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# Love in the Golden Years: A Narrative Examination of Romantic Relationships in Older Adulthood as Compared to Young Adulthood

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Love in the Golden Years:  
A Narrative Examination of Romantic Relationships in Older Adulthood as Compared to Young  
Adulthood

by

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**Abstract**

Life-stories offer an approach to understanding personality processes within a larger, developmental context. This study examines the role that one area of a person's larger context (namely romantic relationships) plays in that person's life-story. Specifically, the study examines whether this role changes over the lifespan. Nineteen students from a consortium of colleges in southern California, and an equal number of older adults living in a nearby retirement community, were interviewed about their romantic relationship history. The interview was semi-structured and asked participants about past and current relationships, and their most meaningful relationship overall. The interviews were coded for the themes of agency, redemption, and contamination, reported self-growth, and an additional variable called unprompted discussion of sexuality that was added based on a series of unexpected occurrences during the interviews. The results showed significant differences in both agency and unprompted discussion of sexuality between the romantic relationship narratives of young and older adults. However, no significant differences were found between the age groups on any of the other three variables, or between the sexes on any of the five variables. The results not only help us to better understand the ways in which our stories about our romantic relationships change across the lifespan, but also suggest significant differences between how younger and older adults think about love and sex.

Search terms: Romantic Relationships, Older Adults, Narrative Psychology, Lifespan Development

## **Introduction**

In 1950, there were only 205 million people aged 60 years and over in the world, a number that increased to 606 million in 2000. To put these numbers in better perspective: 1 in 12 people were over the age of 60 in 1950, with this proportion increasing to 1 in 10 in 2000. Moreover, with the additional contribution of the aging baby boomer population, 1 in 5 people are expected to be above the age of 60 by 2050, which would equate to approximately 2 billion people (“World Population Ageing”). Older adults are today’s fastest growing segment of the population, and have been for quite some time; however, relatively little research exists in psychology that specifically examines late life. The research that does exist largely focuses on the physical health, mental health, and the caregiving relationships of older adults. Little research has looked at love and romantic relationships in late life. Most of the research on relationships has been focused on younger generations, and not on how relationships may change as we age. What then do relationships look like in older adulthood and how might that change from young adulthood to older adulthood? More specifically, how does the way in which we talk about our romantic relationships change across the lifespan?

## **Attachment**

Attachment theory is one of the most comprehensive theories that psychologists use to make sense of romantic relationships. Although the present study does not deal directly with attachment theory, it is important to consider the broad base of empirical evidence concerning attachment in order to better understand the research on romantic relationships. Attachment theory attempts to describe the intricacies of interpersonal relationships between humans by illuminating the different ways in which individuals connect with others, and the ramifications of

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those unique styles. Essentially, attachment involves a person's ability to develop basic trust in themselves and others. Romantic attachment is an extension of attachment theory that examines romantic relationships specifically within the framework of attachment theory.

One of the most important components of romantic attachment theory is attachment styles. Broadly, people are either categorized as securely attached, or they fall within one of the specific patterns of insecure attachment. Securely attached individuals tend to have positive views of themselves, their partners, their relationships and often report greater satisfaction and adjustment in their relationships than those who are insecurely attached. Those who are insecurely attached lack the qualities of a securely attached individual, and fall into three categories: anxious—preoccupied, dismissive—avoidant, fearful—avoidant (Bowlby, 1980). Those with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style worry excessively or become overly engrossed with their relationships and may exhibit high levels of emotional expressiveness, worry, and impulsiveness in their relationships, and may often doubt their worth as a partner and blame themselves for their partners' lack of responsiveness (Bowlby, 1980). Individuals with a dismissive—avoidant attachment style tend to suppress and hide their feelings, and to deal with rejection by distancing themselves from the sources of rejection (i.e., their relationship partners, Bowlby, 1980). People with a fearful—avoidant attachment style seek less intimacy from partners and often suppress and deny their feelings; they are much less comfortable expressing affection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

John Bowlby laid the groundwork for contemporary attachment theory in his *Attachment and Loss* series (Bowlby, 1980). In those texts, Bowlby wrote that the various forms of attachment bonds are active throughout the life cycle, asserting also that attachment representations are likely to maintain significance and consistency across the lifespan (Bowlby,

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1979). Bowlby's early investigations were based largely on observations of infants and children (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Since then, attachment researchers have conducted significant research on adult attachment. However, that research has seldom been focused on older adulthood specifically.

Although relatively little research on attachment in older adulthood has been conducted, there has been an emerging base of research over the last 20-30 years that has begun to study what attachment looks like in late life. Most of this research on attachment in older adulthood has focused on one of three areas: attachment bonds in caregiving and chronic illness; attachment in coping with bereavement and loss; and the relationship of attachment to adjustment and well-being in old age (Bradley & Cafferty, 2001). A burgeoning interest in this field in recent years has resulted in more research on attachment in older age generally; however, the research on romantic attachment specifically in older adulthood is almost nonexistent.

Some of the existent research, especially that on the relationship of attachment to adjustment and well-being in old age is relevant to the present study because romantic attachment is included in the definition of attachment, and because the focus is on well-being in old age. Several studies in this area have examined differences in those who exhibit secure attachment versus those who exhibit insecure attachment. Wensauer and Grossmann (1995) interviewed a group of 49 German grandparents assessing their levels of secure versus insecure attachment. The researchers found that individuals with secure attachments to others exhibited higher levels of social integration, life satisfaction and physical health than insecure individuals. Webster (1997) reported similar findings in a Canadian sample. Older adults classified as secure or dismissive reported greater subjective well-being than fearful-avoidant individuals. Furthermore, Webster found that the majority of participants (52%) were classified as

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dismissive, while just 33% were classified as secure. Wensauer and Grossman reported similar numbers, classifying 42% of their participants as secure, as measured by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1996). It is notable how much these findings differ from the numbers found in normative samples of children and young adults, which indicate that the majority of people fall into the secure category (e.g., 66% in the study by Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This touches on differences that may exist in attachment between the young and old, as very few studies have examined how attachment may change across the entire lifespan.

Gross et al. (1997) believed that certain age differences could be predicted based on normative changes in social roles that occur naturally across the lifespan. Close relationships in early adulthood, for example, likely necessitate increases in emotion-regulatory skills in order to successfully navigate a relationship, which may moderate negative emotional experiences. This theory is supported by other research that has found that older adults are particularly good at both regulating and controlling their emotions (Carstensen, Mikels & Mather, 2006; Mather, 2004; Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996; Lawton et al., 1992). This increase in emotion-regulation and decrease in negative emotional experiences, suggests that attachments in old age have at least the potential to be more positive than the attachments in young adulthood through older adults' greater ability to regulate their emotional experiences. However, the previously discussed studies concerning attachment in old age paint a more dismal portrait of romantic relationships in late life.

Other research concerning attachment in old age versus in young adulthood supports the idea that relationships may be a more positive experience later in the lifespan. Chopik et al. (2013) asked 86,555 Internet respondents, ranging in age from 18 to 70, to respond to questions

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concerning attachment anxiety and avoidance. Their results indicated that attachment anxiety was highest among younger adults and lowest among middle-aged and older adults. Although these findings may simply point to the insecurity and anxiety that naturally exists in young adults attempting to navigate dating and relationships in the hopes of finding a life partner, these results also appear to be somewhat at odds with both Webster's (1997) and Wensauer's and Grossman's (1995) findings that lower levels of secure attachment occurred in older adults than in children and young adults. The differences in these findings may be due in part to the inclusion of children in Webster's (1997) and Wensauer's and Grossman's (1995) studies. For the purposes of the present study, the findings of Chopik et al. (2013) are more relevant because of the exclusion of children from their study and their focused examination of differences between young and older adults.

Cicirelli (2015) also found differences between young and old in terms of attachment, indicating that elders had smaller attachment networks than young adults, and that multiple attachment figures are needed for optimal adaptation in old age. The disparity in presence of secure attachment and differences in attachment networks among young versus older adults is surprising. This apparent decline in secure attachment, if existent, at first appears to suggest that society's characterization of the elderly having relationships figured out, while the young flounder, may be incorrect. However, another potential cause of this difference in attachment figures is that some of an individual's main attachment figures may have died by the time they reach old age. Nonetheless, this study points to the particular importance that close, healthy relationships have for those in late life.

Further, other studies have reported more positive findings concerning love in old age. Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles (1999) emphasized the strengthening of emotional bonds in

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late life in their research. A number of studies have also found that marriage promotes psychological and physical well-being among the elderly (Gove, Hughes & Style, 1983; Levitt, Clark, Rotton & Finley, 1987). In contrast, other research suggests that while attachment anxiety significantly decreases with increasing age, attachment avoidance does not (Van Assche et al., 2012). This particular finding could be due to the general decrease in anxiety that comes with age and the increased stability that that often brings, as well as the possibility that, after individuals experience more and more failed relationships, an increase in attachment avoidance could occur as a result. The extant research on attachment in old age offers a rich and nuanced examination of how relationships may look in late life, and the variety of forms that those relationships may take. However, more research is needed on the nature of romantic relationships specifically, versus simply attachment styles, caregiving, and widowhood, in order to better understand the full scope of attachment, and relationships, in late life.

### **Lifespan Development**

The study of lifespan development has been well developed due to the longevity of its presence in the field of psychology. Early researchers such as Erik Erikson described some of the changes that occur as we age. However, despite the considerable attention that has been devoted to the study of lifespan development over the years, still relatively is known about people who are at the last stage in their lives, and how their experience may differ from younger generations.

One of the most significant and well-documented findings on lifespan development concerns a key difference in how the young and the old think about past events, called the positivity bias. Researchers on aging have consistently found a positivity bias among older adults that does not appear to exist to the same extent in younger populations. In examining differences

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in affect between young and older adults, Carstensen et al. (2000) found that older adults are better at having sustained positive affect and minimizing negative affect. Moreover, results indicated that older adults are significantly less likely to experience negative affect than young adults, and that experienced negative affect ends sooner for older adults than it does for young adults. This pattern ties in very closely with the general experience of positivity bias for older adults.

Schryer and Ross (2012) also examined the positivity effect in older adults as compared to young adults by asking participants to rate the positivity of their own positive, negative, and neutral memories. In two studies, the researchers found both that older adults rated events more positively than younger adults did and that this age difference was not due to differences in the valence of the events that older and younger adults reported, meaning that when recounting a negative memory, older adults remembered the event more positively than young adults did. This appeared to rather reflect the more positive mindset of older adults, and not simply an intention to regulate emotions related to personal experiences. Moreover, Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz (2001) conducted a longitudinal study that found that older adults' enhanced emotional experience is not due simply to cohort effects. Their results instead revealed that negative affect decreases over time for individuals, meaning that people tended to feel less negative emotions as they aged. Moreover, Field (1981) found in a longitudinal study that people recall their childhood as happier the older they are, while Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton (1970) found that, with the passing of time, mothers are more likely to describe their children as having had desirable traits, such as being cooperative and popular, when they were young. All of these results point to a general consensus that, as time passes, people begin to view life events increasingly positively and minimize negative affect in their lives overall.

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Mather (2006) proposed a potential theory for why the positivity effect exists, by positing that in early adulthood, the prospect of the future provokes individuals to focus more on knowledge seeking, whereas in older adulthood, priorities shift and emotional meaning and well-being become the more important goals. In support of this theory, Carstensen and Mikels (2005) reviewed empirical studies on this topic and found, in part, that older adults exhibit superior cognitive performance for emotional relative to non-emotional information and that age differences are most apparent when the emotional content has a positive rather than negative valence. These findings support the idea that older adults seek more meaning-making in their remembrance of emotional events, but that that desire is also paired with the goal to remember the past positively. The broad base of research on the positivity bias overall indicates a significant difference in how older and young individuals think about and remember past events.

Along these lines, some research on lifespan development has focused on the development of narrative identity, which posits that individuals form an identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized, evolving story of the self. McLean (2008), in studying differences in narrative identity between young adults and older adults, found that frequencies of self-event connections and the levels of reflective processing remained constant across the age groups. However, older adults exhibited more thematic coherence and more narratives representing stability, as opposed to change, than young adults. Moreover, theories on narrative identity generally suggest that while identity is formed in young adulthood, it also evolves across the entire lifespan as new experiences provoke reflection and change (Cohler, 1993; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Kroger, 2000; McAdams, 1993). Thus, the initial research on narrative identity across the lifespan would suggest that significant changes do occur as we age, namely the way that we think about, and discuss, our memories.

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The research on lifespan development indicates clear ways in which young adults and older adults differ in how they make sense of their lives. Although this research has not yet been extended to examine differences in how the young and the old make sense of their romantic relationships, it is likely that the findings from previous research will apply and that key differences will emerge in how young and older adults think about, and discuss, their relationships.

### **Narrative Psychology**

Narrative psychology evolved in the late twentieth century (László, 2008). Declared to be the one of the most important aspects of psychology, the term “narrative psychology” was first introduced in a book, *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*, by Theodor Sarbin (1986) that proved to be highly influential in the emergence of the field of narrative psychology. The 1980s overall were formative for the field, as two other major researchers helped to introduce the scientific world to narrative psychology. Dan McAdams (1985) developed a theoretical framework and a coding system for interpreting life narratives, and Jerome Bruner (1986) published a book that explored the narrative psychology empirically. Before this time, no field existed that was devoted specifically to the stories themselves that people told. However, in the last 30 years, the study of the stories we tell about our own lives, and the psychological significance that that holds, has been gaining traction, becoming central to mainstream scientific psychology (Bobrow & Collins, 1975, as cited by László, 2008).

A key component to understanding narrative psychology is acknowledging the significant and varied themes that exist in narratives. Narrative psychology researchers have utilized these themes time and again to better understand various aspects of identity, well-being, and one’s

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social world. One of the most important themes in telling the story of one's life is agency. This theme involves the ability to exert some influence over the course of one's life, and not viewing the events of one's life as being controlled by external forces. Agency is a central human concern (Bandura, 2006) and taps the fundamental human need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, as cited by Adler et al., 2015).

Although agency has been used to aid in the understanding of various psychological phenomena and an overall portrait of an individual's identity, little has been done thus far to study how levels of agency may or may not change across the lifespan. In a study of children and adolescents, ages 8, 12, 16, and 20, the presence of responsibility and serendipity in narratives increased with age, while narrative agency remained constant across age groups (de Silveira & Habermas, 2011). Although this finding suggests that variations in agency is contingent more on individual differences than age, it is still possible that an examination of ages past adolescence, capturing a fuller picture of lifespan development, will illuminate differences in narrative agency between young and older adults. For example, when discussing their findings concerning narrative identity across the lifespan, McLean (2008) offered two statements by both an 18-year-old participant and a 69-year-old participant that she argued were indicative of the differences between the age groups. While the younger participant stated, "So when I came here it sort of helped me become a more open person to new ideas and like, more willing to try new things, so yeah, so that sort of shaped my personality, I guess," the older participant stated, "At my age I think we know who we are and what we are." In this statement, the younger participant acknowledges outside sources, such as "it" and "that" as having been what shaped her, which indicates low agency; the older participant uses strong "I" statements when thinking about her identity and does not attribute the formation of her identity to any external force, which reveals a

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high level of agency. Although this study was not looking at agency specifically, these two statements, argued to be representative of their age groups, reveal vast differences in levels of agency, with the older participant exhibiting much higher levels of agency than the younger participant.

In studying agency in terms of Generativity, which is the active nurturance and guidance of the next generation that occurs in old age, Mansfield and McAdams (1996) found that differences in levels of Generativity were not associated with different levels of agency. This is one of the only studies that has examined agency in old age specifically and since this study did not find a significant correlation between Generativity and levels of agency, more research should be done to determine what influences levels of agency in older adulthood.

In addition to agency, it is not uncommon for stories to display one of two trajectories: redemption or contamination. These two narrative themes are among the most important themes in understanding narrations of difficult experiences. Redemption stories start out as narrations of bad experiences, but end positively (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). McAdams (2013, as cited by Adler et al., 2015) suggested that redemption may be considered a signature theme in American history, heritage, and popular literature. Narratives of past challenging or negative experiences can often be redemptive. With the passing of time, considerable reflection, and since acquired positive experiences, it is not uncommon for individuals to reconcile themselves with past difficult experiences through the acknowledgment of a “silver lining.” The theme of redemption is very relevant for understanding narratives of romantic relationships. Based on the research concerning the positivity bias in older adults, the likelihood of older adults narrating their previous romantic relationships as ending more positively than young adults is a very viable possibility. Moreover, the finding that older adults

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produce more meaning-making in their narratives than young adults (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006) makes it more likely that older adults would be able to both find and describe a “silver-lining” coming as a result of negative past events than young adults who may not yet possess the meaning-making processes to make such conclusions as frequently.

The narrative theme of contamination is the opposite of redemption. In contrast to redemption sequences, contamination sequences follow the trajectory from good to bad. In these stories, scenes that start out positive are narrated as ending negatively (e.g., McAdams et al., 2001). As discussed above, previous research on related topics suggests that older adults would be more likely to be redemptive in their narratives than young adults. However, due to the nature of contamination as opposed to redemption, this same research then also indicates that older adults may be less likely to tell contaminative narratives than young adults.

These three narrative themes are very important in beginning to understand how an individual thinks through the events of their own life, an understanding that is vital in attempting to comprehend the psychology behind who a person really is. In order to gain understanding concerning how a person talks about parts of their life, utilizing these narrative themes is extraordinarily important.

### **The Present Study**

The areas of romantic attachment, lifespan development, and narrative psychology have not previously been studied all at once. However, in order to understand how the way in which individuals talk about their relationships may or may not change across the lifespan, an incorporation of narrative psychology is integral. Remarkably little research has looked at how exactly people talk about their romantic relationships, let alone how that may change as we gain

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more experience with romantic relationships. Such an understanding, however, is vital in order to truly understand the nature of love and dating. In order to explore such a nuanced and complex topic, an incorporation of the fields of romantic attachment, lifespan development, and narrative psychology is necessary.

Moreover, the present study aims to correct serious gaps in the research on romantic attachment across the lifespan, particularly in old age. Specifically, romantic attachment has become a popular topic of study in psychology; however, the attention paid in this research is chiefly to young adults. While romantic attachment in adulthood has also been explored to a certain extent, the research on romantic attachment in old age specifically is virtually nonexistent. This represents an incredibly serious lack in the literature thus far. Given that older adults, particularly with the current aging of the baby boomer generation, make up a significant proportion of the population and more often than not are a part of either a long-term or relatively new relationship, this demographic represents an incredibly rich area that would be well-worth exploration.

Just as romantic attachment in older adulthood has been underexplored, so too has romantic attachment across the lifespan. It is surprising that both of these gaps in the present literature have existed for as long as they have. It is generally well-acknowledged that romantic relationships, attitudes towards love, and approaches to dating encounter numerous changes across the lifespan. We are constantly evaluating and reevaluating our approach to this important aspect of life, and a lifetime of such evolution would surely prompt interesting results in terms of differences between the young and old in their attitudes towards love and relationships.

Furthermore, much of the research on romantic relationships thus far has centered on attachment theory. Very little attention has been paid thus far to examining the way in which we

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talk and think about our past and current romantic relationships. Although narrative psychology has provided a solid foundation from which to understand the nuances and significance of how individuals tell the stories of their lives, little research has looked at how the way in which we tell the stories of our lives may or may not change across the lifespan.

The present study aims to build research in this area by providing a closer look at how older adults, as compared to young adults, think about both their past and current relationships, the findings of which will hopefully provoke further thought in these areas. Although romantic attachment is a heavily studied field, more research needs to be done both in terms of romantic attachment across the lifespan and in old age specifically, and this study will lay a foundation for future study on these topics by examining the differences in how young and older adults talk about their romantic relationships.

Nineteen older adults and nineteen young adults were interviewed concerning their romantic attachment history. They were asked for narratives concerning both past and current partners, as well as a more detailed response concerning their most meaningful relationship. The interviews were then coded for the narrative themes of agency, redemption, and contamination, as well as an additional variable called reported self-growth. Due to the consistent evidence for the positivity bias in older adults, it appears more likely that older adults would exhibit more redemption and less contamination than young adults. Furthermore, the research concerning differing ways in which older and young adults talk about their lives, particularly the increased reflection and meaning-making in older adults, leads me to believe that older adults would show both more agency and reported self-growth in their narratives. As such, it was hypothesized in this study that older adults would exhibit significantly higher levels of agency and redemption than young adults, while young adults would exhibit significantly higher levels of contamination

than older adults. Lastly, it was also hypothesized that older adults would exhibit higher levels of reported self-growth than young adults and that that relationship would be moderated by levels of agency.

### **Method**

**Participants.** Nineteen older adults and nineteen young adults were interviewed. The young adults were students from a consortium of colleges in southern California, and the older adults lived in a nearby retirement community. Among the older adults, 5% were widowed and currently single, 57% were still in their first marriage, 26% were in a second or later marriage, 5% were in a new relationship, and 10% were currently the primary caregiver for their partner. Although no demographic information was collected, the age range of the older adults was approximately 74 to 96 years and the age range of the young adults was approximately 18 to 22 years. The majority of participants appeared to be Euro-American/White.

In order to recruit the older adults, an advertisement was placed in the retirement community's weekly newsletter. No compensation was offered and participants volunteered. Young adults were recruited from various psychology classes and were offered extra credit in exchange for their participation.

**Materials.** Participants were asked to participate in an interview on their romantic history. The same interviewer, a 21-year-old female, interviewed all the older adult participants, while several female college students interviewed the young adults. Participants were told that the interview would last approximately half an hour. For older adults, the average length of the interviews was 33 minutes and for the young adults, the average length of the interviews was 18 minutes. The interview was semi-structured and was a revised Romantic Attachment Interview

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(see Appendix A). The questions themselves asked for an overview of all past and current relationships, as well as more detailed questions concerning their general approach to dating and their most meaningful relationship. For example, participants were asked to reflect on the progression of their romantic relationships, and were also asked to provide a list of five adjectives to describe their most meaningful relationship. There were seven questions in total, but there were often important subcomponents of each question and most questions necessitated a quite detailed response. All questions asked for an open-ended response. Interviews were recorded on a computer webcam with both video and audio present.

Participants' interviews were rated on five different themes in total. The first, agency, was rated using a 4-point scale drawn from previous studies (e.g., Adler, 2012; Adler et al., 2012) that looked at narrative identity and mental health. In this coding system, a "0" means that the person portrayed himself or herself as entirely powerless and at the mercy of external forces. For example, the following statement would earn a "0" on agency: "It was meant to be. I couldn't help falling in love with him." In this hypothetical statement, the person describes the cause of the love affair as being fate itself and that they were helpless in choosing whom to love or how to feel, which means that the statement lacks agency. A score of "3" on agency, however, occurs when a person portrays himself or herself as being the major driver of the events in their life. For example, this statement would warrant a "3" for agency: "After that happened, I decided enough was enough. I knew I had to leave and the next day I did." This hypothetical statement describes their decision to leave as one that he or she made. The decision arose from internal, rather than external forces. A key word exists in many narratives high in agency: "*I decided...I knew...I did.*"

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Redemption and contamination were rated using a coding system developed by McAdams and colleagues (2001) that has been used previously in a variety of studies (e.g., Adler & Poulin, 2009; Lodi-Smith et al., 2009; McAdams et al., 2001). In this system, the interview is given a score of 0 (*absent*) or 1 (*present*) for both themes. Redemption is rated as present when the narrative exhibits a definitive shift from a negative beginning to a positive ending. The beginning and end of the story must be connected and the positivity of the ending needs to mitigate, if not completely erase, the original negativity. An example of redemption would be the following statement: “Our marriage had reached a really bad place and we both felt miserable all the time. When we finally decided to get a divorce, I immediately felt happier and that a huge burden had suddenly been lifted from my shoulders.” In this hypothetical statement, an unhappy marriage leads to a happy life post-divorce, which signals a clear presence of redemption.

Contamination is rated as present when the narrative exhibits a definitive shift from a positive beginning to a negative ending. The beginning and end of the story must be connected and the subsequent negativity must have actively corroded the original positivity. Contamination was marked as present in the following hypothetical statement: “We were so happy in the beginning. He told me he loved me every day and that he would never leave me. Then one day he up and left me for someone else and I was completely devastated.” This clear shift from a happy relationship to heartbreak provides sufficient evidence to signal a presence of contamination.

In order to test the hypothesis that older adults would be more likely to discuss ways in which they themselves have positively evolved through their experiences with romantic relationships than young adults, and that that relationship would be moderate by levels of agency, a measure called reported self-growth was created. This measure involves an explicit

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description by the person being interviewed of how they have grown or changed in positive ways, based on their previous or current romantic relationships. Reported self-growth was measured on a 3-point scale, with either a score of -1, 0, or 1. While no mention throughout the interview of any personal change, positive or negative, would earn a 0, inclusion of negative personal changes would earn a -1. For example, the following hypothetical statement would earn a -1: “After our marriage ended, I became really bitter and cynical about the idea of ‘happily ever after.’ I think that attitude really affected my next relationship.” However, if an individual discusses how they have changed for the better through their experiences, that interview would earn a 1. This hypothetical statement, for example, would earn such a score: “Although that relationship failed, it taught me that I needed to do better in relationships. After that, I wasn’t afraid to express my love to my partner and to tell them how much they mean to me.” In this statement, even though a relationship ended, that particular failure brought about a positive change in the individual’s life, indicating clear reported self-growth.

Over the course of interviewing participants, an unexpected theme emerged from the interviews. Overwhelmingly, older adults were discussing the sexual aspect of their relationships without being asked to do so. Consequentially, a new variable was created and incorporated into this study, in order to measure this attribute: unprompted discussion of sexuality. This theme was coded on a 3-point scale, with either a score of 0, 1, or 2. If no mention of sex or sexuality was made, the participant earned a 0. However, if the participant made an allusion to their sexuality, without mention of any specific sexual interaction having occurred, they earned a 1. For example, the following statement would earn a 1: “The sexual aspect of relationships has always been important to me.” Lastly, an explicit mention of a sexual interaction that happened with a

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partner would earn a 2. Thus, the following statement would earn a 2: “We have always had great sex.”

Three coders watched the recordings of each interview in order to determine the appropriate ratings. Interrater reliability was measured by Krippendorff’s Alpha. The levels of Alpha for the three coders (after they had coded 6 of the interviews) were as follows: agency (.604), redemption (.779), contamination (.656), reported self-growth (.779), and earned a perfect reliability score for sexuality.

Two coders coded each interview and the individual scores were compared. For agency, the two coders’ scores were averaged to create a composite score. However, if there was a 2-point or more difference between the two scores, the coders met to agree on one score together. For the redemption, contamination, reported self-growth, and sexuality ratings, the two coders met to discuss any and all disparities between their codes, in order to determine a single score for each interview. Because agency was coded on a 4-point scale, and the other themes were coded on scales with a smaller range, an averaged score was decided to be appropriate for agency, but not for the other variables.

**Procedure.** The participants first read and signed an informed consent form. The interview took place, and the participants were debriefed lastly.

### **Ethics**

This study was above the level of minimal risk because it involved a protected population, older adults. However, having older adults participate in this study was necessary because the study involved looking at romantic attachment in older adulthood specifically. In order to protect this population, the older adults were interviewed in the comfort of their home,

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consent was entirely voluntary and provided through an informed consent form, and all participants had the cognitive abilities necessary to give consent. Furthermore, because participants were disclosing somewhat sensitive information that was necessary for this study given its line of inquiry, which was information on their past and current relationships, participants were debriefed and provided with mental health resources if they appeared in distress at the end of the interview. However, no deception was used in this study, so the debriefing process was quite straightforward.

Although the data collected was not anonymous, due to the fact that participants engaged in an interview, the interview recordings were kept confidential. None of the interviews were connected with a name in any way, and the interviews were only watched in a lab with headphones on. All other traces of the interviews outside of the lab were removed.

This study helps aid in the understanding of romantic attachment in old age, and how that may differ from romantic attachment earlier in life. The results will help society to better understand and recognize important aspects of old age, which is important in reducing societal stigma associated with the elderly. Furthermore, the opportunity to both reflect on past and current romantic relationships, as well as having a captive audience with which to share those experiences, were beneficial to the older adults. Since all the older adults were recruited on a volunteer basis and were offered no compensation, it suggests that the older adults who participated volunteered because they thought that they would enjoy the experience of sharing memories of these romantic relationships. Because of these benefits and the sole reason that this study was above minimal risk being due to its inclusion of older adults, the benefits to both the participants and society at large did outweigh the risks.

## Results

Four of the variables (redemption, contamination, reported self-growth, and sexuality) were run on an ordinal scale for data analysis. However, agency ( $M=1.51$ ,  $SD=.62$ ) was run on a continuous scale as, with the inclusion of the composite variables, agency had seven possible values. See Table 1 for a full display of the correlations between all the variables, including age and gender.

An independent samples t-test looked at the levels of agency present in the romantic relationship narratives of young adults and older adults. As predicted, older adults ( $M= 1.76$ ,  $SD= .63$ ) were significantly more likely to present higher levels of agency when talking about their romantic relationship experiences than young adults ( $M= 1.26$ ,  $SD= .51$ ) were,  $t[36]=2.68$ ,  $p=.011$ . Table 2 gives a full breakdown of the numbers of older and young adults showing different levels of agency in their interviews.

A chi-square test of independence was run to compare the levels of redemption present in the romantic relationship narratives of young adults and older adults. The hypothesis was not supported, as the relationship between these variables was non-significant,  $X^2(1, N = 38) = 1.72$ ,  $p=.189$ . See Table 4 for a full breakdown of the numbers of older and young adults showing different levels of redemption in their interviews.

A chi-square test of independence examined the levels of contamination present in the romantic relationship narratives of young adults and older adults. The hypothesis was not supported, as the relationship between these variables was non-significant,  $X^2(1, N = 38) = .14$ ,  $p=.703$ . Table 5 gives a full breakdown of the numbers of older and young adults showing different levels of contamination in their interviews.

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A chi-square test of independence was used to look at the levels of unprompted discussion of sexuality present in the romantic relationship narratives of young adults and older adults. The relation between these variables was significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 38) = 15.60, p < .001$ . Older adults were significantly more likely to discuss sexuality unprompted when talking about their romantic relationship experiences than young adults were. See Table 3 for a full breakdown of the numbers of older and young adults showing different levels of unprompted discussion of sexuality in their interviews.

A chi-square test of independence tested whether levels of reported self-growth would be significantly different in the romantic relationship narratives of young adults and older adults. The relationship between these variables was non-significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 38) = 1.75, p = .624$ . See Table 6 for a full breakdown of the numbers of older and young adults showing different levels of reported self-growth in their interviews. It was therefore not possible that self-growth could be (as hypothesized) a moderator in the significant relationship between levels of agency and age. The possibility remained, however, that self-growth and age interacted to predict agency in narratives. To examine this possibility, a regression analysis was conducted, with agency as the dependent variable, and age, self-growth, and their interaction as three predictor variables. The interaction of age and self-growth did not quite add significantly to the prediction of agency from age and self-growth,  $F(3) = 2.70, p = .060, R^2 = .193$ , thus disconfirming the hypothesis.

Further chi-square tests of independence were run to see if any significant differences would be found between the sexes on any of the five variables (agency, redemption, contamination, reported self-growth, and sexuality). However, none of those tests yielded significant results.

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Table 1

*Correlations Between Variables*

	Age	Gender	Agency	<u>Variables</u>			
				Redemption	Contamination	Growth	Sexuality
Age	1	.162	-.408*	-.213	-.062	-.201	-.637*
Gender	.162	1	-.202	-.034	-.057	-.062	-.055
Agency	-.408*	-.202	1	.062	-.063	.224	.161
Redemption	-.213	-.034	.602	1	.224	-.246	-.006
Contamination	-.062	-.057	-.063	.224	1	-.028	-.053
Growth	-.201	-.062	.224	.246	-.028	1	.060
Sexuality	-.637*	-.055	.161	-.006	-.053	-.060	1

Note \* = statistical significance was found

Table 2

*Breakdown of Number of Older and Young Adults Exhibiting Different Levels of Agency*

Age	<u>Levels of Agency*</u>							Total Number
	0	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	
Young Adults	1	0	10	4	4	0	0	19
Older Adults	0	1	4	2	9	2	1	19

Note.\* = Although agency was coded on a 4-point scale, the values listed here represent the full range of available composite numbers when the two coders scores were averaged.

Table 3

*Breakdown of Number of Older and Young Adults Exhibiting Different Levels of Sexuality*

Age	<u>Levels of Sexuality</u>			Total Number
	0	1	2	
Young Adults	16	1	2	19
Older Adults	4	2	13	19

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Table 4

*Breakdown of Number of Older and Young Adults Exhibiting Different Levels of Redemption*

Age	<u>Levels of Redemption</u>		Total Number
	0	1	
Young Adults	10	9	19
Older Adults	6	13	19

Table 5

*Breakdown of Number of Older and Young Adults Exhibiting Different Levels of Contamination*

Age	<u>Levels of Contamination</u>		Total Number
	0	1	
Young Adults	15	4	19
Older Adults	14	5	19

Table 6

*Breakdown of Number of Older and Young Adults Exhibiting Different Levels of Self-Growth*

Age	<u>Levels of Self-Growth</u>			Total Number
	-1	0	1	
Young Adults	1	8	10	19
Older Adults	0	6	13	19

### Discussion

The results from this study show significant differences on agency and unprompted discussion of sexuality between the romantic relationships narratives of young and older adults, meaning that older adults discussed their romantic relationships with higher levels of agency and with more frequency of unprompted discussion of sexuality than young adults. While the hypothesis concerning agency and age was supported, the hypotheses concerning redemption, contamination, and reported self-growth as moderating the relationship between agency and age were not supported.

In terms of the relationships discussed, older adults did not tend to discuss more relationships than young adults, despite their additional years of experience. Older adults, on average, discussed about two serious relationships that they had in their life, often someone the person had dated before they met their spouse or their first and second marriages. However, there were several older adults that did not fit a “traditional” model for relationships in their generation. One woman discussed a ten-year relationship she had had during her marriage, as she and her husband practiced consensual non-monogamy in their marriage. Another woman discussed each of her three husbands, a woman she had dated for seven years, and discussed as her most meaningful relationship the several years she spent with a man sixteen years her junior because, as she described, “we were one.” Young adults, meanwhile, were more likely to discuss relationships that were shorter in duration and more casual in nature than the relationships older adults discussed. Also present in young adults’ narratives was a common theme of conflict over the commitment and seriousness of their relationships, as well as a navigation of the college hook-up culture. One young man, in discussing his first relationship, said that “I felt that I was the one more committed...and he wasn’t willing to become more committed, so we just ended

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it,” and was currently in the throes of attempting to build a more committed relationship with a man he met on Tinder. One young woman also discussed a relationship she had in high school, but said that she had not been able to start something with anyone since coming to college due largely to the hook-up culture. Neither of these themes were present in the older adult narratives, which shows a key generational difference in approaches to romantic relationships. While the focus was on finding a future spouse when the older adults were coming of age, the focus for young adults now is more casual sex and an emphasis on individual growth before settling down.

Previous research, to my knowledge, has not examined how agency within our personal narratives may change across the lifespan. The results from this study, however, suggest that agency does increase as we age. There are a couple potential reasons why this may have occurred. Young adults deal with a great deal of uncertainty and doubt concerning both their present and future selves, from what they should major in, to what they want to do with the rest of their lives, to finding a mate and settling down. Older adults, meanwhile, have largely bypassed that wealth of uncertainty for—generally—a certain form of stability in their lives, or at least stability in their sense of self. Erik Erikson, in his eight stages of psychosocial development, argued that teenagers and young adults are in the midst of a battle between identity and role confusion and between intimacy and isolation, battles that ordinarily subside after young adulthood in Erikson’s model (Erikson, 1994). If young adults are dealing with forming a cohesive identity and attempting to develop intimacy with partners, then it is likely that they struggle with more uncertainty, particularly in terms of their romantic relationships, than older adults. This key difference may illuminate part of the reason why older adults tend to be more agentic in their personal narratives than young adults, as such uncertainty may lead young adults to lack the strong sense of self that is necessary for a high score of agency. Another contributing

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reason for this difference, however, may be related to the recentness of the events discussed in these interviews. Young adults, in discussing their romantic relationship experiences, are generally discussing events of the last several years; older adults, meanwhile, discussed events that had happened over the past sixty or seventy years. Discussing a recent highly emotional experience is much more likely than a non-recent emotional experience to provoke a more emotional telling of the experience, potentially riddled with hurt, anger, doubt, bitterness, etc., which could result in a seemingly lower level of agency. Moreover, one of the younger female participants discussed how, in her first relationship, she had let her boyfriend take control of several aspects of her life; however, she also discussed at length how she developed more agency and a stronger sense of self in the years that followed her first relationship: “He always made me feel like I was doing something wrong, and I would beg him to forgive me every time...and now I look back and I’m just like ‘what the hell were you thinking?’” This example could be indicative of how agency might develop as a person ages and gains more relationship experience. Lastly, while the small sample size for this study makes the significant findings for agency more noteworthy, further research should be carried out with larger, more diverse populations to test the reliability of this finding.

Because the relationship between agency and age was found to not be moderated by reported self-growth, more research should be pursued that looks at other potential variables that might be contributing to the relationship between agency and age. Moreover, no significant difference was found between young and older adults on reported self-growth, showing that young and older adults experience growth from their romantic relationships at relatively similar rates. While no statistically significant difference was found, older adults did report more self-growth (68%) than young adults (52%). However, the majority of both age groups described

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ways in which they had grown through their romantic experiences. Indeed, very few older or young participants discussed substantial regret in terms of their previous romantic experiences, largely because they attributed the events of their past romantic relationships as resulting in their personal growth. Only one participant, a young male, revealed how a relationship had caused a personal setback, through his description of his resulting fear of commitment. Overwhelmingly, participants viewed even the most painful or unhealthy relationships as having had either little effect on their person or, more often, a profound impact on their personal growth. One young woman said of her first relationship: “It was a growing experience...I just learned a lot about myself, I think everyone does in relationships...I’ve just learned so much, things that have stuck with me, so I’m thankful for that.” The results from this study, while not statistically significant, do suggest that highly emotional experiences such as romantic relationships, despite the range of emotions they produce and the problems they can cause, can often lead to important areas of self-growth.

The extensive existing research concerning the positivity bias in older adults led me to hypothesize that older adults would exhibit both higher levels of redemption and lower levels of contamination in their romantic relationship narratives (Carstensen et al., 2000; Schryer and Ross, 2012; Charles et al., 2001; Field, 1981). However, neither hypothesis was supported. Although this came as a surprise, I believe that the subject matter involved in these personal narratives could have influenced the results. One’s romantic relationship experiences most often naturally have both redemptive and contaminative sequences. A person breaks up with a partner that once made them happy and becomes sad, but then meets a new partner and is happy once more. For example one older female participant, upon returning from her mother’s funeral to the announcement that her girlfriend had fallen in love with someone else, she said, “I had a doubly

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broken heart, but it was a turning point...I literally fell to my knees in the shower and offered my life to God in a way that I hadn't before and that I don't think I could have if I felt secure in my relationship." Despite her heartbreak, the woman was able to reflect on the good it brought into her life and went on to fall in love with several other partners over the next several decades.

Thus, most given romantic history trajectories have themes of both redemption and contamination. Given this, it makes sense that young and older adults would not differ substantially in their remembrance of their romantic relationship histories. However, while young adults (21%) and older adults (26%) showed similar rates of contamination in their narratives, older adults (68%) did report more redemptive sequences than young adults (47%). It is possible that further research with a larger sample size could find significant results on the existence of and differences in redemptive sequences in the romantic relationship narratives of young and older adults.

The most striking result from this study ended up being the significant difference in how young and older adults discussed the sexual aspects of their relationships. The interview for this study did not include any questions that referred either explicitly or implicitly to sexuality, as it was assumed that most participants would not be comfortable disclosing that private of information to strangers. Over the course of the interviews, however, it became clear that sexuality was coming up time and again. Moreover, unprompted discussion of sexuality was coming up largely with the older adults exclusively, which resulted in the additional analysis concerning sexuality. The small sample size in this study makes the highly significant results for sexuality all the more notable. The breakdown of the difference between the age groups on this topic is large: 78% of older adults ended up discussing sexuality unprompted, while only 15% of young adults did. Although this difference does not imply that young adults are not having sex,

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the difference in unprompted discussion of sexuality is surprising. One possible cause of this difference could lie in the comfort levels of young and older adults. Despite the sex positive movement currently occurring both in society and within the millennial generation, young adults may not yet feel comfortable disclosing information of their sex lives with people they are not close with, as they could potentially still view sex as a relatively taboo topic. Older adults, meanwhile, have had a longer sexual relationship with both themselves and partners, and are well beyond their younger years of being told that sex is forbidden. However, the reverse is just as likely: older adults, having grown up in a more sexually conservative time, could view their sex lives as more private than young adults. This latter interpretation makes the vast disparity in discussion of sexuality between older and young adults all the more surprising. Another, potentially more plausible explanation, could involve the prevalence of the hook-up culture for contemporary young adults. Such a culture exists on college campuses in particular, a culture that dominates at the college campuses from which young adult participants were selected for this study. A hook-up culture differentiates between sex and love; no longer do you need to be in love, or even be in a committed relationship, to enjoy sexual partnership. The idea behind hook-up culture is that it is supposed to be both sexually liberating and allow room for individual growth without the burden of a serious partner. However, this idea becomes more convoluted with the increasing peer pressure to accept “the norm” and embrace casual sex, the relationship between alcohol, anonymity, and sex, and the confusion that ensues when “feelings” get involved. To have and to enjoy sex with a casual partner without any emotional involvement is now seen as an accepted norm, even a personal success. While older adults see sex and love as deeply intertwined entities, young adults are now taught that the two exist as separate entities.

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Such a distinction could have influenced the higher rates with which older adults discussed sex as a part of love.

Similar themes emerged in the 78% of the older adults who discussed sexuality. Overwhelmingly, older adults discussed their current sex lives with their partner, and both their satisfaction and gratitude concerning the quality and prevalence of those sexual experiences. The young adults who discussed the sexual aspect of their relationships, meanwhile, only brought up sexual experiences with former partners and not current partners. Although some older adults reported a significant change or sharp decrease in their sex lives coming as a result of age or illness, these individuals also described the ways in which they had modified—not abandoned—their sexual experiences with their partners in order to accommodate such change and reported satisfaction with their modified approaches to sex. One participant said that “sexual intimacy isn’t there, but just because it doesn’t happen doesn’t mean that we can’t be physically close,” while another woman said that she and her partner have “less intercourse than before, but more intimacy.” Two older male participants discussed health issues that had developed that had affected their sexual function and proceeded to describe methods they had utilized to maintain their sexual relationship with their partner. While one woman discussed possessing a lower sex drive than her husband, resulting in conflict in their relationship, women and men did not differ substantially in their discussion of sexuality. Neither sex was more likely to bring up the topic of sex than the other, and both tended to discuss the importance of a satisfactory sexual relationship with their partner. Some discussed how their understanding of sexuality had evolved over their lives, with one man learning that sex with his wife had to be consensual: “We had a lot of conflict over that in the beginning. I realized that we both had to want it and not to insist when she wasn’t interested.” One older adult participant, at the end of the interview, even told me that

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I was missing a question on sexuality because of its importance in thinking about the whole of romantic relationships. These results refute the societal expectation that older adults, after reaching a “certain age,” cease all sexual thoughts and activities.

Research on sexuality in late life is even less common than research on romantic relationships in late life. Even Alfred Kinsey, despite interviewing 11,240 people for his 25-year examination of human sexuality, did not get a reliable portrait of sexuality in late life due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of his participants were young adults (“Kinsey Institute”). However, some research has developed in the wake of Kinsey’s studies that does look at sexuality in older adulthood specifically. First, a study by Thompson et al. (2014) showed that while young adults reported positive explicit attitudes towards the sex lives of older adults, young adults also tended to show implicit biases against the sexual activities of older adults. This study better reveals the serious stigma in our society, particularly among younger generations, against the sex lives of older adults, a stigma that has likely been a primary cause in the relative paucity of research in this area. Despite this societal bias, the existing research on this topic better reveals the status of sexuality in late life. Papaharitou et al. (2008) found that 50% of 454 married individuals from the ages of 60 to 90 reported having sexual desire and that the average frequency of sexual activity was four times a month. Furthermore, Matthias et al. (1997) found that almost 30% of 1,216 elderly people had participated in sexual activity in the last month and 67% were satisfied with their current level of sexual activity. Both these researchers and Hartmans et al. (2015) also found that higher levels of intelligence and education were predictors in the prevalence of sexual activity in late life. This finding supports the results from the present study, as all older adult participants were from a prestigious, highly selective, and highly educated retirement community. Indeed, one of the older men who described he and his wife as

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having a “great sex life,” also mentioned that “intellectual stimulation is part and parcel of our life.” Taken together, both previous research and the present study help us to better understand the prevalence of sexual desire and sexual activity in late life. Moreover, this unexpected result from the present study, and the lack of previous research on this topic, makes the importance of further research on sexuality in aged populations abundantly clear.

It is notable that no significant differences were found between the sexes on any of the five variables examined in this study. A wealth of research exists in psychology on sex differences, and yet none were found in this study. It is particularly significant that no sex differences were found in discussion of sexuality, as the societal opinion has always appeared to be that men have always been the more sexual of the sexes. The lack of sex differences in this study make the significant results concerning how agency and our understanding of our sexual lives develop as we age all the more noteworthy.

The limitations of this study lie chiefly in the sample. Neither the sample of young adults nor the sample of older adults are representative of the population. The students who participated are attending one of five prestigious, highly liberal colleges in the same location and were from psychology classes, which could give them a better understanding of how psychology studies work and that could potentially have influenced the nature of their participation. Further, the older adults were drawn from a highly prestigious and elite retirement community that emphasizes social justice, peace, and missionary work and cultivates generativity in its residents through the various expectations that the community holds for its residents. As such, the sample was not very representative of the U.S. population, which could limit the generalizability of the results from this study. Furthermore, the sample size itself is limited. Because the study itself involved an interview and operated on a volunteer basis with the older adults, it was always

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unlikely that a large sample would be acquired. However, only having 19 participants from each age group makes it more unlikely that the sample is representative of the U.S. population of young adults and older adults as a whole.

It is also possible that the results from this study could be due to cultural or generational differences, or perhaps the type of relationships discussed, rather than simply as a result of developmental differences. In order to determine the true cause of these potential differences in the way in which older and young adults discuss their romantic relationships, follow-up studies would be needed in order to go beyond finding what the differences may be between age groups and instead examine what the real root of these differences could be.

The possible avenues of research that could follow this study are rich, because this area is still relatively untapped and more research is needed to examine how romantic relationships change across the lifespan and how both sex and love figure into the lives of older adults specifically. Nonetheless, this study makes important strides in correcting this lack of research on this significant aspect of late life. Moreover, the present study offers a nuanced examination of an intimate, ubiquitous aspect of people's lives that will aid in a greater general understanding of how the ways in which we think about love and relationships evolve throughout the course of our lives.

**Appendix A: Romantic Attachment Interview - Revised Protocol**

"For this interview I will ask some questions about your romantic relationships. If you have not had any yet, we will talk about your close friendships. It will take roughly 30 mins for most people to complete this interview."

"Before I begin, I need to ask you to only use pseudonyms when referring to other people, such as your partners. In addition, I will ask you not to give any other identifying information about other persons. This is to assure these persons' right to privacy in this research process. Thank you."

*(1) Assess whether they have had a romantic relationship.*

- "Can you please tell me a little bit about your romantic relationship history? When was your first romantic relationship?"

*\*\*If participant asks what you mean by "relationship," have them define that. Say something like "anything that you feel was meaningful is fine."\*\**

- Make sure you know:
  - how it started
  - the level of commitment
  - length of relationship
  - how it ended
- Repeat for each consecutive relationship, until now.

*(2) Identify the relationship which will be the focus of the interview.*

(A) If they have had at least one romantic relationship, have the participant identify what was their most significant or important relationship. If participant cannot identify one most important relationship, choose their current or most recent relationship. Skip (B), go straight to (3).

(B) If the participant has had no romantic relationships, only ask the following questions:

- Can you tell me a bit about your general approach to dating? (Ask follow up questions)
- Has your perspective about romantic relationships change as you went from high school to college now?

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- Have you dated much in the past? How did that go? How about now?
- Do the adjectives for their self-identified best friend (follow instructions below)
- Go to Step 4

### *(3) Explore the most significant romantic relationship*

- If this information was not presented before, get a sense of:
  - how it started
  - the level of commitment
  - length of relationship
  - how it ended
    - If the participant mentioned these things before, reiterate them - to see participant would like to add anything or whether you would like to ask any clarifying questions
- Please give me **FIVE** adjectives that describe your partner/friend or your relationship with him/her.

### IMPORTANT - GET ALL 5 ADJECTIVES FIRST. WRITE DOWN EACH OF THE 5 ADJECTIVES.

- For each adjective, in sequence, ask: Can you please tell me about a time or situation that illustrates <adjective>?
  - Be sure to ask follow-up questions if they are vague or general
  - Make sure that they know they are supposed to give a specific instance
- Can you give me a sense about any conflicts that you have/had in the relationship? What were they about? How did they usually start? How were they typically resolved?
- Has your perspective about romantic relationships change as you went from high school to college now?

### *(4) Looking back over your romantic history, do you have any regrets? If so, what are they?*

### *(5) Assess future dating plans*

(A) If the participant is currently in a relationship, ask how they foresee the relationship going from here.

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(B) If the participant is not currently in a relationship, ask how they foresee their dating and romantic life in the near future (over next year or so).

(6) *Thank participant.*

- Debrief participant - give all documents (debriefing form, time credit documentation)
- Make sure that you assess any distress and give participant information about resources in debriefing form
- If you feel that the participant is especially distressed, take appropriate actions (do not let participant leave without some clearly identified support)
  - Campus safety 909-621-8170 (on-campus extension x72000) and ask to speak to the on-call therapist.
  - RA's on duty at (909) 708-7603 or at (909) 708-7604

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