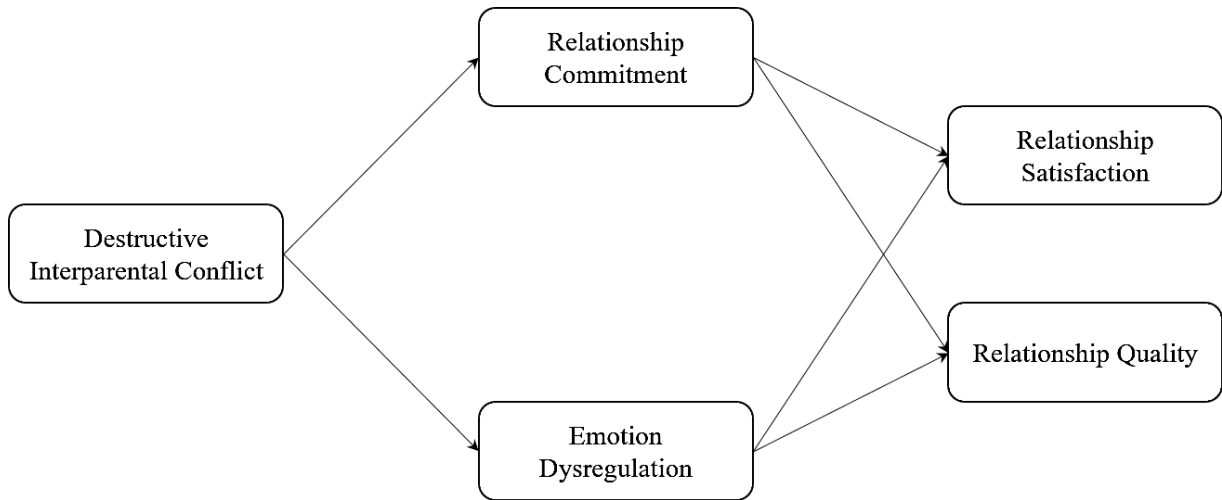
In sum, taking into account the contributes of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1978) emotional security theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994), and cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1993), this study aims to expand understanding of the intergenerational transmission intimate relationship quality, by analyzing the association between emerging adults' exposure to destructive interparental conflict and their romantic relationship quality and satisfaction. In addition, to address the identified gaps in the literature, we also aim to analyze the mediating role of emotional dysregulation and relationship commitment in the association between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationship quality and satisfaction.

We hypothesized that: (H1) exposure to destructive interparental conflict is associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and to worse relationship quality; (H2) exposure to destructive interparental conflict is associated with higher emotional dysregulation, which in turn is associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and worse relationship quality; and (3) exposure to destructive interparental conflict is associated with lower levels of relationship commitment, which in turn is associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and worse relationship quality. The hypothesized model is presented in Figure 1.

Additionally, since previous studies have shown that show emerging adults' romantic relationship quality and satisfaction varies with their age (e.g., Keeports & Pittman, 2017; Simon & Furman, 2010), sex (e.g., Fidalgo, 2014; Kim et al., 2009), relationship length (e.g., Monk et al., 2014), and parent's marital status (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2016; Jorge, 2013), in this study, these variables will be included in the hypothesized model as covariates.

Figure 1.

Model hypothesizing emotion dysregulation and relationship commitment as mediators of associations between emerging adults' exposure to destructive interparental conflict and perceived satisfaction and quality of their romantic relationship.



CHAPTER III– METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

Participants were 425 emerging adults (84.5% females), aged between 18 and 25 years old ($M = 22.74$; $SD = 1.74$), who were, or had been in the past 6 months, in a dating relationship. Most ($n = 347$; 81.6%) were currently in a dating relationship, of which 240 (56.5%) for more than 2 years, 68 (16.0%) for one to two years, 43 (10.1%) for six months to one year, and 24 (5.7%) for less than six months. Regarding participants' completed level of education, 194 (45.6%) had a bachelor's degree, 130 (30.6) had completed high school, 83 (19.5) had a master's degree, 17 (4.1%) completed post-graduate studies (one of them had a PhD), and one (0.2%) had completed the ninth grade. Of those who were college students, 132 (46.5%) were bachelor students, 150 (52.8%) were master's degree students, and 2 (0.7%) were PhD students.

With regard to participants' parents, 288 (67.8%) were married or in a civil union and 137 (32.2%) were divorced. As for their parents' level of education, 158 mothers (37.1%) finished college, 133 (31.3%) finished high school, and 134 (31.5%) had a lower educational level. Regarding fathers, 131 (30.9%) finished college, 119 (28%) finished high school, and 174 (41.1%) had a lower educational level. Only one participant (0.2%) did not provide information about their fathers' educational level.

Relative to participants' cohabitation or not with their parents (regardless of also living with other relatives, with roommates, and/or with their girlfriend/boyfriend), 212 (49.9%) lived with both parents, 68 (16.0%) only with their mother, and nine (2.1%) only with their father. Of those who did not live with at least one of their parents, 63 (14.8%) lived only with their girlfriend/boyfriend - regardless of also living with (a) roommate(s) or friend(s) -, 22 (5.2%) lived alone, 16 (3.8%) lived only with (a) roommate(s) or friend(s), 13 (3.1%) lived only with other relatives, and seven (1.6%) lived with their spouse. Additionally, 296 (69.6%) participants had everyday contact with their parents, and 78 (18.4%) had contact multiple times a week, while six (1.4%) rarely or never had contact with them.

2. Instruments

1.1. Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych et al., 1992; Moura et al., 2010)

To evaluate participants' perceptions of their exposure to interparental conflict, we used the Portuguese version of the subscale Conflict Properties Scale (CPS) from the Children's

Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Moura et al., 2010; Grych, et al., 1992). The CPS is composed of 19 items assessing the characteristics of interparental conflict, namely, frequency (e.g., I never saw my parents fight or get angry), intensity (e.g., When my parents have an argument, they scream a lot at each other), and resolution (e.g., When my parents have an argument they generally tend to solve it) of interparental conflict. Participants rate their agreement with each item, in a 6-point scale, from 1 (i.e., totally disagree) to 6 (i.e., totally agree).

Given the theoretical focus on participants' exposure to destructive conflict, and following the procedure used in previous studies (e.g., Davies et al., 2002; DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010; Fosco et al., 2007), after reverse coding specific items (i.e., 1, 2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 15 and 17), the 19 items were transformed into a composite. A mean score was used, higher values on the CPS reflect exposure to conflict that occurs more regularly, it's more intense, and it's poorly resolved (Moura et al., 2010; Grych et al., 1992). The CPS has shown good to excellent (Kline, 2000) internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach's alpha), ranging between .87 to .91 (e.g., DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010; Fosco et al., 2007; Grych et al., 1992; Simon & Furman, 2010). In its Portuguese version (Moura et al., 2010), adapted and validated in a sample of Portuguese adolescents and emerging adults, the CPS showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$). In the present study, internal consistency of the 19 items was very good ($\alpha = .94$).

1.2. Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-18; Coutinho et al., 2010; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Victor & Klonsky, 2016)

To measure participants' emotional dysregulation, the Portuguese version of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale in its short-form (DERS-18) was used (Victor & Klonsky, 2016; Coutinho et al., 2010). The DERS-18 is composed of 18 items developed to assess emotional dysregulation. Participants were asked to indicate how often the statement presented in each item applied to them, in a 5-point scale, from 1 (i.e., almost never) to 5 (i.e., almost always). The 18 items are organized in the following six factors: non-acceptance of one's negative emotions (i.e., Non-acceptance; e.g., When I'm upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way); poor access to effective emotion regulation strategies (i.e., Strategies; e.g., When I'm upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time); lack of engagement in goal-directed activities during negative emotions (i.e., Impulses; e.g., When I'm upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things); lack of emotional awareness (i.e., Awareness; e.g., I pay attention to how I feel); lack of emotional clarity (e.g., I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings); and poor

management of one's impulses while experiencing negative emotions (e.g., When I'm upset, I lose control over my behaviors) (Justo & Andretta, 2020; Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

The DRES-18 has shown good to excellent internal consistency ranging between $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = .92$ (e.g., Charak et al., 2019; Coutinho et al., 2010; Victor & Klonsky, 2016). In the present study, both internal consistency of each subscale (Awareness, $\alpha = .68$; Clarity, $\alpha = .79$; Goals, $\alpha = .90$; Impulse, $\alpha = .88$; Non-acceptance, $\alpha = .83$; Strategies, $\alpha = .81$) and internal consistency of the total scale ($\alpha = .88$) were acceptable to excellent (Kline, 2000). Higher scores in the DERS-18 indicate higher levels of greater emotion dysregulation.

1.3. Personal Commitment Scale (Monteiro et al., 2015; Stanley & Markman, 1992)

Relationship commitment was measured by the Personal Commitment Scale (Monteiro et al., 2015), the Portuguese version of the short form Dedication Scale (Rhoades et al., 2006) from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The Personal Commitment Scale is a unidimensional measure which assesses individuals' commitment to their relationship (e.g., prioritizing the relationship; meta-commitment; couple identity; the desire to maintain a long-term relationship), through 12 items (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is clearly part of my future life plans"; "It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner"; "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her'").

Participants rated their agreement with each item statement in a 7-point scale, from 1 (i.e., strongly disagree) to 7 (i.e., strongly agree). After reverse coding specific items (i.e., 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12), items were averaged to form a composite, in which higher scores indicate more dedication towards the intimate relationship. The Personal Commitment Scale has shown adequate to very good internal consistency (Kline, 2000) ranging between $\alpha = .77$ and $\alpha = .82$ (Jorge, 2013; Monteiro et al., 2015). In the present study, internal consistency of the Dedication Scale was good ($\alpha = .78$).

1.4. Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007)

To assess emerging adults' satisfaction with their romantic relationships, we used the four-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007), a shorter version of the original 32-item from (CSI-32), created by the authors "by identifying the 4 (CSI-32) items that provided the largest amount of information for the assessment of relationship satisfaction" (Funk & Rogge, 2007; p. 577). The CSI was translated into Portuguese by the researchers, followed by a back-translation into English by a professional translator to ensure that the Portuguese version captured the original meaning of the items. An English-speaking researcher

compared the back-translated version with the original one, and both versions were considered semantically and conceptually equivalent.

Participants were asked to indicate their degree of happiness with their relationship on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (i.e., extremely unhappy) to 6 (i.e., perfect), and to rate their agreement with the remaining three items (e.g., I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner) on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (i.e. not at all/not at all true) to 5 (i.e. completely/completely true). Scores on the CSI-4 can range from 0 to 21. Scores falling below 13.5 suggest relationship dissatisfaction and higher scores indicate higher levels of relationship satisfaction. The CSI-4 has shown excellent internal consistency, going up to $\alpha = .95$ (e.g., Lamela et al., 2020; Krafft et al., 2017; Petch et al., 2014; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019). In the present study internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .79$) (Kline, 2000).

1.5. Relationship Questionnaire (Dixe et al., 2014)

Emerging adults' romantic relationship quality was measured with the Portuguese version of the Relationship Questionnaire (Dixe et al., 2014; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, n.d.). The relationship Questionnaire evaluates the existence of indicative signs of a non-healthy relationship, thereby assessing the quality of young adults' romantic relationships (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, n.d.; Dixe et al., 2014). Although initially designed as a 3-point Likert scale (i.e. yes, no and maybe), during the validation process the scale has been translated into a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (i.e. never) to 4 (i.e. frequently), where participants are asked to indicate how often the situations presented apply to themselves. This questionnaire is comprised of 22 items, developed to evaluate the romantic relationship through 4 subscales: Control Relationship (e.g., Does he/she accuse you of seducing other people?); Possessive Relationship (e.g., Does he/she make all the decisions?); Destructive Relationship (e.g., Did he/she ever destroyed anything that was yours?); Depreciative Relationship (e.g., Does your boyfriend/girlfriend make fun of you in a way that it is hurtful?) (frase para score global). Higher scores indicate less healthy romantic relationships and, therefore, worse romantic relationship quality (Dixe et al., 2014; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, n.d.).

The Relationship Questionnaire has shown good internal consistency ranging between $\alpha = .80$ and $.84$ (e.g., Batista, 2016; Dixe et al., 2014; Fouto, 2017; Marcão, 2016). In the present study, while for each subscale internal consistency of varied between poor to adequate (Control, $\alpha = .66$; Possessive, $\alpha = .74$; Destructive, $\alpha = .44$; Depreciative, $\alpha = .56$), it was very good for the total scale ($\alpha = .86$) (Kline, 2000).

3. Procedure

Data was collected via an online survey was hosted by Qualtrics.com platform, in Portuguese language. Participants were recruited using public posts in social media networks (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp), in online college groups (e.g., Facebook) and via e-mail. These posts announced an anonymous survey about emerging adults' perceptions of their parents' interactions and of their own romantic relationships, and provided a link to access the survey. As criteria for participation, the online announcement requested participants with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years old, that were (or had been in the last 6 months) in a romantic relationship.

When accessing the online questionnaire, individuals were informed that participation was confidential and voluntary, that any identifying information would not be attached to their data, that responses were non-mandatory, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time by closing the survey tab. Individuals were also informed that they would be eligible to register for a raffle, to win a 15€ FNAC gift voucher, upon survey completion. To enter the raffle, participants were asked to provide their email address, which was archived in a different database.

After providing informed consent (by clicking in the "I agree to participate" option), the survey presented participants with demographic questions. Questions referring to interparental conflict, emotional dysregulation, commitment, and romantic relationship quality followed. In order to control for a possible order effect on the presentation of measures, the instruments were randomized within the survey. Also, if participants skipped a question, they were notified but were allowed to proceed.

At the end, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study. They were informed that the aim of the study was to understand how specific experiences in the family context, namely interparental conflict, were associated to their romantic relationship quality, and if cognitive and emotional factors could explain that association. This study was conducted in agreement with the Ethics Guidelines issued by Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), was available online for 29 weeks on all platforms mentioned and took an average of 16 minutes to be completed.

4. Data analyses

Initial analyses included missing value analysis, descriptive statistics, and bivariate correlations among the study variables. All variables were composites computed by averaging or summing their respective items (except for emerging adults' age, sex, relationship length, and parent's marital status). Preceding the test of the mediation model, a missing value analysis was

conducted including all model variables. Little's (1988) Missing Completely at Random test produced a normed chi-square (χ^2/df) of 1,21 (Little's MCAR test $\chi^2 = 255.737$, $df = 212$, $p < .05$; normed chi-square < 2), which according to Bollen (1989), indicates that missing data were mostly at random. Therefore, the expectation maximization algorithm available in SPSS (Schafer, 1997) was used to estimate missing values using all information available from the other variables.

In order to analyze the mediating role of emotional dysregulation and commitment in the association between interparental conflict and romantic relationship quality and satisfaction, a multi-mediator model was tested using the PROCESS (v. 3) macro (Model 4) for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). To test the indirect effects, 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were used, based on 10000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2018). Emerging adults' age, sex, and relationship length, and their parent's marital status were included in the model as covariates, based on the results of the bivariate correlations analysis and on previous literature (e.g., Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Monk et al., 2014; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Correlations ranged from small to strong (Cohen, 1992). Exposure to interparental conflict was positively correlated with emerging adults' emotional dysregulation, and negatively correlated with relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction.

Regarding correlations between the covariates and the theoretical model variables: emerging adults' age was positively correlated with their romantic relationships' length and negatively correlated with emotional dysregulation; emerging adults' sex was positively correlated with emotional dysregulation (i.e., male emerging adults display higher levels of emotional dysregulation than female emerging adults) and positively correlated with relationship quality (i.e., male emerging adults display poorer relationship quality than female emerging adults); length of romantic relationship was negatively correlated with emotional dysregulation and positively correlated with relationship commitment; and emerging adults' parents' marital status was positively correlated with interparental conflict (i.e., divorced parents display higher levels of interparental conflict than married parents).

Table 1.*Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the model variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex ¹⁾	0.16	-	-							
2. Age	22.74	1.75	0.07	-						
3. Parent's marital status ²⁾	0.68	-	-0.01	-0.09	-					
4. Relationship length	4.18	1.15	-0.07	0.19**	-0.05	-				
5. Interparental Conflict	3.22	0.99	0.07	0.09	-0.30**	-0.06	-			
6. Emotional Dysregulation	2.11	0.64	0.11*	-0.14**	-0.07	-0.11*	0.24**	-		
7. Commitment	4.92	0.91	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.11*	-0.14**	-0.06	-	
8. Relationship Quality	1.29	0.36	0.12*	0.01	-0.02	0.02	0.07	0.29**	-0.23**	-
9. Relationship Satisfaction	19.64	4.29	-0.08	-0.08	-0.02	0.12*	-0.11**	-0.26**	0.44**	-0.58**

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation

¹⁾ Sex: 1 – Male and 0 – Female and the proportion of males is reported.

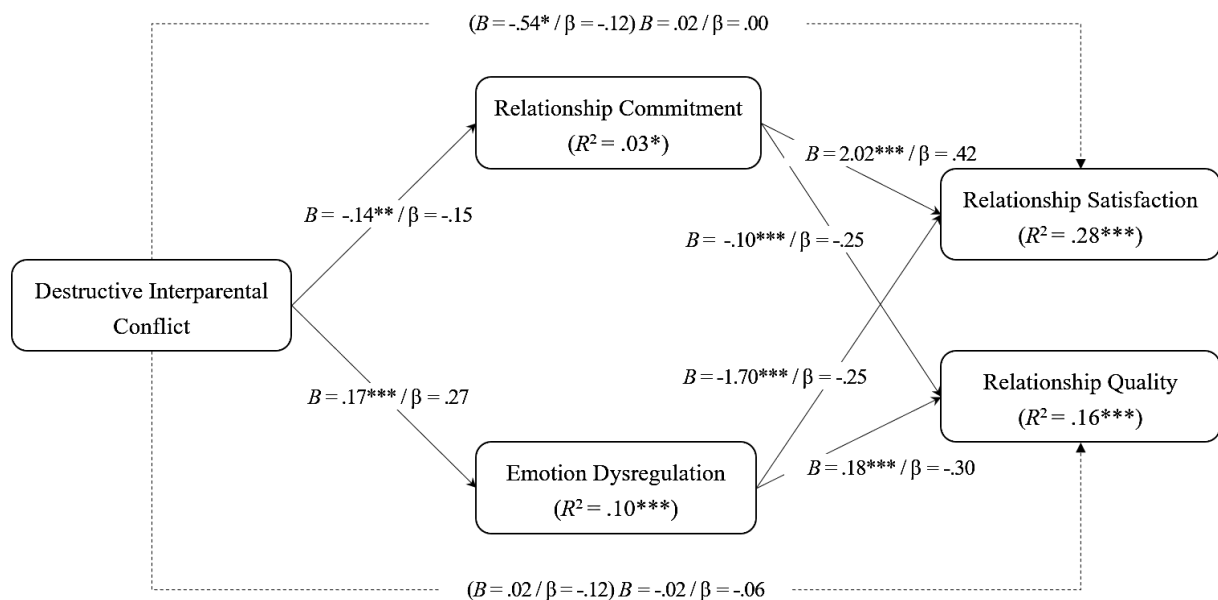
²⁾ Parent's marital status: 1 – Married and 0 – Divorced and the proportion of married is reported.

2. Mediation model

As shown in Figure 2, controlling for the effects of emerging adults' age, sex and romantic relationship length, and parents' marital status, results revealed significant indirect effects of interparental conflict on: 1) emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction via emerging adults' emotional dysregulation (bootstrap standardized estimate = -0.06, 95% CI = -0.10, -0.03) and relationship commitment (bootstrap standardized estimate = -0.06, 95% CI = -0.12, -0.02, respectively); and on 2) emerging adults' romantic relationship quality also via emotional dysregulation (bootstrap standardized estimate = 0.08, 95% CI = 0.04, 0.12) and relationship commitment (bootstrap standardized estimate = 0.04, 95% CI = 0.01, 0.07, respectively). In other words, higher levels of exposure to interparental conflict, were associated with emerging adults' higher levels of emotional dysregulation and lower levels of relationship commitment, which, in turn, were associated with lower levels of emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction and quality.

Figure 2.

Model examining emotion dysregulation and relationship commitment as mediators linking destructive interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction and quality.



Note. Path coefficients in brackets refer to the total effect of destructive interparental conflict on emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction and quality. Estimates in brackets refer to total effects. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Regarding the effects of the covariates, results showed a significant positive effect of emerging adults' sex on emotion dysregulation ($B = .16, p = 0.035 / \beta = .10$) and relationship quality ($B = .09, p = 0.039 / \beta = .09$), indicating higher levels of emotional dysregulation and relationship difficulties in males. In addition, emerging adults' age was negatively associated with emotion dysregulation ($B = -.06, p < 0.001 / \beta = -.16$) and relationship satisfaction ($B = -.30, p = 0.004 / \beta = -.13$). That is, as age increased, emerging adults reported lower levels of emotion dysregulation and lower relationship satisfaction. Finally, relationship length was positively associated with emerging adults' commitment in their romantic relationship ($B = .08, p = 0.012 / \beta = .11$).

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

Exposure to destructive interparental conflict has been associated with a higher risk of poor offspring intimate relationships (e.g., Cui & Fincham, 2010; Li et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2008; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Simon & Furman, 2010). However, there is still need for evidence concerning how with distinctive features of offspring romantic relationships, specifically in emerging adulthood, and the mechanisms through which this association operates. The present study aimed to expand existing evidence on associations between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and emerging adults' relationship quality and satisfaction, by examining the role of emotional dysregulation and relationship commitment as potential mediator of that association.

Based on existing evidence of the mediating role of offspring emotion regulation skills in associations between interparental conflict and various offspring's developmental outcomes (e.g., Buehler et al., 2007; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Jorge, 2013; Padun, 2017; Siffert & Shwarz, 2011) and on a previous study indicating relationship commitment as a mediator of the association between interparental conflict and emerging adults' relationship satisfaction (Braithwaite et al., 2016), we hypothesized that: (H1) exposure to destructive interparental conflict would be associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and higher worse relationship quality; (H2) exposure to destructive interparental conflict would be associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and worse relationship quality via offspring emotional dysregulation; and (H3) exposure to destructive interparental conflict would be associated with lower levels of emerging adults' relationship satisfaction and worse relationship quality via offspring relationship commitment.

Partly supporting H1, this study revealed that emerging adults that expressed higher levels of exposure to destructive interparental conflict reported lower levels of romantic relationship satisfaction. This finding expands the existing literature on the specific consequences of interparental conflict on emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction. Indeed, Braithwaite and colleagues' (2016) study results – similar to previous studies (e.g., Herzog & Cooney, 2002) – had demonstrated that interparental conflict was associated with emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction if parents stayed married, but their study results showed interparental conflict did not have the same deleterious effect if parents divorced. This study's differing results point to a negative association between interparental conflict and emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction regardless of parents divorcing.

Additionally, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Delevi et al., 2012; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2017), these results also support the notion that destructive interparental conflict has lasting effects on offspring relational outcomes. Namely, these results demonstrating the impact of destructive interparental conflict on emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction are in line with previous research results (Jorge, 2013; Willet, 2009).

Drawing on social learning theory, individuals learn relational behavior through modelling their parents or primary caregivers (Bandura, 1977, 1978). Indeed, previous research has demonstrated interparental conflict to be related to the amount of conflict in adolescents' romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Simon & Furman, 2010). Also, romantic relationship satisfaction has been shown to be widely dependent on relationship conflict (Molland, 2011). Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that exposure to destructive interparental conflict is negatively associated with emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction due to exposure to problematic examples of conflict behavior in intimate relational settings. Indeed, results of previous studies have shown interparental conflict to be associated with decreased offspring young adults' relationship satisfaction and quality through their conflict behavior with their partners (Cui et al., 2008; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019).

Contrary to what was expected, results of this study did not reveal a significant total association between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and emerging adults' relationship quality. In this study, interparental conflict was only indirectly associated with participants' relationship quality through their emotional dysregulation and relational commitment. This may be explained by the fact that we tested our hypothesis in a community sample, with low to moderate levels of interparental conflict and tending towards non-problematic romantic relationships. Thus, the relatively low mean levels of both interparental conflict and romantic relationship problems may account for the lack of a significant association between these variables. Nevertheless, our study's results demonstrate how romantic relationship dimensions, such as quality and satisfaction, are differently associated to interparental conflict, and points to the need for further exploration on the significance of destructive interparental conflict in emerging adults' relationship quality.

Supporting H2, our results supported the mediating role of emerging adults' emotional dysregulation in associations between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and their romantic relationship quality and satisfaction. That is, emerging adults exposed to destructive interparental conflict revealed higher levels of emotional dysregulation, which in turn were associated to lower levels romantic relationship satisfaction and to worse relationship quality. These findings are in line with the existing literature on the role of destructive interparental

conflict on emotion dysregulation (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015) and on emerging adults' romantic relationship quality (e.g., Cui & Fincham, 2010; Fidalgo, 2014; Li et al., 2020).

Research on the effects of interparental conflict on offspring demonstrate that interparental conflict, characterized by a relational climate managed with unpredictability and emotional instability, disrupts offspring emotion regulation, causing offspring to develop heightened sensitivity to parental distress and difficulty managing emotions (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Indeed, even though offspring sensitization to interparental conflict through emotion dysregulation has been shown to occur even in face of constructive conflict (López-Larrosa et al., 2018), those reporting lower levels of childhood family cohesion and harmony have been shown to report significantly higher levels of emotional reactivity (Rivera & Fincham, 2015).

Our findings further support the notion that interparental conflict negatively impacts offspring emotional regulation, and that emotion dysregulation has a negative impact on couple relationship quality, satisfaction, and intimacy (Chan, 2019; Kim et al., 2009; Riahi et al., 2020; Tani et al., 2015). Thus, these findings also add to the broader research literature documenting that experience within the family environment accounts for emotional dysregulation processes and that these processes evolve within romantic relationships (Thompson et al., 2020; Stoycos et al., 2020). Indeed, heightened emotion dysregulation has been shown as a mechanism mediating childhood adversity and interpersonal functioning in adulthood, namely in reporting worse romantic relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Poole et al., 2018).

Finally, supporting H3, this study's results showed that exposure to destructive interparental conflict is associated with emerging adults' lower levels of relationship commitment, which in turn are associated with lower levels of offspring romantic relationship satisfaction and worse relationship quality. Thus, in line with the existing literature (Braithwaite et al., 2016), this finding also suggests that offspring relationship commitment seem to be a significant mediator through which destructive interparental conflict operates its negative influence on emerging adults' romantic relationships outcomes.

The interparental relationship provides a model for offspring relationship development (Amato, 1996; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Delevi et al., 2012; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004) and relational skills developed in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood provide paths for sustained intimacy in later relationships (Konstam et al., 2019). Our study results are in line with previous studies adult demonstrating links between heightened interparental conflict and offspring young adults' lower romantic relationship commitment, and demonstrating commitment in relationships to be associated with benefits for the couple, specifically in terms

of relationship quality and satisfaction (Dush & Amato, 2005; Fidalgo, 2014; Lopez et al., 2007; Konstam et al., 2019).

Literature on the intergenerational transmission of divorce reflecting on the role of commitment has mostly demonstrated interparental conflict to be associated with offspring emerging adults' less commitment and, in turn, with emerging adults' lower levels of relationship satisfaction, when parents aren't divorced (Braithwaite et al., 2016; Cui et al., 2010; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). This study's findings further our understanding on the significant role of interparental conflict in offspring relationship commitment, given that, after controlling for parents' marital status, interparental conflict was significantly associated with emerging adults' relationship commitment. By demonstrating that interparental conflict was associated with emerging adults' romantic relationship satisfaction and quality their relationship commitment, results of this study contributes to the understanding of commitment as a viable mediator of the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns, and relationship dysfunction and adjustment (Braithwaite et al., 2016).

Importantly, findings of this study showed that even low to moderate levels of destructive significantly predicted worse relationship satisfaction and quality of emerging adults romantic relationship, and even relatively low levels of emotional dysregulation and high levels of relationship commitment mediated that association. Thus, these findings further point to the importance of studying these processes in order to better understand how to break these deleterious pathways.

Finally, regarding potential covariates associated with emerging adults' romantic relationship outcomes, we controlled for emerging adults' sex, age, and relationship length, and for their parent's marital status. The significant effects of these control variables are also noteworthy. As shown in the results section, both the bivariate correlations and the model results showed that male emerging adults displayed higher levels of emotional dysregulation than female emerging adults. This is in line with other studies demonstrating that males' emotion regulation strategies, such as anger, are more heavily impacted by interparental conflict (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Additionally, male emerging adults displayed poorer relationship quality than females. This finding is also consistent with previous studies demonstrating males' higher avoidance in romantic relationships than women, and sex differences increasing through the life course (del Giudice, 2011). However, a previous study has shown that women reported greater discrepancy between the importance they associated with various relationship standards and the extent to which they were fulfilled (Vangelisti & Daily, 2005).

Regarding age effects, older emerging adults reported lower relationship satisfaction, which can be understood since individuals reaching adulthood are at risk for problems relating to additional developmental tasks of work, studies, or occupation, that ultimately may have negative consequences for their romantic relationship outcomes (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Moreover, the older the merging adults, the lower their reported levels of emotional dysregulation. This finding points to later developmental stages possibly being related to emotional regulation processes. This result is interesting given that other studies have assessed optimal emotion regulation not as a developmental task to be mastered at a certain age, but rather a “moving target” that is continually sensitive to changing goals and contexts (Diamond & Aspinwal, 2003).

As also demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Monk et al., 2014), emerging adults in longer romantic relationships displayed higher levels of relationship commitment. This can be understood given that partners who feel committed to their relationship, as they have intent to continue the relationship, feel more comfortable investing in its future (Monk et al., 2014); and that relationship commitment was measured through relationship dedication, which ultimately evaluates the degree to which a person wants the relationship to continue over time (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Moreover, in line with previous studies (e.g., Jorge, 2013) emerging adults with divorced parents reported higher levels of interparental conflict than emerging adults with married parents. This association is understandable since divorce is usually preceded by high levels of conflict and instability, which operate on offspring understanding of interparental conflict (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Cui et al., 2011).

1.1. Limitations and Strengths

Despite the contribution of this study to the literature in this field, some limitations are worth noting. Most importantly, since this was a cross-sectional study, it can provide support for a mediational model but precludes an analysis of the temporal relationships among the variables, thus limiting inferences about the causal relationships between them. Nevertheless, the wide body of existing evidence supporting the mediating role of emotion regulation in the effects of interparental conflict and multiple emerging adults’ development outcomes, as well as previous evidence indicating relationship commitment as a mediator of associations between interparental conflict and emerging adults’ romantic relationship outcomes, suggest that the direction of effects hypothesized in this study is a plausible assumption. Given that previous research has demonstrated family relationships to be a primary source of meaning in life even for young adults (Lambert et al., 2010), and that research has shown interparental, offspring

and couple influences to be multidirectional – increases in conflict and intimacy in the parents-offspring relationship have been shown contemporaneously intertwining with changes in offspring's romantic relationship (Johnson et al., 2017), it would be important for future research to focus on longitudinal assessments of destructive interparental conflict's influence on emerging adults' romantic relationship outcomes and this association potential bidirectional dynamics.

Moreover, this study does not eliminate the possibility of shared method and informant variance in the findings, since reliance exclusively on emerging adults' reports may have inflated the relationships between the variables included in the models. However, research has suggested that offspring more accurately report parents' relationships than parents themselves, especially regarding aspects such as conflict (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Still, it would be an important step for future research to replicate these results with multi-informant questionnaires (e.g., parents' reports on interparental conflict and offspring partners' reports of relationship outcomes) and multiple methods (e.g., observations of interparental conflict interactions and offspring couple's interactions).

Furthermore, our study's sample presents a limitation due to its heterogeneity, characterized by a disproportion between the number of male and female participants. This unbalance may have contributed for the poor occurrence of significant correlations between participants' sex and the other study's variables. Future research should apply stronger efforts to more effectively reach male participants, for example by targeting specific platforms (e.g., Facebook male groups), in order for investigations results' to be more accurate.

Additionally, the instrument utilized for measuring romantic relationship satisfaction was translated for this study, translated versions were compared and determined as accurate, and analyzes revealed good internal consistency. However, for future investigation it would be necessary a detailed study on the psychometric properties and linguistic adequacy of its translated version.

Finally, data collection for this study was operatized through internet platforms. Despite this method granting participants' confidentiality and anonymity, as well as faster access to participants, it presents limitations such as the impossibility for investigators to control participants' response honesty (e.g., sex and age), and to answer questions participants may have during while executing the survey. To address this limitation, we provided the researchers' contacts so participants could reach out for any clarification deemed necessary.

Despite these limitations, a noteworthy strength of this study is the sample size, which enables robust results and a better possibility for generalization of the findings. It is important

to understand how interparental conflict impacts emerging adults' romantic relationships, especially due to previous evidence demonstrating links between interparental conflict and internalizing symptomatology through romantic competence (Kumar & Mattanah, 2018). Our findings further the understanding of the role of emotion dysregulation and relationship commitment in the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns, specifically in the effects of destructive interparental conflict in offspring emerging adults' romantic relationship quality and satisfaction.

1.2. Implications for practice

The present study emerged from a clear need to continuously further a deeper understanding of the effects of interparental conflict, in order to better develop not only clinical intervention practices focused on offspring perception of their parents' history of conflict and the way it operates on their understanding of their own romantic relationships, but also prevention and intervention programs in both community and clinical samples, for example through educational training.

The results of the present study highlight the importance of intervention aimed at preventing destructive interparental conflict, given its negative effects on offspring's capacity for maintaining satisfying romantic relationships. A recent meta-analysis (van Eldik et al., 2020) has shown that most associations between the interparental relationship and child functioning endured over time. In line with this finding, our results support the growing consensus that prevention and intervention programs aimed at reducing destructive interparental conflict could benefit from an alternative or additional focus on the interparental romantic relationship, since parents' conflict behaviors seem to negatively influence offspring's romantic relationship outcomes. Indeed, parent education programs have been showed to be more effective for parents in conflict if they included a couple relationship component (Reynolds et al., 2014), and couple-focused interventions alone or as supplement to parenting programs have been shown to be potent in increasing offspring well-being (Zemp et al., 2016).

For offspring relationship outcomes, it is important to intervene on their perceptions of interparental conflict, emotion regulation processes and relational commitment. Even though instability in love relationships is a developmental feature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Fincham & Lucier-Greer, 2018), studies have shown that college students in committed romantic relationships experience greater well-being, less mental and physical health problems, and less risky behaviors, than single college students (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Relationship

education as way to promote later healthy romantic relationships is gaining greater attention among those studying emerging adults (Fincham et al., 2011), and, because emerging adults' romantic relationships are in constant flux as they prepare for long-term relationships, finding ways to improve the materials and to better applied them is essential (Olmstead et al, 2011).

Our study's results support the need for emerging adults' relationship education programs and provide useful additional inputs for such programs, such as the importance of capacitating emerging adults to work on their relationship commitment and improve their emotion regulation skills. Indeed, results of couple-based interventions, in which at least one partner had experienced chronic difficulties in emotion regulation, have demonstrated reductions in emotion dysregulation, and increases in relationship satisfaction (Kirby & Baucom, 2007), and relationship education programs aimed at emerging adults that have focused on emotion security and commitment security have been shown to be successful (Fincham et al., 2011).

In sum, following evidences pointing to the negative long-term effects of exposure to interparental conflict and its interaction with offspring emotion regulation and commitment, in this study we proposed to analyze emerging adults' emotion dysregulation and relationship commitment as potential mediators of the association between of exposure to destructive interparental conflict and their romantic relationship quality and satisfaction. Supporting our hypotheses, this study's results successfully demonstrated that destructive interparental conflict was associated to lower satisfaction and worse quality if emerging adults' romantic relationships, through higher emotion dysregulation and lower relationship commitment. Taken together, these findings support the research literature on the effects of interparental conflict on offspring adjustment outcomes and expands existing evidence about the intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship patterns.

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