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Perceived Parental Reactions to Coming Out, Attachment,  
and Romantic Relationship Views

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## Abstract

Coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) to one's parents can be a challenging experience and may lead to acceptance or rejection. Attachment theory can help predict parents' reactions to coming out and consequences for romantic attachment. In a cross-sectional study of 309 LGB individuals, we found that those who perceived their mother as accepting in childhood were more likely to have come out to her. Moreover, parents perceived as accepting and independence-encouraging in childhood were reported to react more positively to their child's sexual orientation. Mothers' positive reactions were associated with lower romantic attachment anxiety for men. The links between parent-child relationship quality and optimism and trust in romantic relationships were mediated by romantic attachment patterns. Findings support the contention that LGB pair bonds are attachment relationships, and underline the importance of prior parent-child relationships for predicting LGB individuals' experience of coming out and romantic relationships.

Keywords: attachment, sexual orientation, coming out, relationship views, parent-child relations

Perceived Parental Reactions to Coming Out, Attachment,  
and Romantic Relationship Views

Western society sometimes views same-sex romantic relationships as outside the boundaries of normality and acceptability, for example by not allowing legal same-sex marriage in the UK and most of the USA. This can lead some lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (LGB) to feel marginalised and isolated (Armesto, 2001). Disclosing one's sexual orientation to others ("coming out") can be one of the most difficult tasks some adolescents and adults experience. Individuals fear this disclosure will lead to damaged relationships, rejection, negative evaluations, and abuse (Cramer & Roach, 1988). Moreover, parents in particular may react with either acceptance or rejection (e.g., Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). These reactions may have consequences for LGB individuals' romantic attachment. The purpose of the present research was to examine for the first time the process of coming out to parents from an attachment theoretical (Bowlby, 1969) perspective. We addressed several important research questions in a large LGB cross-sectional sample. How does perceived quality of the parent-child relationship while growing up predict disclosure to parents and parents' reactions? Do parents' reactions to coming out predict romantic attachment patterns above and beyond earlier parent-child relationship quality? Finally, what are the links between these processes and romantic relationship views? Because our study was cross-sectional, we cannot test causality, but we can examine whether associations between variables are consistent with our theoretical model, which is outlined below.

*Coming Out*

LGB individuals often describe their parents as being the most difficult people to disclose to (Ben-Ari, 1995), and consequently are rarely the first to whom a child discloses (D'Augelli et al., 1998). Yet most do come out to parents: D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) reported that in a nationwide survey of youths in the USA, 68% had disclosed to their mother

and 44% to their father. Similar percentages have been found in other US (Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002) and Australian samples (Ridge & Feeney, 1998).

Parents' reactions to coming out vary. Disclosure sometimes results in parents' disappointment, anger, shock, or guilt (Robinson et al., 1989). In fact, about half of LGB individuals report that parents react negatively (Cramer & Roach, 1988; D'Augelli et al., 1998; LaSala, 2000), with mothers more likely to respond positively to disclosure than fathers (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998). Importantly, however, the disclosure of one's sexual orientation can have benefits, such as the development of a positive identity (Miranda & Storms, 1989), improved self-esteem, and better psychological adjustment (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Before describing the links between coming out and romantic relationship functioning variables, we will briefly discuss attachment theory.

### *Attachment Theory*

Bowlby (1973) stated that attachment figures affect the way we think about ourselves and our relationships. The quality of care received from attachment figures influences one's attachment pattern in childhood (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978) and adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Romantic attachment patterns can be described by two dimensions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998): attachment anxiety and avoidance. Those high in attachment anxiety are clingy and fear abandonment from partners; they typically received inconsistent and overprotective care. Those high in attachment avoidance are uncomfortable with closeness and intimacy; they typically received rejection and neglect from caregivers. Those low in anxiety and avoidance (i.e., secure individuals) are comfortable with intimacy and typically have received sensitive and reliable care. Research shows that security in romantic relationships is linked to relationship satisfaction and functioning (Feeney, 2008).

Attachment models of parents are fairly stable across the lifespan (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000); however, significant attachment-

related life events or changes in sensitivity of care may influence change in attachment models (Egeland & Farber, 1984; Hamilton, 2000; Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000). Coming out to parents is an event that might change the care received from parents. If met with rejection, a person may feel more insecure in attachment relationships, but if met with acceptance it may lead to felt security in relationships. We suggest that experiences with a particular attachment figure will influence global attachment models, given that attachment models are organized in a hierarchy (Collins & Read, 1990; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003), with relationship-specific models at the bottom feeding into more global models at the top.

#### *Parent-Child Relationship and Coming Out*

The first part of our theoretical model addresses the link between the quality of LGB individuals' relationships with parents and the coming out process: both the decision to come out to parents, and parents' subsequent reactions to disclosure. Boon and Miller's (1999) research suggests that the extent to which one's mother is perceived as trustworthy determines gay and bisexual men's decision to come out to her. And Holtzen, Kenny, and Mahalik (1995) found that those with a current secure attachment to parents were more likely to be out to them. To our knowledge, only two studies have examined the link between the parent-child relationship prior to disclosure and parents' reactions. Mohr and Fassinger (2003) found that LGB individuals who experienced sensitive parenting in childhood reported more parental support of sexual orientation. Further, Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl (2006) found that gay men who recalled having authoritative (i.e., high responsiveness and supervision) parents reported their parents reacting less negatively to coming out than those with authoritarian or indulgent (but not neglectful) parents. We extend the above research by examining the links between perceived quality of parent-child relationships while growing up and (a) decision to come out and (b) parents' reactions to

coming out, focusing on different core dimensions of parent-child relationship quality.

Research consistently supports the existence of two key dimensions of parenting quality: acceptance (vs. rejection) and encouragement of independence (vs. overprotection/control) (Arrindell, Gerlsma, Vandereycken, Hageman, & Daeseleire, 1998; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The extent to which a parent accepts a child has been the focus of several personality theories and has established links with psychological adjustment (Rogers, 1961; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005). For example, adults' recalled parental acceptance is associated with experiences of separation from that parent (McCormick & Kennedy, 2000), sensitivity towards their own infant (Biringen, 1990), and their infant's attachment security (Ricks, 1985). The extent to which a parent encourages a child's independence, as opposed to controlling or overprotecting the child, contributes to the child's developing identity and ability to explore the world (Epstein, 1983). For example, recalled overprotection is linked to increased psychological distress among eating disorder patients (Arrindell et al., 1998) and to panic disorder and social phobia (Parker, Roussos, Hadzi-Pavlovic, Mitchell, Wilhelm, & Austin, 1997), whereas independence-encouragement is associated with lower depression and higher feelings of autonomy among adolescents (Butner et al., 2009). Thus, we expect that LGB individuals are more likely to come out to parents who have been accepting and independence-encouraging, and that those parents also respond more positively to disclosure.

#### *Adult LGB Relationships*

The second major focus of our theoretical model concerns LGB individuals' romantic attachment security and romantic relationship views: the links between them and the extent to which they are influenced by parent-child relationship quality and parents' reactions to coming out. Mohr (2008) has reviewed the literature to show that LGB romantic relationships are attachment relationships and are influenced by the same processes as heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, LGB compared to heterosexual individuals typically report

similar distributions of attachment styles and similar romantic relationship correlates with attachment style (Mohr, 2008). Much of the research on LGB relationships is descriptive and atheoretical; attachment theory provides a useful framework to investigate LGB relationships.

Research is mixed with regard to the link between parent-child relationship quality and LGB adults' attachment patterns. Research with heterosexual samples has associated perceived good parental care in childhood with secure romantic attachment (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Specifically, acceptance (vs. rejection) predicts low avoidance, whereas independence-encouragement (vs. overprotection) predicts low attachment anxiety. In LGB samples, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) and Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, and Perlman (2004) have found associations between perceived parental care in childhood and adult attachment anxiety and avoidance. In addition, Mohr and Fassinger found that perceptions of parents' sensitive care were indirectly related to attachment dimensions via perceived parental support for sexual orientation. Ridge and Feeney (1998) found no association between reported early parental relationship quality and adult attachment style in close relationships; however, their measure of attachment was based on one item, limiting its reliability. We extend this research by examining the two key dimensions of parent-child relationship quality (acceptance and independence-encouragement) and a multi-item, multi-dimensional measure of romantic attachment.

Very little research has examined the link between parents' reactions to coming out and adult attachment, and most is indirect. Although they did not examine directly parents' reactions to coming out, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) found that those who reported having mothers who are supportive of their sexual orientation reported less anxiety and avoidance in adult close relationships, and those who reported supportive fathers reported less attachment anxiety. In contrast, Elizur and Mintzer (2003) found no correlation between gay men's family acceptance and adult attachment security in close relationships. A limitation of Elizur

and Mintzer's (2003) study is that they measured family acceptance (or anticipated acceptance for those not out) as a composite across seven family members, which may have obscured the effects of parents' reactions. We extend this work by examining directly the link between perceptions of parents' reactions to coming out and current romantic attachment.

Some studies suggest that parental acceptance and support of one's LGB identity is associated with the quality and satisfaction of romantic relationships (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Murphy, 1989), whereas others do not (LaSala, 2000). Although Green, Bettinger, and Zacks (1996) did not measure reactions to coming out, they found that family disclosure is unrelated to relationship satisfaction and stability in lesbian couples. We extend past research by examining the associations between perceived parental reactions to coming out and romantic trust and optimism. We examined these novel variables for several reasons. Trust is the foundation of close relationships, and relates to adult attachment security in past research with primarily heterosexual participants (Mikulincer, 1998). Optimism is also associated with adult attachment in primarily heterosexual samples. Carnelley and Janoff-Bulman (1992) found that those high in attachment anxiety were less optimistic about the future success of their romantic relationships, even when perceived quality of relationship with parents while growing up was taken into account. Given avoidant individuals' negative views of others, theoretically avoidance should also relate to low romantic optimism. We expected to extend research by replicating these patterns in our LGB sample. We reasoned that if coming out resulted in negative reactions from parents, attachment insecurity would increase, which in turn would decrease trust in attachment figures and optimism about romantic relationships.

### *The Current Research*

In the current study, we examined the dynamics of coming out to parents from an attachment theoretical perspective, redressing some of the weaknesses of past research. In particular, we collected multi-item self-reports from LGB adults on their perceived early



parent-child relationship quality, their parents' reactions to their coming out (if applicable), and their current romantic attachment patterns and relationship views.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows our theoretical model. We tested the model using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS 17.0. SEM is advantageous for testing theoretically predicted paths selectively, without capitalizing on chance by testing every possible association.

First, we examined, in the whole sample, associations between quality of parental relationships in childhood and decision to come out to parents. We predicted that people who perceived their parents as accepting and independence-encouraging while growing up would be more likely to come out to them (Hypothesis 1). Second, we examined whether parental relationships related to adult romantic attachment. We expected to replicate findings in heterosexual samples that parental acceptance relates to low avoidance and parental overprotection to high attachment anxiety (Hypothesis 2). Third, we considered consequences for romantic relationship views. Approximately half our participants reported romantic relationship trust, whereas the other half reported romantic relationship optimism. We expected that perceptions of early parental acceptance and independence-encouragement would relate positively to trust/optimism, and that these associations would be mediated by lower romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance (Hypothesis 3).

Next, we examined perceived parental reactions to coming out, among those who had disclosed their LGB identity to one or both parents. We predicted that parents who were judged more accepting and independence-encouraging in childhood would react more positively to disclosure (Hypothesis 4). Further, positive reactions should be linked with secure romantic attachment, controlling for early parental relationships, and attachment should mediate the link between parents' reactions and trust/optimism (Hypothesis 5). As researchers (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008) have called for a more detailed picture of the role of gender in family dynamics, we examined whether or not gender moderated the effects

of the parental variables (i.e., the links between parent-child relationship quality, parents' reactions, and attachment dimensions) (Research Question 1).

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 309$ ; 108 women, 201 men,  $M_{AGE} = 27.89$  years,  $SD = 10.46$ , range 16-68) comprised 108 students, 61 full-time workers, 37 part-time workers, and 22 unemployed. Twenty-seven participants' mothers and 52 participants' fathers were deceased; 11 participants were adopted, and 100 participants' parents were divorced.

Of the sample, 276 participants identified as gay/lesbian, and 33 as bisexual; 254 participants had disclosed their sexuality to their mother ( $M = 69.12$  months ago,  $SD = 69.54$ ) and 205 to their father ( $M = 64.28$  months ago,  $SD = 66.92$ ) (two participants reported that their parents were deceased so we treated these variables as missing). About half ( $n = 159$ ) of participants were in a "romantic love relationship" ( $M_{DURATION} = 42$  months,  $SD = 70.90$ , range a few weeks to 30 years). Participants had been in "a serious love relationship" on average 2.6 times (range 0-10,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

Participants were recruited in several ways: some via organizations for LGB individuals or their parents,<sup>2</sup> some from LGB bars, clubs and events, and some via snowballing. Although this strategy may result in selection biases, it is difficult to obtain a representative sample of LGB individuals due to often-associated stigma (for an exception see Landolt et al., 2004). Three researchers collected a subsample of items.<sup>3</sup>

### *Materials*

*Romantic attachment.* In the current study we examine romantic attachment patterns assessed by self-report. Shaver and Mikulincer (2002) have reviewed the literature to show that self-report measures of adult attachment patterns tap conscious and in part unconscious processes. This is evidenced by their associations with independent assessments of

unconscious processes, such as reaction time measures and physiological measures, as well as with relationship behaviors. Attachment anxiety (18 items;  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) and avoidance (18 items;  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were measured with Brennan et al.'s (1998) Experiences in Close Relationships scale. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*); sample: "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down."

*Coming out.* Participants indicated whether or not they had disclosed that they were LGB to their mother and to their father, and if so, how long ago they had done so.

*Reactions to coming out.* Perceptions of parents' reactions to disclosure were assessed using Robinson et al.'s (1989) measure. Participants rated parents' feelings (e.g., surprised, disappointed) on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). We assessed mothers' and fathers' initial (24 items) and current reactions (23 items) separately. Due to the fact that initial and current reactions were highly correlated ( $r = .57, .67$ ) and that we had no theoretical reason to expect initial and current reactions to differently affect results, we combined them as an index of positive reactions (mothers' reaction:  $\alpha = .98$ ,  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .81$ ; fathers' reaction:  $\alpha = .98$ ,  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .86$ ).<sup>4</sup> "Curiosity" was removed as it did not correlate highly with other items.

*Parent-child relationship while growing up.* Epstein's (1983) Mother, Father, Peer scale assessed acceptance (10 items; mother:  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ; father:  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and independence-encouragement (13 items; mother:  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = .88$ ; father:  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = .88$ ). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*); sample: "When I was a child my mother helped me learn to be independent."

*Trust in romantic relationships.* Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna's (1985) measure assessed faith (7 items), dependability (5 items), and predictability (5 items) of current

partners (those not in a relationship reported on their most recent partner). A mean trust score was created from the subscales ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*); sample: “My partner behaves in a very consistent manner.”

*Optimism in romantic relationships.* Carnelley and Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) measure assessed optimism in romantic relationships (6 items,  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .88$ ). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*); sample: “How confident are you that you will have successful love relationships in the future?”<sup>5</sup>

### *Procedure*

Participants were given a questionnaire, consent form and stamped addressed return envelope. Funding allowed 103 to be reimbursed £10.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics and Analysis Strategy*

Raw correlations are shown in Table 1. Being out (vs. not out) to mother was associated with maternal acceptance (but not other parental relationship variables), and with optimism (but not attachment or trust). Generally, there were positive associations between early parental relationships, parents’ reactions to disclosure, attachment security, trust, and optimism. The exception was that parents’ reactions were unrelated to avoidance or trust.<sup>6</sup>

In SEM, all scales were modeled as latent variables indicated by item parcels. Items for parental relationships, attachment dimensions, and optimism were randomly assigned to three parcels. Parental reaction items were assigned to four parcels (i.e., initial positive, initial negative, current positive, current negative). Trust items were assigned to subscales (i.e., predictability, dependability, faith). Being out vs. not out to each parent was modeled as a dummy-coded observed variable (i.e., with no measurement error).<sup>7</sup> SEM, while modeling directional associations among variables, does not test causation and we do not assume it,

particularly given the retrospective nature of the parental relationship and initial reaction variables. We use the term “predict” purely in a statistical sense to refer to unidirectional paths. All item parcels were sufficiently normally distributed (skew < 1.9, kurtosis < 3.2; estimates are affected only if skew > 2 or kurtosis > 7; Curran, West, & Finch, 1996).

To evaluate model fit, we examined the indices recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). These were the  $\chi^2$  statistic (which is highly sensitive to sample size so rarely non-significant; Bollen, 1989); the normed  $\chi^2$  statistic (i.e.,  $\chi^2$  divided by degrees of freedom to reduce influence of sample size: good if 2 or less; Ullman, 2001); the comparative fit index (CFI: good if .95 or more); and the root-mean-square error approximation (RMSEA: good if .06 or less). To account for the number of paths being tested, we adopted a conservative alpha level of .025 throughout. Finally, to account for the cross-sectional design of our study and to rule out alternative causal interpretations, we tested a series of alternative SEMs modeling key paths in two alternative directions and comparing model fit.

*Entire Sample: Early Parental Relationships, Decision to Come Out, Romantic Attachment, and Romantic Relationship Views*

The first SEM examined the part of the model that involved all participants (i.e., those both out and not out to parents; Hypotheses 1-3) (Figure 2). Specifically, early parental relationships predicted (a) being out vs. not out to the respective parent and (b) adult romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance (including theoretically predicted paths between acceptance and avoidance, and between independence-encouragement and anxiety). Adult attachment dimensions in turn predicted romantic optimism and trust (representing the predicted mediation pattern). All parental relationship variables were allowed to correlate.<sup>8</sup>

To address Research Question 1, we first tested whether parental relationship paths differed by gender. Model fit was not reduced by constraining to be equal across genders the paths from parental relationships to attachment dimensions,  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 5.05, p = .28$ , or from

parental relationships to coming out,  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 1.38, p = .85$ . This suggests that parental relationships, disclosure to parents, and romantic attachment are related in equivalent ways for both men and women. Thus, we retained and report a single model for the entire sample.

The model fit the data extremely well (Figure 2). In terms of disclosure to parents, maternal acceptance in childhood significantly predicted coming out to mother. Paternal relationship variables were unrelated to being out to father, but being out to mother was related to being out to father. Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 1, LGB individuals are more likely to come out to mothers whom they viewed as accepting during their childhood. Being out to one's father was associated with being out to one's mother, but not with the perceived quality of their early relationship with him.

In terms of romantic attachment, fathers' acceptance negatively predicted avoidance, whereas mothers' independence-encouragement negatively predicted attachment anxiety. These results partly support Hypothesis 2 and replicate those for heterosexual participants in past research (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Finally, as expected, attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted both trust and optimism. We tested indirect effects by running 2000 bootstrap samples and calculating bias-corrected estimates. The indirect effects of fathers' acceptance on trust and optimism (mediated by avoidance) were significant, respective  $\beta$ s [99% confidence intervals] = .20 [.11, .29] and .17 [.09, .26]. The indirect effects of mothers' independence-encouragement on trust and optimism (mediated by anxiety) were also significant,  $\beta$  [99% CI] = .12 [.03, .21] and .07 [.01, .15]. Thus, as predicted (Hypothesis 3), early parental relationships relate to romantic trust and optimism through their association with romantic attachment.

*Individuals who have Come Out: Parental Relationships, Parents' Reactions to Coming Out, and Romantic Relationships*

The next analyses included only participants who were out to at least one parent ( $n =$

260; Hypotheses 4-5). We examined a model in which early parental relationships predicted the respective parent's reactions to coming out; parental relationships and reactions to coming out predicted romantic attachment dimensions; and attachment in turn predicted trust and optimism (Figure 3). Mothers' and fathers' reactions were allowed to covary. In addition, to address Research Question 1, we tested whether the paths involving parental reactions differed by gender. Based on the above results for the entire sample, we constrained all other paths to be equal across gender. We then systematically constrained the remaining paths to be equal: first (a) parental relationships to reactions, then separately (b) fathers' reactions to attachment dimensions and (c) mothers' reactions to attachment dimensions. Constraints (a) and (b) did not reduce model fit (respectively:  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 4.87, p = .30$ , then  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 4.71, p = .10$ ), but constraint (c) did,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 11.83, p = .003$ . This suggested that mothers' reactions to disclosure are differently related to attachment for men vs. women.

The model (allowing only paths from mothers' reactions to vary by gender) fit the data reasonably well, meeting good-fit criteria for two of the three indices (Figure 3). As well as replicating all significant paths from the entire sample (cf. Figure 2), mothers' and fathers' acceptance and independence-encouragement significantly predicted more positive parental reactions. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, parents who were judged to be good caregivers when their child was growing up were also reported to react more positively to their child's sexual orientation.

The paths from fathers' reactions to romantic attachment, and from mothers' reactions to avoidance, were nonsignificant. The path from mothers' reactions to anxiety was significant only for men: gay/bisexual men whose mothers reacted more positively are less anxious about their romantic relationships. We tested whether attachment anxiety mediated the link between mothers' reactions to coming out and trust and optimism for men, but the paths were nonsignificant (respective  $\beta$ s [95% CI] =  $-.00 [-.17, .18]$  and  $-.03 [-.16, .12]$ ).

Thus, whereas Hypothesis 4 was supported consistently, Hypothesis 5 was partly supported only for men's attachment anxiety. This exploratory finding suggests that parents' reactions to coming out are only influential in LGB romantic relationships above and beyond early parent-child relationships for men's attachment anxiety, but will need to be replicated before drawing any firm conclusions from it.<sup>9</sup>

### *Alternative Models*

Given that our data were cross-sectional, it is conceivable that alternative causal models might fit the data equally well. This is particularly the case regarding retrospective reports of early parenting experiences, which could be influenced by current attachment patterns (among the whole sample) or by the more recent experience of coming out to parents (among those who are out). Similarly, it is conceivable that relationship trust/optimism might influence attachment models. To examine these possibilities, we tested a series of smaller SEMs in which we modeled key associations in two directions and compared fit.

First, we tested two alternative models in the whole sample in which (a) parental relationships predict attachment dimensions (cf. Figure 2) and (b) attachment dimensions predict parental relationships. The hypothesised model (a) fit the data significantly better than the reversed model (b),  $AIC_{diff} = 26.21$ ,  $ECVI_{diff} = 0.086$ .

Second, we tested two models in which (a) attachment dimensions predict relationship views (cf. Figure 2) and (b) relationship views predict attachment dimensions. Again, the hypothesised model (a) fit the data significantly better than the reversed model (b),  $AIC_{diff} = 63.81$ ,  $ECVI_{diff} = 0.208$ .

Third, among those who were out to at least one parent, we tested two models in which (a) parental relationships predict reactions to disclosure (cf. Figure 3) and (b) reactions predict parental relationships. The hypothesised model (a) once again fit the data significantly better than the reversed model (b),  $AIC_{diff} = 13.68$ ,  $ECVI_{diff} = 0.053$ . In summary, in the parts



of our theoretical model most open to alternative causal interpretations, we found every time that our hypothesized direction fit the data better than the alternative.

## Discussion

### *Theoretical Model*

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of coming out to parents and LGB individuals' experience of romantic relationships from an attachment theoretical perspective. In general, we found support for our theoretical model. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, LGB individuals were more likely to be out to mothers whom they viewed as accepting in childhood. We predicted that perceptions of both acceptance and independence-encouragement would contribute to LGB individuals' decision to come out to parents, but it seems that acceptance is a primary consideration. Perhaps individuals view a mother's past acceptance as a better indicator of her likely reaction to, and acceptance of, their LGB disclosure. Fathers' past acceptance, however, did not predict being out to father, inconsistent with Holtzen et al.'s (1995) finding that those with a current secure attachment to either parent were more likely to be out to them. Holtzen et al. examined current relationship quality, not recollections of relationship while growing up, meaning that experiences with parents since disclosure could have influenced their current attachment to them. Interestingly, we found that being out to mother was associated with being out to father. Given that people are more likely to be out to their mother than father, and that mothers are more likely to respond positively than fathers (D'Augelli & Herschberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998), it is possible that once individuals disclose to their mother, their mother encourages them to disclose to their father. Alternatively, participants may be out to both parents because they have a supportive family environment. Future research should investigate the possibility that mothers serve as mediators between father and child, supporting each to aid acceptance.

We found that memories of childhood experiences with parents predicted romantic

attachment, supporting Hypothesis 2. Specifically, maternal (but not paternal) overprotection was linked to attachment anxiety, and paternal (but not maternal) rejection was linked to avoidance; these findings did not differ by gender of participant. These findings underline the importance of both dimensions of parenting and largely replicate those found with heterosexual samples (e.g., Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and most with LGB samples (Landolt et al., 2004; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; but see Ridge & Feeney, 1998). Furthermore, an alternative model in which romantic attachment predicted parent-child relationship quality fit the data less well. These results support the argument that attachment theory can be used to understand LGB romantic pair bonds (Feeney & Raphael, 1992; Mohr, 2008).

Our research showed that the associations between early parent-child relationship quality and romantic trust and optimism were mediated by romantic attachment patterns, supporting Hypothesis 3. This suggests that LGB individuals' perceptions of parental care feed into their attachment security in romantic relationships, which ultimately influences the extent to which they find it easy to trust a romantic relationship partner and feel optimistic about the future success of their romantic relationships. These results are consistent with past research conducted with primarily heterosexual participants that has linked romantic attachment to trust (Mikulincer, 1998) and optimism (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Furthermore, an alternative model in which optimism or trust predicted attachment dimensions fit the data less well. This suggests that adult attachment patterns have similar important consequences for relationship views in LGB samples as they do in heterosexual samples, consistent with past research that highlights the similarities in the fundamentals of romantic relationships of LGB and heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2002; Mohr, 2008; Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008).

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, individuals who reported having accepting and independence-encouraging parents while growing up were more likely to report that those

parents reacted positively to their coming out. These results extend those of Mohr and Fassinger (2003) and Boon and Miller (1999) by demonstrating the importance of both core dimensions of parenting. Although our data were based on concurrent reports of remembered parent-child relationship quality and perceptions of parental reactions, they do suggest that parents who have been good caregivers in the past will be more accepting of one's sexual orientation. Indeed, an alternative model in which parental reactions predicted parent-child relationships while growing up fit the data significantly less well. In future it would be ideal to replicate these findings longitudinally.

Our findings suggest that if an LGB individual is trying to decide whether or not to come out to parents (and perhaps others) (s)he should take into account the extent to which they have not only been accepting but also encouraged his/her independence in the past. Perhaps parents who encouraged independence are more accepting and supportive of their children's LGB status because they encourage and trust their children to explore and develop their own identities. We agree with Green (2000) that clinicians should explore the pros and cons of coming out to parents in therapy in order to aid decision-making, rather than automatically encouraging people to come out. Although it is rare for parents to abandon their LGB children (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), an LGB individual may be in the best position to anticipate the types of reaction he/she will receive from parents.

We found some support for Hypothesis 5 that perceptions of parents' reactions to coming out would relate to current romantic attachment patterns: mothers' negative reactions predicted men's (but not women's) attachment anxiety. This is consistent with other findings showing the importance of the opposite-sex parent for romantic attachment (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990), although that research focused on heterosexual individuals and may not apply as strongly. Our finding is largely consistent with past research linking parents' LGB support to adult attachment (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003), and poor maternal relationships at time of

disclosure to preoccupied attachment in women (Ridge & Feeney, 1998), but contrasts with Elizur and Mintzer's (2003) null results concerning family acceptance of sexual orientation and adult attachment. Our findings extend the above past research because we examined *directly* perceptions of parents' reactions to coming out, rather than less direct measures concerning perceptions of parents' supportiveness, general relationship, or family acceptance. Future research could extend this by examining the effects of parents' reactions to coming out on state of mind regarding attachment, such as with the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984, 1985, 1996) or Current Relationship Interview (Crowell & Owens, 1996). Unfortunately, we did not find support for the hypothesis that attachment would mediate the link between parents' reactions to coming out and trust or optimism. Nevertheless, the influence of mothers' reactions to coming out on men's attachment suggests that researchers might more closely examine the consequences of parent-child interactions in adolescence and adulthood for other important attachment relationships. Other events in a young adult's life that may prove a challenge for parents and may lead to rejection include dating someone outside of one's own religion, ethnicity, or social class, and pursuing a different career path than advised by parents. Our findings suggest that even in the context of a loving, caring childhood parent-child relationship, these events and the reactions they prompt may affect the adult child's life and adult attachment models.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

In our study we investigated novel, theoretically driven hypotheses using reliable, multi-item measures of important interpersonal constructs. Another strength of our study is that it was based on a large sample of LGB individuals from a fairly diverse community sample. Limitations include potential sample selection biases. For example, a large proportion of our sample were out to parents, which may have reflected the wide age range. However, this opportunity sample was not a random sample and so does not necessarily

represent the population, a weakness inherent in researching people who are stigmatized. Although the sample was large, it did not allow for the investigation of potential differences between bisexual versus gay and lesbian participants, between participants in young adulthood versus those in middle or older adulthood, or between different ethnicities (we did not obtain ethnicity data); future research might address these questions.

Although our data focused on LGB individuals' *perceptions* of their parents' reactions to coming out, rather than on *objective* assessment of parents' reactions, these perceptions and their consequences are worthy of study in their own right as they may reflect, in part, internal working models of parents. Future research should examine these issues by sampling several family members; this would avoid the common method variance found in individuals' reports of parents' reactions and quality of parent-child relationship, for example.

Another limitation is that the data are cross-sectional; as highlighted earlier, causality cannot be inferred. Furthermore, examining mediation in cross-sectional designs has been shown to introduce bias in parameters (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). The retrospective nature of the reports is a weakness; however, we believe that it is not a fatal flaw of the research. In their review of the validity of retrospective reports of adverse childhood experience, Hardt and Rutter (2004) report that measures similar to the ones used here (e.g., the Parental Bonding Inventory; PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) are negligibly affected by current mood. Furthermore, Wilhelm, Niven, Parker, and Hadzi-Pavlovic (2005) found that the PBI shows good stability over a 20 year period, and life events and depression had little effect on this stability. Nevertheless, caution should be used when interpreting the results until they are replicated longitudinally, though such research may prove difficult to conduct (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Despite these limitations, this research is valuable by virtue of being theory-driven and focusing on an understudied group.

*Conclusions*

The present findings contribute to the literature showing that LGB pair bonds are attachment relationships and largely function in similar ways as do heterosexual pair bonds. In particular, among LGB as well as heterosexual samples, recollections of early parent-child relationship quality feed into romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance, which in turn foster expectations of romantic partners (i.e., trust) and relationships (i.e., optimism). At the same time, we have highlighted unique issues and processes that additionally impact LGB individuals' relationship experiences and views. In particular, the process of coming out to parents—a challenge that most LGB individuals take on at some point—is influenced by past parental experiences (i.e., acceptance and independence-encouragement) and can color future romantic experiences (i.e., particularly men's attachment anxiety). Thus, those considering coming out to parents might wish to bear in mind their past relationship when forming strategies and expectations. More broadly, research examining the influence of attachment experiences with parents on romantic attachment should consider not only childhood, but also experiences throughout adolescence and continuing adulthood.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some measures are based on retrospective reports. Unfortunately, it is difficult to examine these issues longitudinally (and collect pre-disclosure measures) due to stigma associated with identifying as LGB (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). For example, it would be very difficult to recruit a sample of adolescents who had not yet come out and have them report perceived quality of parent-child relationship before and after coming out to parents. Therefore, the retrospective nature of self-reports is a typical limitation in this area (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Participants were recruited from organizations for LGB individuals (e.g., Breakout, Gay West, university LGB organizations, Lesbian/Gay Christian Movement, FFLAG [Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays], Outrage, Outzone, Stonewall), and for HIV positive individuals (e.g., Body Positive, Terrence Higgins Trust). Twenty-two participants were HIV positive.

<sup>3</sup> Sample 1 comprised 31 women and 120 men ( $M_{AGE} = 32.31$ ,  $SD = 12.17$ ; 109 out to mother, 95 out to father). Sample 2 comprised 42 women and 61 men ( $M_{AGE} = 24.15$ ,  $SD = 6.92$ ; 91 out to mother, 75 out to father). Sample 3 comprised 35 women and 20 men ( $M_{AGE} = 22.85$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ; 54 out to mother, 35 out to father). Partly to avoid burdening participants with long questionnaires and thus increase the response rate, and partly because studies involved several investigators who included other variables not the focus of this study, researchers collected a subsample of items. All participants reported demographics, information about coming out, attachment dimensions, parents' reactions to coming out, and parent-child relationship whilst growing up. In addition, participants in sample 1 reported romantic relationship optimism, whereas those in samples 2 and 3 reported romantic relationship trust.

<sup>4</sup> Supplementary analyses were also conducted with the initial and current reactions in

separate models. Some of the reported results were weaker when using only one of the indices, but no clear meaningful differences arose between the two models, and the overall pattern of results was unchanged.

<sup>5</sup> Except for the Mother, Father, Peer scale and romantic optimism scale, these measures have been used with LGB samples in prior research.

<sup>6</sup> There was no systematic pattern of missing data, except where parental relationship or parental reactions data were missing due to not having grown up with a parent or a parent being deceased. All scales had less than 5% missing data (after accounting for deceased parents and not being out) apart from trust, whereby missing data was slightly higher among participants who were not in a current romantic relationship compared to those who were.

<sup>7</sup> Endogenous binary variables do not meet parametric assumptions of SEM. Because being out to mother and father were observed (as opposed to latent) variables, recommendations to use Bayesian estimation or to provide additional constraints to make the model identified (Long, 1997) were not appropriate. Another recommended strategy for binary variables is to use maximum likelihood estimation with bootstrap resampling (Bollen & Stine, 1993). When inspecting the confidence intervals for our paths generated by bootstrapping analysis; all of the significant paths in Figure 2 remained significant. We therefore report parametric path estimates in Figure 2 for clarity and ease of reading.

<sup>8</sup> In order to test associations with trust and optimism in the same SEM, we used a stochastic regression method to impute missing values (Little & Rubin, 2002). Although Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation can be used in AMOS without imputing values, it is not possible to fit the saturated model and thus generate fit indices because no participants completed both the trust and optimism scales. Stochastic regression imputation fits a regression model for each observed variable using maximum likelihood estimation, and then imputes a value for each missing case by drawing at random from the distribution of



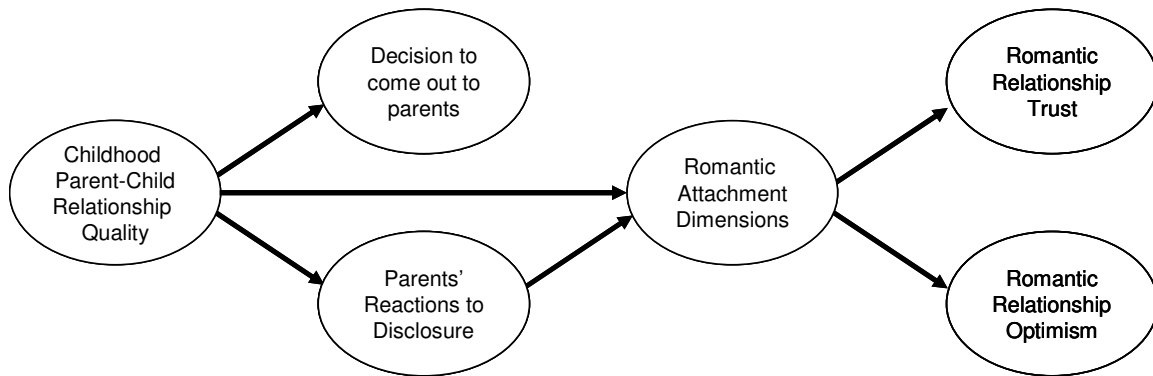
values based on the nonmissing scores for that case. This random element means that stochastic regression does not artificially increase model fit in the way that standard regression imputation might. Fit indices and path estimates were very similar to those obtained when trust and optimism were examined in separate models with no imputation.

<sup>9</sup> Age was controlled for in all analyses and the pattern of results remained the same.

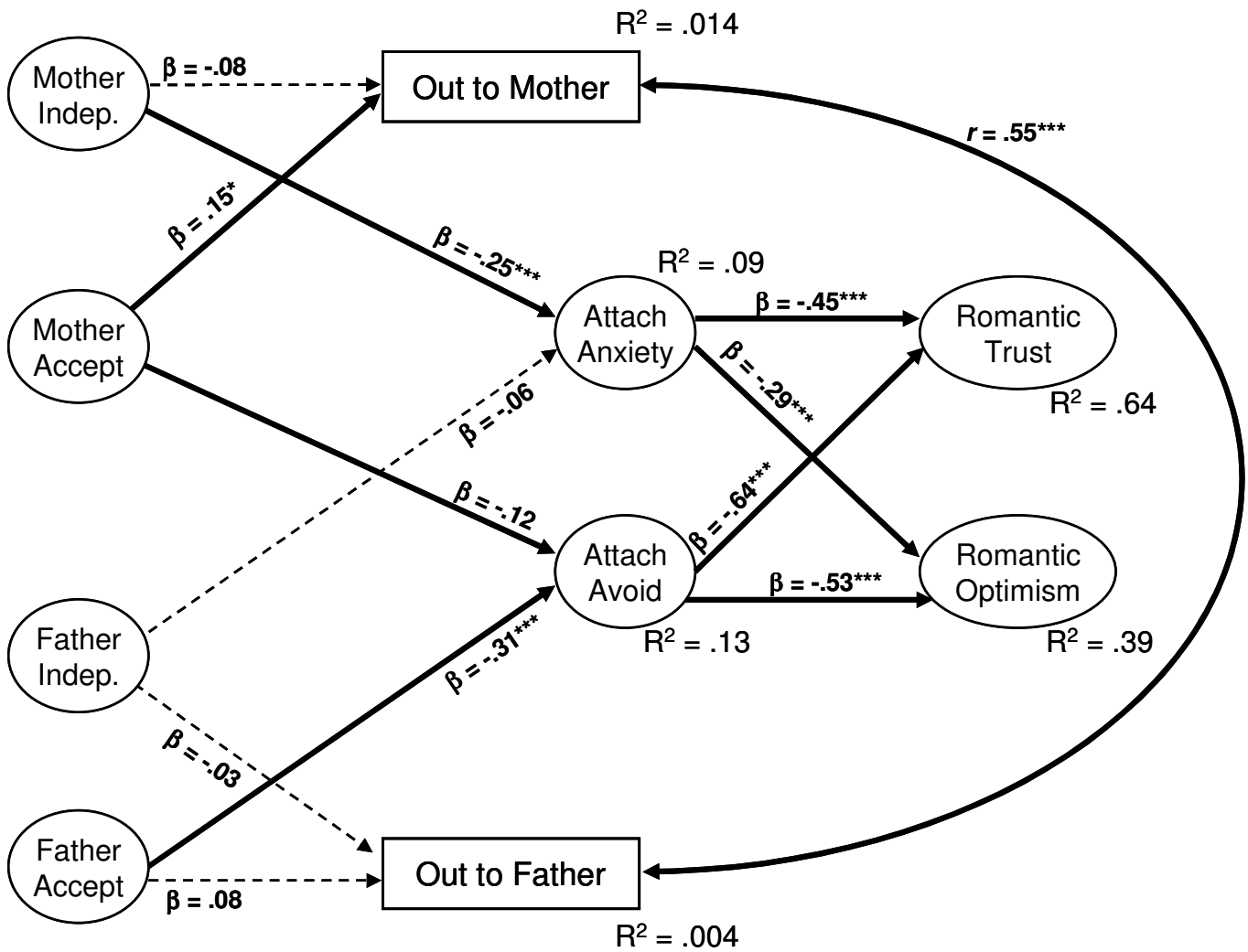
Table 1  
Raw Correlations

|                                    | —Parental Relationships— |                     |                     |                     | —Coming Out—       |      |                    | —Attachment—      |                     |                     |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                                    | 1.                       | 2.                  | 3.                  | 4.                  | 5.                 | 6.   | 7.                 | 8.                | 9.                  | 10.                 |
| <i>Parental Relationships</i>      |                          |                     |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 1. Mother Independence             | —                        |                     |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 2. Mother Acceptance               | .49 <sup>***</sup>       | —                   |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 3. Father Independence             | .58 <sup>***</sup>       | .24 <sup>***</sup>  | —                   |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 4. Father Acceptance               | .28 <sup>***</sup>       | .22 <sup>***</sup>  | .54 <sup>***</sup>  | —                   |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| <i>Coming Out to Parents</i>       |                          |                     |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 5. Out to mother (yes/no)          | .00                      | .12 <sup>*</sup>    | .03                 | -.01                | —                  |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 6. Out to father (yes/no)          | .00                      | .08                 | .05                 | .05                 | .55 <sup>***</sup> | —    |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 7. Mother Reaction <sup>a</sup>    | .33 <sup>***</sup>       | .36 <sup>***</sup>  | .18 <sup>**</sup>   | .09                 | —                  | -.05 | —                  |                   |                     |                     |
| 8. Father Reaction <sup>a</sup>    | .35 <sup>***</sup>       | .30 <sup>***</sup>  | .43 <sup>***</sup>  | .36 <sup>***</sup>  | .06                | —    | .54 <sup>***</sup> | —                 |                     |                     |
| <i>Romantic Attachment</i>         |                          |                     |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 9. Anxiety                         | -.27 <sup>***</sup>      | -.21 <sup>***</sup> | -.22 <sup>***</sup> | -.13 <sup>*</sup>   | -.02               | .01  | -.15 <sup>*</sup>  | -.18 <sup>*</sup> | —                   |                     |
| 10. Avoidance                      | -.11                     | -.19 <sup>**</sup>  | -.18 <sup>**</sup>  | -.31 <sup>***</sup> | -.07               | -.04 | .03                | -.08              | .09                 | —                   |
| <i>Romantic Relationship Views</i> |                          |                     |                     |                     |                    |      |                    |                   |                     |                     |
| 11. Trust ( <i>n</i> = 148)        | .21 <sup>***</sup>       | .24 <sup>**</sup>   | .26 <sup>**</sup>   | .31 <sup>***</sup>  | -.01               | .01  | .01                | .02               | -.48 <sup>***</sup> | -.64 <sup>***</sup> |
| 12. Optimism ( <i>n</i> = 152)     | .26 <sup>***</sup>       | .23 <sup>**</sup>   | .19 <sup>*</sup>    | .14                 | .17 <sup>*</sup>   | .09  | .09                | .21 <sup>*</sup>  | -.31 <sup>***</sup> | -.48 <sup>***</sup> |

Notes. *N* = 309. <sup>a</sup> Time and reactions given only for those who were out to mother (*n* = 254) or father (*n* = 205) respectively. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

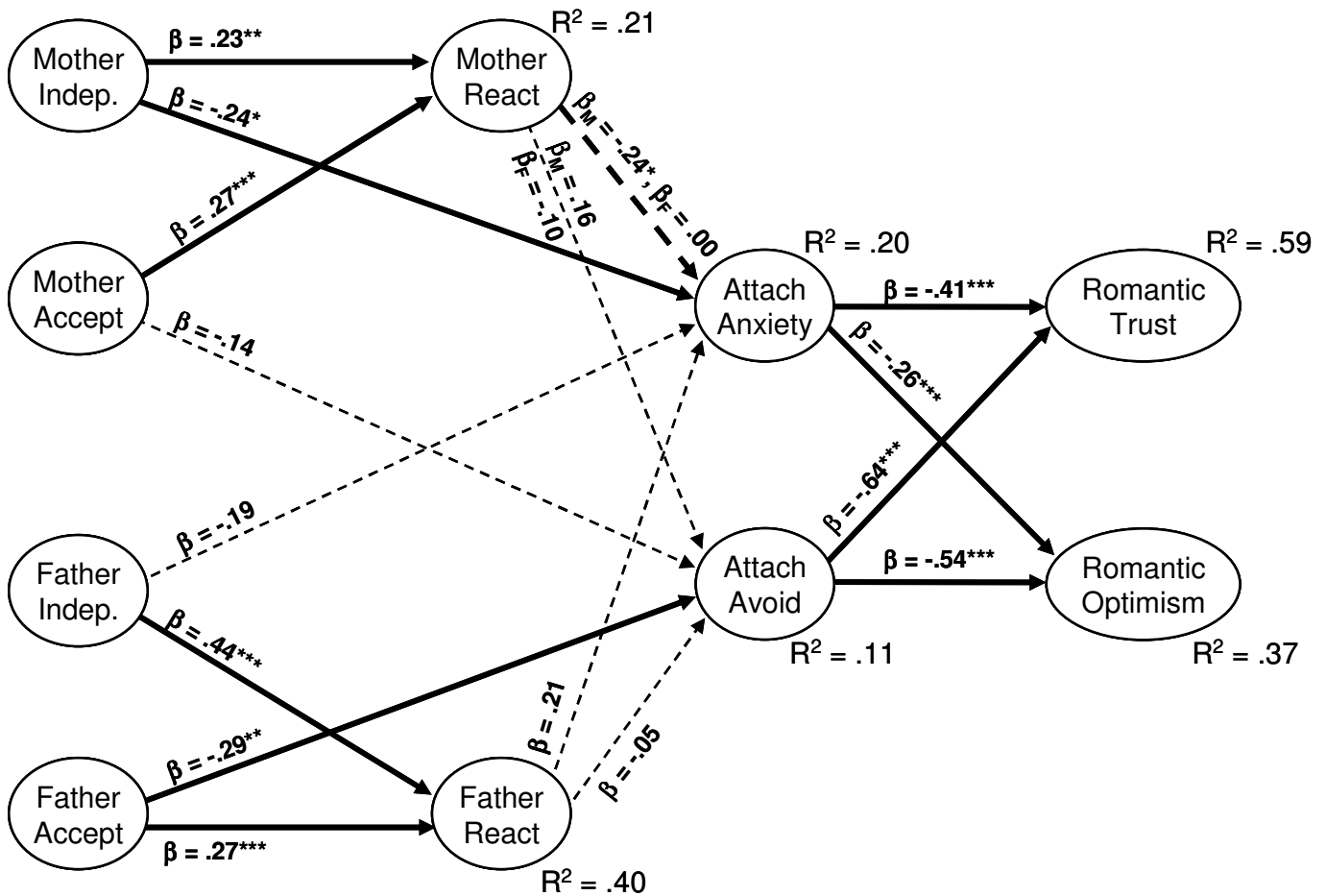


*Figure 1.* Theoretical model showing how experiences with parents may influence romantic attachment models and relationships.



$\chi^2(526) = 637.21, p = .001, \chi^2/df = 1.21, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .026.$

Figure 2. Early parental relationships predict coming out to parents (out vs. not out), adult romantic attachment, and romantic relationship views (all participants). Solid lines indicate significant paths; dotted lines indicate non-significant tested paths. Indicator variables, error terms, and correlations between parental variables are not shown for clarity. Indep = Independence-encouragement; Accept = Acceptance; Avoid = Avoidance. \*  $p < .025$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



$\chi^2(896) = 1412.86, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.58, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .047$

Figure 3. Adult romantic attachment and views as a function of early parental relationships and parents' reactions to disclosure (participants who are out to parents). Solid lines indicate significant paths; small dotted lines indicate non-significant tested paths; thick dashed lines indicate path that differed by gender. Indicator variables, error terms and correlations between parental relationship variables are not shown. Indep = Independence-encouragement; Accept = Acceptance; Avoid = Avoidance; React = Reaction. In subscripts, M = Male; F = Female.

\* $p < .025$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .