

**THE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF GIRLS IN CHILD PROTECTIVE
SERVICES: PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONAL AGENCY**

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Abstract

Romantic relationships emerge as a critical context for late adolescent development. Developmental systems theory proposes that adolescents exercise agency over their romantic relationships to promote their own development in three ways; seeking romantic relationships to satisfy their developmental needs for sexuality, affiliation, intimacy, commitment, identity, and autonomy; reflecting on their romantic experiences to understand themselves and relationships; and adapting their behaviour to attain their needs among romantic relationships. To date, such expressions of agency within adolescent romantic relationships have been studied among adolescents who grow up having normative parental relationships known to support their romantic development. Thus, the current study explored these expressions of agency within the context of romantic relationships for late adolescent girls involved with CPS who experience ruptured parental relationships. Twenty-two girls ($M_{age} = 18.5$) placed in out of home care by CPS, were interviewed regarding their romantic relationship experiences. A content analysis was conducted to identify satisfied needs within their romantic relationship experiences, whether and how they reflected on these experiences, and how they altered their behaviour when their needs were not met. Results from the current study showed that these girls' romantic relationships satisfy normative developmental and unique needs, that some girls in care reflect on their experiences and learn from them, and that girls take actions to adapt their behaviour in the face of unmet needs. These findings suggest girls in care enact agency within romantic relationships to support their development and hold implications for the positive value of romantic relationships while also underscoring how these girls can be vulnerable in romantic context.

Keywords: romantic relationships, late adolescents, child protective services, developmental systems theory, agency

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1. Introduction

Nearly two decades ago Collins and Steinberg (2006) argued that romantic relationships were an integral factor to facilitate development. Since then, converging research has substantiated and extended their claim, finding that romantic relationships become an increasingly important relationship within which relational needs for sexuality, intimacy, affiliation, commitment, identity, and autonomy are satisfied. In line with developmental systems theory (Benson et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2013; Moore, 2016), youth take an active role in shaping their romantic development by seeking these needs within romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a), reflecting on their romantic experiences (e.g., Norona et al., 2017), and altering their behaviour when their needs are not met in their relationship (e.g., Bravo, et al., 2017). Importantly, as adolescents are embedded in a multitude of interacting systems, other relationships, particularly those with parents, also influence teens' romantic relationships by providing a supportive context to experience normative romantic development.

Despite the plethora of research that has taken place over the last two decades, the majority has focused on youth developing in normative contexts. Considering that the parental context serves an imperative purpose in the romantic relationships of adolescents it is necessary to explore the romantic relationships of those whose parental relationships are strained. Youth in the care of Child Protective Services (CPS) experience ruptures in their parental relationships and subsequently undergo development in contexts distinct from their same age peers when they are removed from their homes of origin by CPS. However, research on the romantic relationships of adolescents in care is limited with the majority highlighting the negative aspects of their relationships, specifically for girls (e.g., Wekerle et al., 2009), and few studies revealing the relevance of romantic relationships for these teens (e.g., Zinn et al., 2017). Thus, this study aims to explore the importance of romantic relationship for girls in the care of CPS by investigating the kinds of needs girls seek in their romantic relationships, whether and how girls reflect on their romantic experience, and how girls behave when their needs are not met.

1.1 Normative Romantic Relationships

There is no doubt that romantic relationships are both common and central in the lives of adolescents (12-19 years old) with upwards of 60% of teens reporting having engaged in at least one romantic relationship prior to completing high school (Lantagne & Furman, 2017; Paulk et al., 2011). Over the course of the adolescent period these relationships become increasingly important for satisfying adolescents' need for affiliation, intimacy, sexuality, commitment,

identity, and autonomy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). By the time teens reach the late adolescent period (17-19 years old) these needs coalesce and are met through a range of corresponding, age salient, romantic feelings, activities, and behaviours. The romantic relationships of late adolescents are increasingly dyadic and are quite long in duration, often lasting up to a year (Lantagne & Furman, 2017; Paulk et al., 2011).

By spending more time together as a result of the increased length of their relationships, adolescents' needs for affiliation are met through shared interests and participation in mutually enjoyable activities (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). As they spend more time with their romantic partners their relationships deepen in emotional closeness, augmenting emotional support, feelings of love, and personal disclosure, meeting needs for intimacy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a; Tuggle, 2014). Though sexuality needs are explored earlier in adolescence through the engagement in sexual behaviours like kissing (Waylen et al., 2010), expanded affiliative and intimate qualities act as a precursor to attaining sexual needs through the full range of sexual behaviour (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015; Koon-Magnin et al., 2010). Together, the gratification of sexual, affiliative, and intimate needs enhances the bond and commitment between partners.

At the same time, the affiliative nature and emotional closeness of their relationships provides an impetus for late adolescents to explore their own identity by experiencing how they and their partners may have similar or different interests, values, and goals. These considerations, support teens' identity needs and promote autonomous self-expression, for instance in the form of activities and friendships outside the relationship (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). When romantic relationships encourage teens' interests and desires outside the partnership, adolescents can attain their need for autonomy while also balancing their needs for sexuality, affiliation, intimacy, and commitment.

1.2 Developmental Systems Theory

DST rejects the dualistic view that development is influenced by heredity or environment and instead emphasizes the shared role of intersecting genetic, ecological and epigenetic facets on development (Johnston, 2014). As such, DST proposes that development occurs through the interactions of multiple systems, which include adolescents' own biology and psychology, interpersonal relationships, communities, social services, media, social norms, and even history or timing (Lerner et al., 2013; Moore, 2016). Normative development unfolds when there is alignment between the teen's own internal systems (i.e., biology and psychology) and the

surrounding external systems (i.e., relationships) (Lerner et al., 2013). Importantly, DST takes the position that adolescents are not merely a passive product of interacting systems. Rather, they can influence their own development by exercising personal agency over their interactions with the systems and contexts in which they are embedded (Lerner et al., 2013; Benson et al., 2006). Agency can be conceptualized as ones' influence on their own thoughts and behaviour to effect change in their environment. DST contends that teens can enact agency by choosing the kinds of systems they interact with in the first place. For example, teens can decide to engage with prosocial or deviant peers. In this way, adolescents can promote their own positive development by selecting relationships and contexts that best support their needs (Lerner et al., 2013). Furthermore, DST posits that, as adolescents navigate age salient tasks, they display agency by reflecting on their experiences to better understand themselves and the relationships or contexts they need to support their own growth. Through this process of reflection, adolescents can subsequently move towards normative development by making choices about how to interact with the surrounding systems in order align their internal needs with the appropriate contexts. For instance, upon reflection an adolescent may understand the purpose of their parents' rules and can then choose to adhere to them which in turn promotes the quality of their relationships with their parents. Therefore, DST proposes that in the multitude of interacting systems, adolescents have agency over their development by selecting contexts that are in alignment with their internal system, reflecting on their experiences, and choosing how to interact with the external systems.

1.2.1 Implications of DST for Romantic Relationships in Late Adolescence

In line with DST, adolescents are active in their development by seeking relational contexts that support their needs. Applying this to romantic relationships, as an adolescent's biological and psychological needs for sexuality, affiliation, intimacy, identity, autonomy, and commitment arise, they are motivated towards seeking the satisfaction of these needs in their external environments, in this case, romantic relationships (Collins et al, 2009; Connolly & McIssac, 2009a). During early adolescence, puberty ignites sexuality needs which drive teens toward romantic relationships where they expect these needs to be attained (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). With this emergence of the romantic context, teens then begin to look to romantic relationships to satisfy other needs in a development progression as romantic relationships become more and more central in the lives of adolescents (Connolly & McIsaac,

2009a). This is expressed by adolescents' eagerness for corresponding romantic feelings, activities, and behaviours. For instance, Kedzior and colleagues (2023) found that teens desired trust and space in romantic relationships suggesting that teens seek relationships whereby there is intimacy and respect for autonomy. Indeed, studies examining adolescents' romantic relationship goals or desires document their relationship aspirations for intimacy, identity, and autonomy (Kedzior et al., 2023; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2012). As teens align their needs with their external systems, they exert their agency by selecting romantic relationships with the expectation that they will satisfy their needs. Thus, when their romantic relationships possess feelings, behaviours, and activities analogous with developmental needs, the relationship is said to fulfill those needs.

As adolescents seek out and engage in romantic relationships, they reflect on their experiences to learn about themselves, and what they want in romantic partners and romantic relationships. In a recent study, Norona and colleagues (2017) reported that adolescents described important lessons from their romantic experiences regarding how to balance one's own and one's partner's needs and manage negative emotions within relationships. Additionally, teens also developed a more cohesive understanding of romantic relationships as consisting of positive and negative qualities (Norona et al., 2017). These results illustrate how teens' reflection on their romantic experience promotes an improved understanding of romantic relationships. Additionally, while information on adolescents is limited, a growing literature on post break-up growth among emerging adults, and adults particularly, further demonstrates the importance of reflection on romantic experiences for learning, finding that adults learn about themselves, what kinds of characteristics they want in a partner, and relationship skills to implement in future relationships (Kansky, 2018; Lewandowski & Bizzoco 2007; Miller, 2009; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). In essence, this process of reflection can enable adolescents to have an improved understanding of themselves and romantic relationships which can empower teens to change their behaviour when their needs are not being met.

Motivated to align their developmental needs within the romantic context, DST maintains that adolescents take action to satisfy their developmental needs through romantic relationships by choosing how they interact with the romantic relationship system. With the insights afforded by the process of reflection teens can choose to adapt their behaviour to better suit their needs by taking action. This expression of agency is best illustrated in the romantic context when teen's

developmental needs are unsatisfied within their romantic relationships. Research reveals that when needs are unmet in their romantic relationships adolescents take action by ending their relationships (Connolly & McIssac, 2009b; Bravo et al., 2017). By ending their relationship, adolescents have the opportunity to select new partnerships that are in alignment with their needs. Further, some research has found that adolescents may also choose to engage in infidelity while remaining in their romantic relationships when the satisfaction of their developmental needs are no longer available (Norona et al., 2018), suggesting that adolescents adapt their behaviour to get their needs met in other relationships. Thus, teens do not only experience an improved understanding about themselves and relationships from their romantic experiences but can actively make changes to their environment to better meet their needs. In conclusion, adolescents demonstrate agency in their development by selecting the romantic relationships that best suit their own needs, reflecting on their experiences and modifying their behaviour.

Of course, in line with DST, romantic relationships represent only one context within a host of interacting systems in which late adolescents develop. As such, romantic relationships are influenced by youths' non-romantic relationships and environments such as peers, school, and particularly parents. Parental relationships are especially important because they provide adolescents with basic necessities of safety and security which afford teens the opportunity to venture away from the family and explore romantic relationships. Moreover, parent-teen relationships act as a context by which late adolescents form relationship impressions and develop skills that in turn affect need attainment. This is apparent when considering the continuities between parent-teen and teen- romantic partner qualities. For instance, the quality of teens' relationships with their parents is related to intimacy in their romantic relationships (Ha et al., 2010), such that those who openly express themselves with their parents are also comfortable having open discussions with romantic partners (Taradash et al., 2001). Additionally, parental monitoring directly affects their teens' romantic relationships by permitting, restricting, or delaying the engagement in romantic relationship activities. Thus, parents play an integral role in the romantic relationships of their adolescents, functioning as a supportive context for normative romantic relationship development. Of course, however, not all teens develop within such supportive environment.

1.3 Youth Involved with Child Protective Services

In Canada, it is estimated that 60,000 children and adolescents are in the care of CPS (Saint-Girons et al., 2020) because their home environments have been deemed unsafe. Such compromises to children's safety can take the form of direct harm inflicted on the child as in the case of physical abuse or indirect harm via neglect or failure to provide basic supports, inadequate supervision, and lack of physical safety (Trocmé et al., 2011). Neglect and exposure to parental violence are the most common forms of maltreatment in Canada, followed by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Afifi et al., 2015). Foster care, kinship care, group homes, and treatment centres are among the placement options for those taken into care as children or adolescents (Esposito et al., 2014). Additionally, independent living placements are available for adolescents sixteen years or older who have not reached the maximum. In Ontario, the province where this study was conducted, the maximum age of protection is 20 years old. These adolescents live without a caregiving adult and receive some supports from child protective services such as a financial allowance and contact with a children's service worker (CSW). For adolescents removed from their homes of origin and placed in out-of-home care in Canada, foster care placements are most common (Esposito et al., 2014; Fallon et al., 2015). These placements can be particularly positive for teens as foster parents can provide them with the safety, security, and access to services often missing from their home of origin. Further, foster homes allow for adolescents to live in a familial environment and build relationships with a different caregiver (i.e., foster parents). In fact, in 2018 adolescents rated the quality of their relationships with their foster parents as 6.2 out of 8 (OACAS, 2021).

However, in some cases, adolescents' experiences with out-of-home care can be quite challenging. For instance, 40% of adolescents move placements once or twice, while a third move placements three or more times (Esposito et al., 2014), which can impact the formation of stable caregiver relationships and stable community connections (e.g., peer relationships). Additionally, adolescents can experience revictimization while in care (Riebschleger et al., 2015). Finally, although adolescents can be provided with financial aid from CPS agencies, it is often not enough to cover all their living expenses and as such, they must find and prioritize a job.

Together, the reasons for being in care and the removal from their home of origin to placement in out-of-home care mean that adolescents in care experience significantly ruptured

familial relationships. Upon entering care these young people must cope with the separation from their parents of origin (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000) and the uncertainty of continued familial connections. Depending on the nature of the maltreatment, young people may or may not have access visits, calls, or other communications with their parents. Complicating matters further, the parents of those in care often experience their own personal and relational challenges (Fallon & Van Wert 2017) and continue to live high risk lifestyles (Esposito et al., 2014) making it especially difficult for these teens to maintain parental relationships. In fact, many adults with a history of CPS involvement still have problematic relationships with their parents of origin (Andersson, 2018). Moreover, unlike their same age counterparts who receive economic and social support from their parents of origin, many late adolescents in the care of CPS particularly, live independently and without these necessary supports (Montgomery et al., 2006). Thus, it is evident that the settings in which adolescents in care develop are vastly different from their same age peers living in normative contexts.

1.3.1 Romantic Relationships of CPS Youth

The romantic relationships of adolescents in care have been infrequently studied. Of the studies that have considered their romantic relationships, the majority focus on conflict and violence within their romantic relationships (Fitzgerald, 2021; Katz, Courtney & Sapiro et al., 2020; Petty John et al., 2021; Wekerle et al., 2009). These experiences are particularly apparent in the romantic relationships of girls in care, with prevalence rates of intimate partner violence being over three times that of community samples (Collin-Vézina et al., 2006; Wekerle et al., 2009; Wincentak et al., 2017). While this research sheds light on CPS involved teens' romantic relationships, it is also important to explore the positive aspects of their relationships to understand what needs are attained in their romantic relationships and how agency is expressed through the romantic context.

Although not well researched, there is a small number of studies that have investigated other aspects of CPS involved adolescents' romantic relationships. Studies reveal that romantic relationships are common among these teens, with up to 85% having engaged in a romantic partnership before turning 18 years old (Wekerle et al., 2009; Zinn et al., 2017). These relationships have been shown to serve as an important source of social support (Zinn et al., 2017), and suggest that teens in care seek romantic relationships to meet needs for intimacy and affiliation. Nonetheless, no research has examined the active role adolescents in care take in

seeking their needs through romantic relationships. Therefore, research is required to explore the kinds of needs sought in the romantic relationships of these adolescents. On the one hand, based on the progression of needs attained in romantic relationships of typically developing adolescents, we would expect teens involved with CPS to seek affiliation, intimacy, sexuality, commitment, identity, and autonomy within their romantic relationships. On the other hand, given the many familial, financial, and care-giving deprivations they experience in their out-of-home care living situations, we may also expect these youth to seek unique needs from their romantic relationships.

When it comes to self-reflection and altering behaviour to meet their developmental needs, virtually no study has explored these expressions of agency in romantic relationships among teens in care. However, one study that explored their perceptions of healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships, highlights evidence of personal and relational learning following their reflections (Forenza et al., 2017). For example, in making comparisons between healthy romantic relationships and their general experiences of their own or others' romantic relationships, teens involved with CPS acknowledged a lack in relational skills such as communication (Forenza et al., 2017), suggesting that they have learned about a discrepancy in their own skill set. When discussing romantic relationship education, adolescents in care proposed ideas to incorporate exploration of what one wants in a romantic relationship and how to identify problematic interactions (Forenza et al., 2017), revealing a desire for personal and relational growth. While the study by Forenza and colleagues (2017) features these teens' awareness of and ambition for learning about themselves and romantic relationships, they did not specifically examine teens' reflections on their own experiences. Accordingly, more research is required to expand on how CPS involved adolescents reflect on their romantic relationship experiences and investigate the kinds of actions they take when their needs are not satisfied to better understand how youth express agency over their romantic relationship development.

1.4 Study Purpose and Objectives

Romantic relationships emerge as critical contexts for adolescents to seek and attain their developmental needs. As they pursue these relationships, they reflect on their experiences to understand and learn about themselves and romantic relationships. This process supports adolescents to subsequently adapt their behaviour to attain their needs within romantic relationships. Unlike their same age peers, adolescents in care undergo ruptures in their parental

relationships, out of home placements, unstable caregiver relationships, and diminished economic and social support. Literature on the romantic relationships of adolescents in care is scarce with the majority of research focusing on the negative aspects of their romantic relationships, highlighting heightened levels of violence and conflict especially among girls. Alternatively, only a few studies suggest that romantic relationships are pertinent to teens involved with CPS, while virtually no research is concerned with the satisfaction of developmental needs, reflection on one's own romantic experiences, or how these adolescents alter their behaviour to get their needs met within romantic relationships.

Given the lack of information on CPS involved adolescents' romantic relationships this study aims to investigate the importance of romantic relationships for girls in the care of CPS. Therefore, the first goal of the current study is to explore the kinds of needs satisfied within CPS involved girls' romantic relationships. Due to their age and exceptional care-giver experiences, it is expected that girls will identify both the satisfaction of normative developmental needs and unique needs in their romantic relationships. It follows that the second goal of the current study is to capture CPS involved girls' reflections on their romantic relationship experiences to see how they learn from their experiences. Based on the available literature it is expected that their responses will reflect personal and relational learning or growth. Finally, the third goal of this study is to explore actions taken by girls in care when their romantic relationships do not meet their needs in order to learn how they take action to align their needs with their external environment, in this case, romantic relationships. It is expected that girls will take action perhaps in the form of ending their relationships or engaging in infidelity as found in the literature on adolescents growing up in normative contexts. Together, these goals will aid in recognizing the importance of the romantic relationship context for girls in care, illustrating their inherent strengths and highlighting the kinds of supports these teens require to be more successful through this process. The current study is guided by three research questions;

1. What kinds of needs are satisfied in the romantic relationships of girls in care?
2. Do girls in care reflect on their romantic relationship experiences?
3. What actions are taken by girls in care when their romantic relationship does not satisfy their needs?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The current study included 22 adolescent girls ($M_{\text{age}} = 18$), who had been in the care of one CPS agency located in Ontario, Canada between Fall 2014 and Fall 2015. Initially, 44 girls took part in the study, however given the particular importance of romantic relationships during the late adolescent period 19 girls aged 16 and younger were removed from the analysis along with two girls who moved back in with their parents of origin at the time of study. Additionally, one participant was removed due to never having experienced a romantic relationship. Of the 22 participants included in the study, 54.5% had a current romantic partner. Participants spoke about one to five romantic partners in their interviews for an average of 2.5 partners. For majority of participants (38.9%) their most recent romantic partner was two years older than themselves while their most recent romantic relationship lasted between one month to over four years. Notably, four participants in independent living placements lived with their romantic partner during the time of study. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

		Frequency (%)
Age	17	11 (50)
	18	3 (13.6)
	19	5 (22.7)
	20	3 (13.6)
Current placement type	Foster home	8 (36.4)
	Kinship home	3 (13.6)
	Group home	1 (4.5)
	Independent living	10 (45.5)
Participants currently in a romantic relationship		12 (54.5)

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview and Life History Calendar.

A semi structured interview was developed by the research team to elicit information regarding romantic relationships. Since life experiences can be difficult to recall, a life history calendar was used as a visual aid to support the recollection of experiences. The girls were asked a series of questions regarding current and past romantic relationships experiences, and important people in their lives to allow for opportunities to respond through multiple lenses (See Appendix B). To elicit responses regarding the satisfaction of developmental needs within romantic relationship experiences, girls were asked to describe their relationships in terms of time spent together, the kinds of activities they engaged in with a partner and good things about their relationships. Girls were also asked to discuss the most important people in their lives and those who provided them with support, which could include a romantic partner. Together, these questions allow girls to speak about the presence of romantic feelings, behaviours and activities in their relationships which underscore the satisfaction of needs. In terms of active reflection on romantic experiences, girls were asked to about previous romantic relationship experiences that had ended which provided girls with a chance to reflect on and share their understanding of their romantic experiences. Finally, girls in the study were asked about bad things in their relationship experiences in order to first, locate unsatisfied developmental needs, then explore the actions taken by girls when their needs were unmet within a romantic relationship. Throughout the interviews, however, girls spoke to satisfied needs, shared their reflections on their romantic experiences, and described their actions with respect to unsatisfied needs across interview questions. For this reason, all discussions regarding romantic relationships during the interview were considered for analysis of each research question.

2.3 Procedures

2.3.1 Consent.

In collaboration with a committee of supervisors from the CPS agency, a process to obtain consent while ensuring the privacy and respecting the autonomy of each girl was created. First, researchers provided CSWs with information regarding the study and a standardized script to introduce the study to eligible girls to whom they were assigned. Next, CSWs introduced the study to girls one on one, at which point girls either indicated that they were interested in the study and provided consent for our research team to contact them, or that they were not interested. Researchers then contacted interested girls and/or their caregiver(s) and provided

more information about the study. Subsequently, a meeting was arranged by the researcher with girls who were still interested in the study. Girls who could not be reached after seven attempts by the researcher were removed from the participant list. Prior to data collection, consent was obtained from girls as they were 17 years of age or older (See Appendix A). A \$50 gift card was given to each girl to thank them for their participation.

2.3.2 Data Collection.

Interviews for each girl took place at an agreed upon location where girls felt comfortable. These locations included their homes, libraries, and coffee shops. Between Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 participants engaged in a semi-structured interview which lasted one to two hours. Interviews were audio recorded for transcription. The life history calendars were used during the interview as an aid and were not used for analysis.

2.3.3 Ethical Considerations.

Ethical considerations were taken at each step of the data collection process. First, CSWs only introduced the study to girls whom they believed to have the capacity to discuss their life experiences. Since adolescents in care experience high levels of adversity, particularly maltreatment, talk about life experiences could be troubling and elicit overwhelming emotions. Thus, CSWs provided the discretion necessary to only include girls who would not be harmed by being asked to recount life experiences. During interviews with girls, interviewers reassured the girls that they did not have to answer questions they were uncomfortable with, and they were provided with information regarding local support services, specific to their location. This was done to ensure participants felt comfortable, to respect their right to consent, and to ensure they would have access to support, if needed, once they completed the interview. Additionally, to protect the wellbeing of participants, girls who disclosed information regarding current or previously unreported abuse and/or suicidality were connected with their CSW or crisis staff. Finally, in the dissemination of results, quotations selected do not include identifiable information and pseudo names are used to protect the identity of participants.

2.4 Analysis

The current study conducted an qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014; 2021) to explore girls' romantic relationship experiences. A mixed inductive and deductive approach was utilized to allow for categories to be created from the transcript content inductively and then organized into main categories deductively based on the available literature. This approach was

selected as it provides the opportunity to generate broad, alternative responses not yet considered in the literature on CPS girls romantic experiences, while accounting for responses that are comparable to the existing literature. Following Mayring (2021), first, selection criteria for each research question were determined. This included determining a category definition and the level of abstraction, for each research question (see Table 2). Using the selection criteria 6/22 participant transcripts were read line-by-line and inductive categories were developed for each research question. These categories were then revised, and the selection criteria were edited.

Table 2

Final selection criteria for each research question

Research question	Selection Criteria	
	Category Definition	Level of Abstraction
What kinds of needs are satisfied in the romantic relationships of girls in care?	Romantic relationship or romantic partner qualities and characteristics which are discussed as being positive or present, within a romantic relationship experience.	A concrete description which spans one sentence to a paragraph.
Do girls in care reflect on their romantic relationship experiences?	Statements of reflection in which the participant indicates a change or learning in their perceptions of themselves or romantic relationships in relation to romantic experiences.	A concrete description or reflection which spans one sentence to a paragraph.
What actions are taken by girls in care when their romantic relationship does not satisfy their needs?	Self reported actions taken following statements where unmet needs were discussed.	A concrete description that spans one to three paragraphs in order to capture the context in which the actions are taken following the mentioning of an unsatisfied need.

Next, six more transcripts were analyzed line-by-line whereby content was organized using the existing categories or new categories were generated as needed. At this time, categories were revised, and the selection criteria were edited again. This process of categorizing content for each research question, revising categories, and editing selection criteria was carried out two more times, and a final list of categories was developed. Using this final list, all participant transcripts were read through, and content was categorized accordingly.

Once all transcripts were worked through, intra-coder and intercoder agreement was calculated. On average intra-coder reliability was 99% with inter-rater reliability averaging 80%. Finally, main categories were built over the course of three meetings between my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Connolly, and myself whereby the categories identified were grouped to form higher level categories presented in the results of this study. The number of participants who spoke about each of these high-level categories in at least one of their romantic relationship experiences was calculated and is presented in the results section.

3. Results

3.1 Satisfied Needs

3.1.1 Normative developmental needs.

As expected, participants' discussions of their romantic relationship experiences elicited six categories of satisfied needs; *romantic partner affiliation*, *romantic partner intimacy*, *sexuality*, *identity*, *commitment*, and *autonomy* (see Table 3). Almost all participants (95.5%) spoke about affiliative needs within their romantic relationship experiences. These participants discussed engaging in several kinds of activities with a romantic partner such as going on dates, spending time together at school or with friends, and hanging out as a dyad, talking, and watching movies. For instance, Shelly said "...[we] go to the movies, go to dinner, and just go and hangout at his house and stuff". Additionally, participants also reported having commonalities with a romantic partner and that a romantic partner was like a best friend. For example, Jane explained "like you would never think like, it feels like you're living with your best friend, but like also somebody that's your boyfriend. You know what I mean. That's like, that's something that I always wanted."

Over half of the participants (54%) expressed the satisfaction of intimacy needs within their romantic relationship experiences. These participants spoke about the ability to self-disclose personal stories or their feelings to their partner and explained that a romantic partner listened to them. For example, Mary expressed "He actually listened when I had problems, he actually

Table 3
Satisfied Needs

Category	Frequency of participants (%)
Normative Needs	
Romantic Partner Affiliation	21 (95.5)
Romantic Partner Intimacy	19 (86.4)
Sexuality	12 (54.5)
Identity	8 (36.4)
Commitment	5 (22.7)
Autonomy	3 (13.6)
Unique Needs	
Provisions of Security	11 (50)
Family Affiliation	9 (40.9)
Provisions of Instrumental Support	8 (36.4)
Family Intimacy	3 (13.6)

listened to me.” These participants also described a romantic partner as loving, caring, nice, understanding of their circumstances and behaviour, encouraging and supportive to the participant. For instance, in describing conflict within her romantic relationship Lisa said, “he’s never said anything to like piss me off in the moment of something and he’s really understanding of me and when I get kind of heated and stuff.” Additionally, Hailey said “he was caring...he was so supportive with me” when asked to describe the good things in one of her romantic relationship experiences. Other participants provided more explicit examples of intimacy, for example, Jane explained “[when] Christmas time's coming around it's very stressful for me because it's just hard not to have a family so it would make me feel very upset and sad and I would come home, and I would cry to my boyfriend.”

Over half of participants (54.5%) referenced sexuality needs when discussing their romantic relationship experiences. Most of these participants described their romantic partners as cute or attractive (e.g., “I don't know he's such a cutie, cute I guess he's really smart and ... tall I

guess... I love his eyes” (Maria)), while a few noted sexual behaviours such as cuddling and intercourse. For example, when probed about what was good about her partner Mary said, “Cuddle bug and good sex.”

Over one third of participants (36.4%) spoke of identity needs expressed as the presence of romantic partner characteristics that underline success in several life domains. These participants explained that a romantic partner was smart, hardworking, graduated from high school or attained a job. For example, Jane described her partner as hardworking, “He works really hard for what he wants and he goes and gets what he wants too like if he, you know what I mean...” Additionally, these participants spoke about a romantic partner’s maturity, independence, self-regulation, and ability to set goals. For instance, Nicole explained “he’s more mature [than other boys I dated], like I actually, he’s really smart. He goes to like [University].”

Some participants (22.7%) spoke of commitment needs. Girls in this study expressed commitment in terms of making future plans with a romantic partner regarding living arrangements and having children. For example, Alex explained how she and a previous partner had plans to move in together although they did not follow through before a breakup; “...we were going to move in together in June, it was like our first, we like put money down on the apartment.” Tina also explained how she and her current partner were deciding on living arrangements in the future; “we’re also like kind of thinking of moving so he is in the process of it to, because wherever we decide to move is kind of where [my] college will end up being closer to.”

A minority of participants (13.6%) expressed that autonomy needs were met within their romantic relationship experiences. These girls spoke about having their own space or freedom within a romantic relationship. Elizabeth clearly articulates this when discussing her current romantic relationship, “It’s not like I feel like I’m tied down and I’m trapped in a relationship, I have the freedom to go do whatever I want as long as he knows I’m safe at the end of the day.”

3.1.2 Unique needs.

In addition to the normative developmental needs, participants’ discussions of their romantic relationship experiences also elicited four categories of satisfied needs that are unexpected; provisions of security, family affiliation, provisions of instrumental support, and family intimacy (see Table 3). Half of participants (50%) expressed the presence of characteristics within their romantic relationship experiences that denote a romantic partner

provided them with security. These participants explained that a romantic partner was reliable, dependable, put the participant first and watched out for them. For instance, Christine said;

“I think this is the best relationship I’ve been in, that I’ve ever been in...Because he hasn’t gave up on me, like I said he’s a fighter, no matter what we’ve been through he still hasn’t got up and left, which other people would have left me after everything we’ve been through.”

Elizabeth expressed security in her relationship by comparing her romantic partner’s efforts to watch out for her with her parents; “anything I try to do he tries to make sure it benefits me and not screw me over anyway, which is better than my parents have really done for me in the past.” Just under half of participants (40.9%) described affiliative needs between a romantic partner’s family and the participant or visa-versa, the romantic partner and the participant’s family. Specifically, these participants spoke about being close, getting along and spending time with each other’s family members. Tina described an example of affiliation with her partner’s family;

“...Um they’re really more of a family than my family ever really was, aside from my foster family... Usually when we go over it's like Christmas or holiday and the whole family is together and we play board games together...we all sit down and play them as a family it's really fun”

Over one third of participants (36.4%) expressed the met needs of instrumental support provided by a romantic partner. These participants explained that their partners bought them items and helped them in accomplishing various goals such as finding a place to live, getting a driver’s license, saving money and assistance with schoolwork. For instance, Kate said “I started taking my schooling a whole lot serious, he would help me out, he's pretty smart.” Additionally, Jane explained how her partner buys things she wants; “... you know how sometimes you just say I really want this; he will go get it like he won't even wait. He will go get it and give it to me.”

A few participants (13.6%) expressed that needs of family intimacy were met within their romantic relationship experiences. These girls explained that a romantic partner’s family inspired them, helped, or supported them. For instance, Tina explained “I don't really have a relationship with my parents at all, like my biological parents or my sisters or anything so I guess having his family there kind of makes up for it a bit.”

3.2 Reflections on Romantic Relationships

Throughout their interviews 10 participants reflected on what they had learned from their romantic experiences. Similar to what has been found in typically developing adolescents, the self-reflections of girls in this study echo learning about themselves and romantic relationships. Their reflections can be organized into five categories; *I realized he was not good for me, I changed my approach in romantic relationships now, I learned about myself, I learned my lesson, and I learned about relationships and how to navigate them.* See Table 4.

About a third of these participants (31.8%) expressed that they realized a romantic partner was not a good fit for them. They particularly spoke about realizing that a romantic partner wasn't treating them right, wasn't a good person, and wasn't mature. Lisa explained; "It took me a long time to try to kind of be like no, like he's a really bad person and I need to like see him for what he is not for what he is to me."

Some participants (18.2%) explained that they changed their approach in romantic relationships due to their romantic relationship experiences. These girls spoke about changing their approach in a variety of ways including not allowing romantic partners to treat them in a negative way, changing how they express themselves or disclose about themselves with a

Table 4

Participant Self-Reflections on their Romantic Relationship Experiences

Reflections	Frequency of participants (%)
I realized he was not good for me	7 (31.8)
I changed my approach in romantic relationships now	4 (18.2)
I learned about myself	4 (18.2)
I learned my lesson	4 (18.2)
I learned about relationships and how to navigate them	3 (13.6)

romantic partner, and not getting into the same kinds of negative situations with romantic partners. For instance, Jane reveals how she learned to express herself in romantic relationships.

"that's what I learned from my relationships sayings to myself from now on I will voice myself saying if something hurts me because ... in a way he did teach me a lot because I would never share my feelings when somebody hurt me and then after him I became just a stronger person

and I felt like I can stand up for myself and be like I don't like the way you're speaking to me please don't speak to me like that like”

Some participants (18.2%) spoke about how they learned about themselves. These participants explained that they became more mature, knew how to react better to conflict, and realized they could be happy outside of a romantic relationship. For instance, Olivia described the insight she gained about her lifestyle when asked about good things in her previous romantic relationship, “Um, he made me realize, um, what the sum of my 17-year-old self would become if I continued to smoke and do drugs and play video games all day.”

Additionally, participants (18.2%) also commented on learning their lesson with boys saying that they wouldn't have a romantic relationship with boys their age or in high school again and wouldn't focus their attention on a boy; “Don't focus on a boy...I've learned that” (Alex). Finally, a few participants (13.6%) reflected on how they learned about and how to navigate romantic relationships due to their romantic relationship experiences. These participants spoke about learning more about what romantic relationships consist of (e.g., “He made me realize that sex could be more than just physical” (Olivia)) and how to work together within a romantic relationship (e.g., “Now we like learn[ed] to like balance everything” (Flora).

3.3 Actions taken when needs are not satisfied

Across interviews, participants discussed unsatisfied needs largely in terms of the opposite of satisfied normative and unique needs mentioned earlier. That is, participants noted unmet needs of romantic partner intimacy, commitment, autonomy, romantic partner affiliation, family affiliation, and romantic partner characteristics of failure. Consistent with the research on CPS involved adolescents' romantic relationships, participants also described romantic experiences of intense conflict and violence, suggesting unmet needs of security. When such normative and unique needs were not satisfied participants described behaving in six ways; *I expressed how I felt, I ended the relationship, I didn't say how I felt, I did what he said or what he wanted, I cheated on him, and I gave him another chance*. See Table 5. It is of note that the actions taken when participant needs were not satisfied within a romantic relationship are not mutually exclusive as some participants used a combination of actions within or across romantic relationship experiences.

Many of the participants (59.1%) recounted verbally expressing how they felt when their needs were not satisfied. Some participants expressed their feelings to a romantic partner

Table 5
Actions taken when needs are not satisfied

Actions	Frequency of participants (%)
I expressed how I felt	13 (59.1)
I ended the relationship	8 (36.4)
I didn't say how I felt	6 (27.3)
I did what he said or what he wanted	3 (13.6)
I cheated on him	1(4.5)
Gave him another chance	1(4.5)

immediately, while there was a break in time prior to expressing themselves for others. For instance, Hailey explained how she behaved when her previous romantic partner cheated on her; “Well I told him from like when we first started date that cheating wasn’t acceptable to me, so I was like we’re done. Like don’t ever talk to me...I just kind of told him how it was.” Another participant, Celine, stated that she shared her feeling in a note when her partner no longer wanted to be committed; “I wrote in the note too [to my ex-partner], like the day you broke up with me it made me really upset.”

Over one third of participants (36.4%) reported that they ended the relationship when their needs were not satisfied. For example, Olivia explained breaking up with a romantic partner due to the partner’s unsuccessful characteristics “Yeah. And then- I mean- I kind of just broke things off again because I’m scared. And he’s unemployed and he didn’t graduate high school and has a kid, that’s why.”

In contrast to expressing themselves, over one quarter of participants (27.3%) said that they did not tell a romantic partner how they felt when a need was not satisfied. For example, when asked about how she responded to a previous partner’s verbal aggression Jane said, “No I didn’t [tell him how I was feeling].” Additionally, 13.6% of participants reported that they complied with a romantic partners request despite a need being unsatisfied. For instance, Amanda explained how she responded to her previous partner’s efforts to exert control and limit her autonomy.

“And then [my romantic partner] was like “oh I’m breaking up with you.” And I was dumb and [wanted him to] stay and he was like as long as you never touch alcohol again, I’ll stay with you. And I agreed.”

Finally, one participant (4.5%) described cheating on a romantic partner when her needs were unsatisfied, while another participant (4.5%) explained that she gave her romantic partner a second chance even though her needs were not satisfied.

4. Discussion

The current study filled a gap in the available literature on the romantic relationships of girls in care by shifting the lens from negative romantic relationships outcomes to exploring the significance of these relationships in the girls’ lives. Using a DST perspective, this study aimed to investigate the ways in which girls in care exert agency over their romantic relationships by identifying satisfied needs within their romantic relationships, exploring whether and how they reflect on and learn from their romantic experiences, and capture actions taken by girls when their needs were unmet across their romantic relationships. Confirming expectations, results from this study reveal that the romantic relationships of girls in care satisfy normative developmental needs and also needs unique to their situation. Additionally, this study finds evidence that some girls in care reflect on and learn from their romantic experiences by broadening their understanding of themselves and romantic relationships. Finally, the current study reveals the many ways the girls took action when their needs were not satisfied in their romantic relationships. Collectively these results provide a novel depiction of the romantic relationships of girls in care, highlighting the fundamental position romantic relationships occupy in their lives.

4.1 Satisfied Needs

The current study aimed to identify the kinds of needs satisfied in the romantic relationships of girls in the care of CPS. As expected, the findings illustrate that the girls attain both normative developmental needs and unique needs across their romantic relationships. To begin with, their identification of normative developmental needs suggests that girls in care seek out romantic relationships to have a partner with whom they can spend time with, engage in shared leisure and sexual activities with and build a bond with; a relationship where they can share their feelings, feel loved, cared for and understood; and a context to explore their own values and goals, while having the freedom to make their own decisions outside the relationship.

As we would suppose that all girls generally undergo the same biological and psychological transformations beginning in puberty, it is not surprising that girls in this study look to romantic relationships to fulfil normative developmental needs too. Even the trend whereby most girls in this study discussed affiliative, intimate, and sexual needs, while fewer girls spoke to identity, commitment, and autonomy needs echo's the progression of need attainment outlined among teens developing in typical environments (Connolly & McIssac, 2009a; Connolly et al., 2023). Thus, findings from the current study demonstrate that girls who experience CPS involvement similarly guide their own romantic experiences to align with their own developmental needs.

Despite the parallels between the normative developmental needs identified in the romantic relationships of girls in this study and trends highlighted in the broader adolescent literature, there are some interesting distinctions to be addressed. The first is the limited frequency with which autonomy needs were discussed. At a time when CPS involved adolescents begin to age out of care, making it vital to consider maintaining their social network ties and explore their interests especially as it pertains to career, it is interesting that more girls in this study did not note having space and freedom to express themselves in these ways within their romantic relationships. Keeping in mind the frequency with which other needs were identified, these findings suggest that girls in care may not particularly seek romantic relationships to fulfill needs of autonomy, rather they may be more concerned with having romantic relationships for the purpose of companionship, connection, and emotional support. This finding is in line with those of Zinn and colleagues (2017) who found that late adolescents in care perceive the most social support from romantic relationships compared to caregivers, suggesting that romantic relationships are critical for meeting needs that are interpersonal in nature. However, as Zinn and colleagues (2017) did not investigate perceived autonomy support, and this study did not have enough power for statistical comparisons, future research should quantitatively explore the importance of romantic relationships for attaining each developmental need to better understand how teens involved with CPS weigh their needs in their relationships.

Despite the similarity of needs identified by girls in this study to teens developing within normative contexts, girls in this study distinctively discussed developmental needs of commitment and identity. About 20% of girls in this study sought commitment needs in at least one of their romantic relationships. Though teens developing under normative circumstances attain commitment needs in their romantic relationships through a sustained bond, girls in this

study discussed preserving their relationships for the long-term by moving in together, marriage, and creating a family. In fact, some girls in this study maintained their romantic relationships for up to four years. Given that adolescents in care often have a history of moving homes and in turn community settings (Esposito et al., 2014), such attainment of long-term commitment may reflect girls' desire for stability. Additionally, as late adolescents in care prepare for emancipation, these results may speak to girls' yearning for maintained social connections. This leads to the next finding that girls in this study discussed satisfied identity needs in terms of educational or occupational success, independence, and maturity. While there is limited information regarding the content of identity needs expressed among typically developing late adolescents' romantic relationships, these results may also be a reflection of preparation for leaving care. As youth in care are particularly tasked with being self-reliant, mature, attending post-secondary education, and finding employment as they approach the maximum age of protection (Kovarikova, 2017), perhaps girls aim to select partners who can complement their own goals and path towards success. Taken together, these findings from the current study suggest that, although girls in the care of CPS are active in selecting romantic relationships to meet their developmental needs, they do so in a way that also reflects their circumstances.

Extending from the distinctive results identified within the normative developmental needs sought by girls in care, girls in this study identified unique needs attained from their romantic relationships that have not been documented among teens growing up within normative contexts. Firstly, half of the girls in this study referenced met needs for security within their romantic relationships, while over one third of girls identified met needs of instrumental support, suggesting that girls in the care of CPS seek out romantic relationships to have a partner who will be reliable, look out for them, and help them with a range of life tasks such as getting a driver's license. As such, the romantic relationships of late adolescents in care may be an essential source of safety and aid. Additionally, girls in the current study identified unique needs for family affiliation and intimacy, implying that girls in care seek out romantic relationships to fulfil needs for familial connection. Thus, romantic relationships are also important for enhancing feelings of familial bonds.

In light of the fact that adolescents in care often experience ruptured parental relationships whereby parents cannot or do not provide security, safety, and help with typical adolescent tasks, and live away from their families, the unique needs identified in this study

suggest that girls in care look for needs, otherwise not provided, in their romantic partnerships. At the same time, security in the form of a stable placement, instrumental supports in the form of financial assistance and having access to a CSW worker, and familial environments as in foster care, are often available to late adolescents in care, raising the question of why these girls sought unique needs in their romantic relationships. Given that not all girls in this study referenced unique needs, it is possible that the girls who did, did not live in stable placements, have strong familial connections, nor have enough instrumental supports, especially considering that 10 girls in the current study lived on their own. Future research is tasked with first exploring these unique needs among teens growing up in typical environments to ensure the exceptionality of these results. Second, future research could build on our findings, by examining the external resources including familial connections of adolescents in care to identify whether the absence or presence of these factors influences needs sought in their romantic relationships. In sum, this study demonstrates that girls in care take an active role in their development by selecting romantic relationships to meet needs unique to their experiences of being in care.

4.2 Reflections on Romantic Relationships

The present study sought to explore the reflections girls in care devise about their romantic relationships to identify what they learn from their relationship experiences. Consistent with DST, the results of this study indicate that some girls in the care of CPS reflect on their romantic experiences and in turn develop a newfound understanding of themselves, romantic relationships and how they wanted to behave in a romantic relationship. As expected, girls' reflections parallel the lessons learned by their same age peers (Norona, et al., 2017) and growth experienced by adults following a breakup (Kansky, 2018; Lewandowski & Bizzoco 2007; Miller, 2009; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) in that they reported an improved understanding of themselves, what they want in romantic partners and in romantic relationships. By expanding on their personal and relational understanding through their interactions with romantic relationships, these findings illustrate the process by which girls in care express agency within the romantic domain. Moreover, given that the majority of girls who reflected on their romantic experiences expressed a realization that their partner was not a good match for themselves, this study demonstrates that girls in care reflect on the alignment between their needs and the romantic relationships they find themselves in and recognize when there is misalignment. Together, these

findings suggest that romantic relationships are similarly important for augmenting reflection and subsequent growth among girls in the care of CPS.

Importantly however, only 10 girls in the study shared their reflections on their romantic experiences during their interview. It is surprising that so few girls in the study reflected on their romantic experiences, yet there could be a variety of explanations. For instance, in an effort to organically elicit reflections, girls were not asked specifically to reflect on their romantic experiences nor to reflect on what they had learned through their romantic relationships. Thus, it is possible that girls did not offer their reflections simply because they were not asked.

Additionally, given that the average number of romantic relationships discussed by girls in this study is only 2.5, perhaps girls did not have enough romantic experiences to reflect on. Moving forward, longitudinal research should be considered capturing the reflections of teens in care, as this kind of design would provide them with multiple opportunities to discuss their romantic experiences, thus offer reflections. Finally, the lack of reflection found in the current study may also underscore girls' challenges to engage in agentic processes, thereby allowing girls to continue to engage in relationships regardless of the satisfaction of their needs. Future research can address this issue by directly exploring the perceived sense of agency adolescents in care have regarding their romantic relationships. Despite the fact that not all girls in this study shared reflections about their own romantic relationship experiences, the current study is the first to investigate such reflections among a CPS sample. Furthermore, the current study has expanded our knowledge on the importance of romantic relationships for reflection and subsequent learning among girls in care, exhibiting girls' own influence over the romantic context.

4.3 Actions Taken When Needs are Not Satisfied

This study is not only the first to explore actions taken by girls in care when their needs are unsatisfied within their romantic relationships, but the first to explore adolescents' range of action when their needs were not met. In line with DST, the current study finds evidence that girls in the care of CPS adapt their behaviour when their needs are unmet in their romantic relationships. Specifically, the majority of girls' responses in this study reveal that they took action in their romantic relationships by expressing how they felt to their romantic partner and ending their relationship when their needs were unmet, revealing that girls make conscious attempts to interact with their romantic system when it does not align with what they need. Additionally, although only discussed by one girl in the study, findings show that cheating on a

romantic partner is another response to unmet needs, suggesting instead that girls in care may choose to look to another romantic relationship to meet the unfulfilled needs in their current relationship. Such actions of relationship termination (Bravo et al., 2017; Connolly, & McIssac, 2009b) and infidelity (Norona et al., 2017) are echoed in studies on teens developing in normative circumstances that focus on break-up experiences, signifying that girls in care are motivated to take similar actions to attain their needs in the romantic domain.

At the same time, girls in this study also reported acting in ways in which they did not change their behaviour when their needs were unmet; *I didn't say how I felt, I did what he said or what he wanted, and I gave him another chance*. Given that DST posits that individuals adapt their behaviour to get their needs met through romantic relationships, these behaviours potentially represent the ways girls maintain their romantic relationships to meet other needs, rather than implying girls do not change their behaviour in response to unmet needs. For example, if autonomy needs are unmet in a romantic relationship but intimacy needs are satisfied, girls may choose to not express themselves, listen to their partner's rules, or give their partner another chance in order to maintain the satisfaction of intimacy needs. Further, against the backdrop of unique needs satisfied within these girls' romantic relationships that signify romantic relationships meet needs of security, instrumental support, and familial relationships typically met by parents, it is possible that girls' behaviour in the form of inhibited action functions to promote the satisfaction of such unique needs. For instance, if intimacy needs are not met within girls' romantic relationships, but provisions of security are satisfied, girls may choose to not change their behaviour to sustain security. Together these findings suggest that, when needs are unmet in the romantic relationships of girls in care, girls may need to balance met and unmet needs in their relationships to decide the kind of actions necessary to align their needs with the available external environments. In sum, the current study expands on our understanding of the importance of romantic relationships for CPS girls by demonstrating how they enact personal agency to coordinate their needs in the romantic context. To extend this work, scholars are encouraged explore and compare the range of actions identified in this study with teens living in typical environments and those involved with CPS to understand how and whether such actions are uniquely carried out by girls in care.

4.4 Implications

The findings from this study have significant implications for how we understand the romantic relationships of girls in care and how CPS agencies can support girls' romantic relationship development. Together, the results of the current study demonstrate that the romantic relationships of girls in care are, in fact, a critical context for development in that they provide satisfaction for normative developmental needs in addition to unique needs, promote self-reflection and subsequent personal and relational learning, and allow for adaptation in light of unmet needs. As such, the current study not only extends our knowledge on romantic development particularly for adolescents growing up in nonnormative circumstances but underscores the positive aspects of romantic relationships for girls involved with CPS. Individuals such as social workers, foster parents, and clinical psychologists who come into contact with CPS can acknowledge the importance of these relationships and leverage these relationships to promote development by supporting teens' agency in their pursuit of needs, subsequent reflections, and behavioural adaptation when the romantic context does not align with their needs. Given that this is the first study to recognize the imperative role of romantic relationships in the lives of girls in care, future research should continue to take this perspective when studying romantic relationships in this population in order to substantiate or counter findings. Furthermore, since we did not directly compare CPS girls with a matched sample of girls living within normative contexts, future research should also consider this comparison to statistically examine differences between populations. Nevertheless, the current study finds evidence that, as CPS girls enact agency over their romantic relationships, the romantic context is integral to their development.

Despite the rather positive implications of the current study, it is necessary to highlight that the results also paint a picture of vulnerability for these girls. The finding that girls seek security, instrumental support, and family connections through their romantic relationships, paired with the fact that many girls did not reflect on their romantic experiences, while others seemingly choose not to change their behaviour when their needs were unmet, implies that these girls display an increased reliance on their romantic partners and may struggle to assert their agency within the romantic domain. Research on sex trafficking has recognized the use of romantic relationships as an entry point (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Baird et al., 2019). Providing girls with security, instrumental supports, and feelings of belonging in the form connections, pimps prey on

those who otherwise lack the attainment of these needs in other relationships or systems (Baird & Connolly, 2023; Baird et al., 2019). These specific, unique needs sought in the romantic relationships of girls in care could then be withheld by a romantic partner with the intention of exploitation. Moreover, if girls in care are limited in their capacity to reflect on their experience they may not learn from their romantic experiences. Further, by choosing to refrain from their adapting behaviour when their needs are not met, these girls may stay in exploitive, unhealthy romantic relationships. Taking these findings into account, CPS agencies should ensure that they provide CPS girls with security, instrumental support, and familial connections to a sufficient degree so that girls are not seeking such needs in their romantic partnerships. Furthermore, CPS agencies should also offer educational programs focused on empowering girls to reflect on their experiences and model constructive ways to attain needs when there is misalignment. In sum, the findings from the current study provide insights into the ways girls' expressions of agency or lack thereof may actually negatively impact their development.

5. Limitations

Despite the novel contributions of the current study, there are some methodological and analytical limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, as a result of ethical obligations, children's services workers decided on which girls would be invited to participate in this study based on their impressions of girls' emotional and cognitive capacity to recall their life history which limits the generalizability of our findings. Thus, the results of this study may only reflect the romantic experiences of girls in care who have heightened emotional and cognitive ability compared to their same age counterparts in care. Secondly, this participant recruitment procedure also ensued a small participant pool and subsequent small sample size further limiting our ability to generalize the findings, in addition to presenting analytical constraints concerning category saturation and the inclusion of quantitative analysis. Additional participants could provide a stronger indication of the saturation of categories and enough power to take advantage of the inductive analytic design by conducting quantitative analysis on qualitative responses. Thirdly, while the focus on girls in care in this study is justifiable it does limit the generalizability of findings to the romantic relationships of boys in care. A fourth limitation in the current study concerns the assumption that participants experience familial ruptures. Although girls in this study all lived in placement settings implying they were removed from their home of origin the details of their history and nature of their

relationships with their biological family is unknown. Consequently, it is unclear whether and how their familial experiences play a role in their romantic relationship experiences. Finally, although several findings in the current study are reflected in the research on youth developing in normative contexts, we do not truly know how similar or different these girls' romantic experiences are since we did not directly compare the romantic relationships of girls in both circumstances.

6. Conclusion

The current study is the first of its kind to investigate the significance of romantic relationships for adolescents involved in CPS. In identifying expressions of agency, through the kinds of needs satisfied in their romantic relationships, whether they reflect on their romantic experiences to better understand themselves and relationships, and how they adapt their behaviour when needs are unmet, the current study underscores the ways in which adolescent girls in care interact with the romantic context to promote their own development. Thus, this study accentuates the indispensable position romantic relationships have in the lives of teens in care. Concurrently, the present study also holds implications for the ways in which teens in care could be vulnerable to experiencing negative outcomes in their romantic relationships. Nevertheless, the present study offers a positive outlook on the romantic relationships of adolescents in the care of CPS and contributes to our understanding of agency exerted by girls in care in the context of romantic relationships.

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Appendix A

RELATIONSHIPS AND RESILIENCE PROJECT

Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask the researcher any questions you might have. This study has been reviewed and approved for compliance to research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Subcommittee of York University.

Researcher(s): Katherine Wincentak, M.A., Graduate Student, Psychology, kwincen@yorku.ca, 647-992-7370 Dr. Jennifer Connolly, Supervisor, Psychology, connolly@yorku.ca, 416-736-5647. **Other Contact Information:** Psychology Graduate Program Office: (416) 736-5290. Manager of Research Ethics for York University: (416) 736-5055.

Purpose and Procedure:

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the role of relationships in promoting resilience in teens who have received care through (blinded for confidentiality). We believe that helping young people to develop healthy relationships is important because the quality of relationships can have a positive effect on teen's development. We would like to explore the ways in which relationships with caregivers, friends and romantic partners are linked to sense of self, school engagement, behaviour and well-being. Further knowledge in this area of research will help parents, researchers, educators, and practitioners to better understand these teens' development of relationships and how these relationships can lead to positive outcomes.

This study will take about one to two hours to complete and you will be asked questions about the quality of your relationships, sense of self, school involvement, emotional well-being as well as behaviours and attitudes regarding bullying, dating violence, and sexuality. You will also be asked about information like age and gender. Ideally, we would like to meet with you twice, once this year and once next year and have the two meetings audio-recorded. Audio-recordings will be destroyed after the data is collected and coded.

Potential Benefits:

The results of this study will contribute to an understanding of the role of relationships in promoting resilience and positive outcomes for teens who have received care through (blinded for confidentiality). This study will also help develop educational programs aimed at promoting healthy relationships for teens and you will be invited to participate in free psycho-educational training on healthy teen relationships. You will also receive a gift card to thank you for your participation.

Potential Risks:

There are no known risks associated with taking part in this study. However, asking teens about relationships might stir strong feelings. For this reason, all youth will be provided with information regarding counseling and other local support services within their community.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Any data collected from your participation in this study will have identifying information removed. Although the data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences, the data will be reported in aggregate form, so that it will not be possible to identify individuals.

All data will be stored in locked files in a locked research office at York University. Data access will be limited to researchers involved in this study. All study materials will be retained for seven years after data collection is completed. At that time all paper documents will be securely shredded.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary, and you can choose to answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. Feel free to ask questions or share concerns about anything related to the study at any point during this meeting. The information that is shared will be held in strict confidence and discussed only with the research team. If you prefer not to participate, that is fine and there will be no consequences for you as a result of not participating. Participants who choose to withdraw from the study after their data has been collected will still be fully compensated and invited to participate in the healthy teen relationships program. For participants who withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Results of the Study:

You can ask us for a copy of the report when the study is finished.

How can I ask questions about the study?

If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to contact us at any point at the phone numbers or e-mails provided. If you have any questions about the ethics review process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University, Phone: 416-736-5914 or Email: acollins@yorku.ca.

Consent to Participate:

- ☐ I have read and understood the description provided. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time.
- ☐ I consent to the session being audio-recorded, understanding that the recording will be destroyed following data collection and coding.

Participant's Name Signature Date

Researcher's Name Signature Date

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Do you currently have a boyfriend or girlfriend? (Initials, age, gender)
2. Where did you meet them?
3. How long have you been together?
4. What kinds of things do you do together?
5. How often do you spend time together?
6. Could you tell me about the last time you had a fight with your boyfriend or girlfriend?
7. Could you tell me about your partner?
8. What are some good things about your relationship?
9. What are some bad things about your relationship?
10. How would you describe him/her using 3 words? Please provide examples.
11. Have you had other boyfriends or girlfriends? (If yes, ask questions 1-10 about each romantic partner)
12. Who are the most important people in your life? Why?
13. How would your life be different if they weren't in your life?
14. Are there people in your life who keep you from taking unnecessary or dangerous risks?
15. Are there people in your life who help you with your problems?
16. Are there people who help you achieve your goals?