The Association between the Relationship Status of One’s Biological Parents and Relationship Destiny/Growth Beliefs: An Application of Implicit Theories of Relationships

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Abstract

Problem/Purpose: Humans have an inherent desire to connect, build relationships, and be close to other people (particularly romantic partners). Several studies have shown that healthy relationships promote our mental and physical wellbeing, thus it is important for researchers to prioritize the study of the variables that enhance relationship satisfaction. One construct that has been linked to relationship satisfaction is Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITRs). Proponents of ITRs argue that people adopt one of two belief systems relating to relationships; those who endorse destiny beliefs agree that relationships are either meant to be or not whereas those endorsing growth beliefs argue that relationships must incorporate ongoing communication and survive hardship in order to succeed. Previous research reveals that those who adopt growth beliefs report greater relationship satisfaction than those with destiny beliefs. Although a number of studies have examined whether one's parents contribute to their relationship beliefs, there is no study that has assessed the impact of one’s parents’ relationship status on ITRs. Thus, because growth beliefs are linked to fulfilling relationships, it is expected that adults who report that their biological parents are together will endorse growth beliefs to a greater extent than destiny beliefs and those with parents that are not a relationship will endorse destiny beliefs over growth beliefs.

Procedure: A total of 127 English-speaking adults (71 male, 56 female; ages 23-70) were recruited online and asked to complete questionnaires assessing ITRs, parental relationship status (43.3% together, 25.9% not together, 28.3% widowed), the extent to which they look to their parents for relationship advice, and demographic information.

Results: The results of a one-way MANOVA revealed that those whose biological parents were together endorsed destiny beliefs to a significantly greater extent ($M = 4.95$) than those whose parents were widowed ($M = 4.15$). The results of a correlational secondary analysis determined
that there was a significant positive association between seeking relationship advice from one’s parents and endorsing destiny beliefs.

**Conclusions/Implications:** These results confirm that parents have a significant influence on their children’s ITRs, potentially resulting in higher quality relationships. This supports the importance of positive role modeling. Parents should take extra care with how they display their personal relationships with their children. To aid this, parental education groups should prioritize teaching parents how to navigate their relationships in a healthy way in order to positively influence their children’s future relationships.
The Association between the Relationship Status of One’s Biological Parents and Relationship Destiny/Growth Beliefs: An Application of Implicit Theories of Relationships

Humans have an inherent desire to connect, build relationships, and be close to other people (particularly romantic partners). The development and maintenance of satisfying romantic relationships not only makes us happy but also influences our long-term health (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). So, what makes for satisfying relationships? Proponents of Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITRs) argue that people adopt one of two different belief systems regarding the keys to a successful relationship, destiny and/or growth beliefs (Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004; Knee, 1998; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). In particular, individuals endorsing destiny beliefs agree that relationships are either meant to be or not, whereas individuals endorsing growth beliefs argue that it takes ongoing communication and work to make them successful. Essentially, IRTs have been conceptualized as broad knowledge structures (i.e., schemas) that involve specific beliefs about the stability/success of romantic relationships (Knee et al., 2003).

Research reveals that not only do ITRs impact the ways in which people view romantic relationships but also how individuals attempt to maintain those relationships (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003; Knee et al., 2004). In particular, individuals endorsing growth beliefs are more likely to use relationship maintenance behaviors to sustain or grow their relationships, whereas those endorsing destiny beliefs are less inclined to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors. For example, in a groundbreaking study conducted by Knee (1998), it was discovered that individuals endorsing destiny beliefs tended to adopt coping strategies that reflected disengagement when responding to a relationship stressor, whereas individuals endorsing growth beliefs tended to employ relationship maintenance strategies in these instances. Thus, ITRs have
important implications for the success of romantic relationships and, ultimately, our overall health.

**The Origins of Implicit Theories of Relationships**

Despite the applicability of this theory when assessing health and well-being, the majority of studies adopting ITRs as a framework have used growth/destiny beliefs as predictors of relationship behaviors/outcomes or as moderators between relational variables. In fact, relatively few studies have attempted to assess the origins of ITRs and the variables impacting the development of growth or destiny beliefs. However, among this dearth of research includes a study assessing the relationship between preferences for romantic-oriented media and destiny beliefs, in which undergraduate students consuming more romantic media reported stronger beliefs in soulmates as compared to those consuming less romantic media (Holmes, 2007). In a more recent study, Gaiduk (2015) examined the impact of perceived parental relationships on the development of ITRs and discovered that young adults who reported that their parents had higher quality communication reported greater growth beliefs than those reporting that their parents had lower quality communication.

**The Impact of Parent Relationship Dissolution of Implicit Theories of Relationships**

Although Gaiduk (2015) was the first to examine the impact of one’s parents on ITRs, the focus was on the quality rather than on the relationship status between participants’ biological parents. In fact, numerous studies have established a link between parental relationship dissolution/divorce and intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship distress (e.g., Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). This impact also appears to have long-term effects. In a 2003 study by Jennifer Strebruk, participants with divorced parents reported having faced more relationship insecurity and experienced greater attachment avoidance as compared to
those with biological parents who have remained in a committed relationship. Additionally, participants that went through parental divorce perceived a higher risk in sharing intimacy with others.

**The Current Study**

Being that divorce can produce a disdainful dynamic between parents that can result in a negative impact on their children's relationship quality (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Strebtruk, 2003), it is plausible that children who have watched their parents’ divorce may adopt different relationship belief systems (i.e., ITRs) than those whose parent’s romantic relationship has remained intact. Thus, the proposed study was designed to examine the impact of the relationship status between one’s biological parents and the extent to which he/she endorses growth or destiny beliefs. Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that individuals with parents that are separated will envelop more proponents of a destiny mindset than those with parents that are still together (H1). This is because, as observed by Knee (1998), those with destiny beliefs tend to have low relationship quality and high unresolved conflict; this was also the case in those who have experienced parental divorce (Gaiduk, 2015).

**Methods**

**Participants**

A total of 127 participants 18 years of age or older were obtained using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk® (MTurk®), a virtual marketplace for individuals around the globe to perform tasks online. To procure meaningful findings, many statisticians agree that a minimum of 100 participants should be included in a research study (Bullen, 2014). The use of MTurk® helped to obtain diversity in the sample due to its expansive user population.

**Materials**
Implicit Theories of Relations Scale. Participants completed an 8-item questionnaire first created and used by Raymond Knee in 1998 to determine growth and destiny beliefs. The questionnaire was completed privately with no researchers present to ensure no social desirability bias is present. Four questions were used to assess growth beliefs while the other four assessed destiny beliefs. Potential answers ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree using a 7-point Likert scale as in Knee’s original study. Growth and destiny questions were grouped separately when scoring for a total of two ITR scores. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 28 with a higher score indicating greater beliefs in the respective mindset. An example of a growth item is “Potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not”. An example of a destiny item is “The ideal relationship develops gradually over time”.

Perceived Parental Relationship Questionnaire. Participants then completed an additional questionnaire regarding their biological parents’ relationship as well as other items involving their own relationship with their parents. Items on this survey were based on the participant’s response to the first question: “What is the current relationship status of your biological parents?” The following questions involved relationship quality, adoption status, and other relevant questions regarding the participant’s parental relationship.

Post-Relationship Contact and Tracking. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their behaviors, as well as those of their previous partner, after separating from a recent relationship. The survey contains 14 questions involving offline behaviors such as letter writing or threatening to inflict harm and 8 questions involving online behaviors such as sending needy or demanding messages.
Demographic Questionnaire. The participants also completed a demographics questionnaire including items assessing age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, marital status, relationship satisfaction, and relationship advice-seeking.

Procedure

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited via MTurk®. Potential participants read a recruitment message describing the study as an assessment of their mindset regarding implicit theories of relationships. All participants viewed a consent form which provided details about the study as well as informed them that they would participate in a 15-minute anonymous survey. Consenting participants were then asked to complete two questionnaires regarding their romantic relationship mindset and their perceived parental relationships. Participants additionally completed a demographics questionnaire following the surveys. All surveys were created and hosted on Qualtrics. Upon completion of the measures, participants were debriefed by reviewing the debriefing statement and received compensation in the form of $2.00 deposited into their MTurk® account.

Results

Data Cleaning

The data was screened and cleaned using methods consistent with behavioral statistics. A total of 140 adults participated in the study. However, only 127 were retained for analysis. There were 13 participants that were removed due to failing the attention check item or for completing less than 80% of the survey. Outliers were assessed for both destiny and growth belief scale scores in the remaining 127 participants by calculating the z-scores using SPSS. A cutoff of +/- 3.00 or beyond was used to determine any outliers. Destiny z-scores showed no outliers while two growth z-scores were beyond the cutoff. After assessing the raw data for these outliers, I
determined their scores were not extreme and decided to keep them in for the analyses. Finally, a test of skewness was conducted by calculating a z-score for the skew statistic. This was done by taking the skew statistic and dividing it by the skew standard error. Since the destiny z-score for skew was not equal to or beyond +/- 2.58, I determined that the data set for destiny beliefs was normally distributed. However, the growth z-score for skew was -5.43, meaning the growth data set was negatively skewed. To rectify this, the growth scale scores were reversed and the square root was computed, resulting in a successful transformation skew z-score of 2.21. The age variable contained no missing values nor outliers and the z-score for skew was 1.92; thus, the data was cleaned.

**Primary Analysis**

Of the 127 English-speaking participants (71 male, 56 female), 43.3% indicated that their parents were together, 25.9% not together, 28.3% widowed, and 2.4% did not know. Due to small group sizes, those whose parents were married or in a relationship were grouped as “together” and those who were single, divorced, or separated were grouped as “not together”. To test the impact of one’s parents’ relationship status on self-reported ITRs, a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (one-way MANOVA) was conducted. Those who did not know their parents’ current relationship status were excluded from the analysis due to low participant response. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant multivariate effect of parents’ togetherness on ITRs, $F(4, 240) = 2.75, p = 0.03$, Wilk’s $\Lambda = 0.19$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. A one-way Analysis of Variance (one-way ANOVA) was then conducted for both destiny and growth beliefs to further explore this effect. The results indicated that parents’ togetherness had a significant effect on destiny beliefs, $F(2, 121) = 4.27, p = 0.02$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$ but not ones’ growth beliefs, $F(2, 121) = 2.69, p = 0.07$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Opposite to my hypothesis, planned
contrasts revealed that those whose parents were not together or were widowed adopted destiny beliefs to a significantly lesser extent than those whose parents were together, \( t(121) = -2.86, p = 0.01, d = 0.52 \). However, there was no significant difference in destiny beliefs for those whose parents were not together or were widowed, \( t(121) = 0.57, p = 0.60, d = 0.13 \). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

Secondary Analyses

A supplemental correlational analysis was conducted to determine if looking to one’s parents for relationship advice was related to one’s growth and/or destiny beliefs. The results of a Pearson bivariate correlational test determined that there was a significant positive association between seeking parental relationship advice and one’s destiny beliefs, \( r(124) = 0.28, p = 0.002 \). However, there was no significant association between seeking parental relationship advice and one's growth beliefs, \( r(124) = -0.05, p = 0.56 \). See Table 2 for a correlation matrix.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to see if there was a relationship between the extent that one looked up to their parents for relationship advice based on their parents’ current relationship status. There was a significant effect between parental relationship status and one’s seeking of parental relationship advice, \( F(2, 120) = 15.18, p < 0.001, \partial \eta^2 = 0.20 \). Planned contrasts revealed that those whose parents were together looked up to their parents for relationship advice to a significantly greater extent than those whose parents were not together or widowed, \( t(120) = 5.48, p < 0.001, d = 0.99 \). However, there was no significant difference in the extent to which one looked up to their parents for relationship advice for those whose parents were not together and those who were widowed, \( t(120) = 0.74, p = 0.46, d = 0.22 \). See Table 3 for descriptive statistics.
Table 1.

*Descriptive Information for ITRs and Parental Relationship Status*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Together Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Not Together Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Widowed Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Destiny beliefs</td>
<td>4.95 (1.36)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Growth beliefs</td>
<td>5.33 (1.03)</td>
<td>5.77 (0.87)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.

*Correlation Coefficients for the ITR scales and the Parental Relationship Advice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Variables</th>
<th>Pearson-Product Moment Correlation Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Destiny</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 126, ** = p < 0.01. Advice = the extent to which one looked to their parents for relationship advice, Destiny = the extent to which one endorsed destiny beliefs, Growth = the extent to which one endorsed growth beliefs.*
Table 3.

*Descriptive Information for Seeking Parental Advice and Parental Relationship Status*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Together Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Not Together Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Widowed Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Seeking Parental Advice</td>
<td>2.74 (1.36)</td>
<td>1.45 (0.87)</td>
<td>1.67 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The current study was designed to examine the impact of the relationship status between one’s biological parents and the extent to which he/she endorses growth or destiny beliefs. Questionnaires involving parental relationship status, the extent to which one looked up to their parents for relationship advice, and demographic information were administered to participants. The extent to which one looked up to their parents for relationship advice was collected in order to determine if the variable impacted participants’ relationship beliefs. I also wanted to see if parental relationship status would impact the extent to which one sought relationship advice from their parents.

The results of this study confirmed that parents do have an important influence on the relationship beliefs of their children. Those whose parents were together reported more destiny beliefs overall than those with parents who are no longer together, contrary to my hypothesis. There was also a positive relationship between seeking parental relationship advice and one’s destiny beliefs. Further, there was a significant effect of parental relationship status on the extent to which one asked their parents for relationship advice. Those with parents who were together looked up to their parents more than those whose parents were not or were widowed.

Opposed to my primary hypothesis, those whose parents were together reported more destiny beliefs overall than those with parents who are no longer together. Although the explanation for this finding is unclear, there are several possibilities. Those whose relationship beliefs are met, tend to be more satisfied in their relationships as opposed to those whose beliefs are not, despite whether they endorse growth or destiny beliefs (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2017). It would follow that parents endorsing destiny beliefs who believe they have found their soulmate are more satisfied and thus still together. Since those who have parents who are still together
look up to their parents for relationship advice to a greater extent and the advice parents give
their children is likely to be in line with their own personal relationship beliefs, it makes sense
that their children also endorse destiny beliefs.

In addition, children may attribute their parents’ successful relationship to them being
“meant to be” rather than seeing their growth through conflict resolution. In recent decades, this
“meant to be” mentality may have been influenced by the rise of media consumption. Romantic
comedy movies were the sixth highest grossing films between 1995 to 2005 and five of the
fifteen highest grossing romantic comedy movies of all time came out after 2005 according to
Entertainment Weekly, suggesting popularity in recent decades (Entertainment Weekly, 2019).
Romantic ideals are often rewarded in romantic media while romantic challenges are typically
punished. This may influence viewers to glorify “perfect” relationships and try to avert
unavoidable relationship challenges (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). In addition, those who prefer
romantic media tend to endorse destiny beliefs to a greater extent than those who do not
(Holmes, 2007). Thus, the popularity of romantic media may make recent generations more
prone to endorsing destiny beliefs. The combination of viewing romantic media and receiving
relationship advice from destiny-endorsing parents who remain in a successful relationship may
result in those who have parents that are still together endorsing destiny beliefs to a greater
extent than those whose parents are not.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the important contributions of this study, there are several limitations that must
be noted. One important limitation of this study was the broad categorization of parent
togetherness. Due to small group sizes, those that were divorced, separated, or never together
were combined for analysis. In addition, those who were married or in a relationship were
combined into a group and those who did not know the relationship status of their parents were excluded altogether. This hindered my ability to obtain a nuanced understanding of group differences. In future studies, a larger sample should be collected to ensure proper inferences can be made for each parental relationship status.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of adults identifying as a sexual or racial minority. Being that the study explored relationship beliefs, it is important to consider potential differences in those who pursue relationships with members of the same sex. Adults who identify as sexual minorities are less likely to endorse destiny beliefs than heterosexual adults (Haedtke et al., 2019). Considering 86.6% of the sample identified as heterosexual, there were not enough participants who seek same-sex partners to make inferences about this population’s relationships. Likewise, the sexual orientation of one’s parents should have been collected in the parent questionnaire to determine if there are differences in the dependent variables based on one’s parents’ sexuality. Additionally, a large percent of the sample identified as “Caucasian” or “White.” According to a longitudinal study of romantic experiences from adolescence into adulthood, black individuals have different cohabitation habits and marriage rates than white individuals (Meier & Allen, 2009). Therefore, there is reason to believe that conclusions about relationship beliefs drawn from a study of primarily white participants can not necessarily be applied to people of other races. In the future, researchers could adopt more innovative recruitment methods in an attempt to obtain a more diverse sample.

In addition, variables such as participant relationship satisfaction could be included for analysis. Then, associations between parent relationship status, seeking parental relationship advice, ITRs, and relationship status/satisfaction could be explored. While studying ITRs provides great insight into how one attempts to sustain their relationships (Knee, 1998; Knee et
al., 2003; Knee et al., 2004), studying the success of a relationship itself is arguably of greater
importance due to the impact relationships have on one’s long-term physical and mental health
(Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003).

**Implications and Conclusion**

The primary implication of this study is the importance of parental relationship modeling. Parents have a significant impact on how their children view and maintain relationships. Earlier, it was mentioned that as long as one’s relationship expectations are met, their relationship satisfaction will not depend on the extent to which they endorse growth or destiny beliefs (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2017). However, it may be advantageous to prompt parents to model growth beliefs to their children. It is a lot easier to meet one’s expectations if they are constantly seeking growth and improvement rather than finding their “perfect match” (Knee, 1998). Additionally, previous studies have shown that endorsing destiny beliefs can cause negative disengagement in response to relationship stressors. To promote the endorsement of growth beliefs, parent education classes should teach healthy communication and conflict resolution to parents, specifically outlining how to normalize their relationship problems in front of their children. Then, children will observe that their parents’ relationship, successful or not, was attributed to productive problem-solving and abundant communication. With this type of modeling, it reasons to believe that children will be more likely to adopt growth beliefs and thus obtain healthier, more realistic and satisfying relationships.

In addition, relationship and family counselors should implement communication techniques that teach parents to replace hostility and aggression with calm discussion when they are in arguments. Research has shown that approaching conflict in this way provides their children reassurance and positive emotionality (Cummings et al., 2003). With children present in
family counseling, they can learn helpful communication skills from the therapist alongside their parents. Parents can then model these techniques in real-time to further solidify these ideas.

In conclusion, the results indicate that those whose biological parents are currently married or in a relationship with one another endorse destiny beliefs to a significantly greater extent than those who are not, contrary to my hypothesis. Further, those who endorse destiny beliefs look up to their parents for relationship advice to a greater extent as do those whose parents are still together. These findings can be used in settings such as parent education classes and family counseling in order to teach parents how to model communication and healthy conflict resolution to their children in order to encourage the adoption of healthy growth beliefs.
References


Haedtke, K., Capesius, D., & Thompson, A. E. (April, 2019). The Examination of the Association between Implicit Theories of Relationships and Infidelity Experience among Heterosexual and Sexual Minority Adults. Poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Psychological Association, Chicago, IL.


**Figures**

![Average Destiny & Growth Beliefs](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** Average destiny and growth beliefs based on parent togetherness.

![Seeking Parental Advice Averages](image2.png)

**Figure 2.** Average extent to which one sought parental relationship advice based on parental relationship status.