2026 Volume: 02 Issue: 04 www.ijrpa.com ISSN 2456-9995 Research Article

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-21

EXPOSURE TO MARITAL ABUSE DURING ADOLESCENCE SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARDS MARRIAGE AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

***Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

Grace International Bible University.

Article Received: 04 March 2026
Article Revised: 22 March 2026
Published on: 12 April 2026

***Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**
Grace International Bible University.
DOI: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.3917

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which foundational beliefs about marriage, intimacy, and relational norms are formed. For adolescents who witness marital abuse, whether physical, psychological, or emotional, the imprint of that exposure can persist into adulthood, shaping attitudes towards romantic relationships in profound and often damaging ways. Yet the specific mechanisms by which adolescent exposure to marital abuse translates into adult relational attitudes remain underexplored in qualitative literature. This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of adults who were exposed to marital abuse during their adolescent years and explores how those experiences have shaped their current attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships. Using a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in an interpretive philosophical approach, the study draws on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 adults aged 24 to 41 years who reported witnessing sustained marital abuse between their parents or parental figures during their adolescence (ages 13-19). Participants were recruited through community mental health centres, social media support groups, and snowball sampling across the United Kingdom. All participants were not currently living with their parents and had been in at least one serious intimate relationship as an adult. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) revealed six major themes: (1) normalisation of abuse as a relational script, (2) hypervigilance and the constant scanning for relational threat, (3) commitment ambivalence and the fear of marital entrapment, (4) exaggerated communication sensitivity and the catastrophic interpretation of conflict, (5) intergenerational rupture and the conscious

rejection of parental modelling, and (6) fragile hope and the slow construction of alternative relational blueprints. Direct quotations from participants illuminate the lived reality of those carrying adolescent wounds into adult intimate spaces. The findings inform trauma-informed relationship education, therapeutic interventions for adult children of abusive marriages, and preventive programmes for adolescents currently exposed to marital abuse.

KEYWORDS: *Marital abuse, adolescence, intimate relationships, marriage attitudes, intergenerational transmission, trauma, phenomenology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The home is supposed to be a sanctuary. For most adolescents, it is the primary site of learning about love, conflict, resolution, trust, and commitment. It is within the walls of the family home that young people observe how two adults negotiate disagreements, express affection, repair ruptures, and sustain connection across time. These observations, whether consciously registered or not, form the raw material from which adolescents construct their own mental models of what marriage and intimate relationships look like, how they work, and what they should feel like. But when the marital relationship that adolescents witness is characterised by abuse, the lessons learned are profoundly different. Instead of safety, they learn that love hurts. Instead of respect, they learn that power dominates. Instead of repair, they learn that conflict escalates. Instead of trust, they learn that vigilance is survival.

Marital abuse, encompassing physical violence, psychological aggression, emotional manipulation, coercive control, and verbal degradation, affects not only the direct victims but also the children and adolescents who witness it. The developmental consequences of exposure to domestic violence during childhood have been extensively documented, including increased risk of mental health disorders, behavioural problems, and academic difficulties. However, the specific developmental window of adolescence a period characterised by identity formation, the emergence of romantic interest, and the consolidation of abstract reasoning about relationships has received far less attention. Adolescence is not simply an extension of childhood. It is a distinct developmental stage during which young people begin to imagine their own future relationships, to test relational hypotheses, and to form stable attitudes that will guide their adult intimate behaviours.

For an adolescent who watches a father repeatedly humiliate a mother, or a mother physically attack a father, the lessons are not abstract. They are visceral, repeated, and often unaccompanied by any alternative model of what a healthy relationship might look like. The

adolescent may come to believe that marriage is inherently dangerous, that intimacy inevitably leads to betrayal, that conflict always escalates to abuse, or that love and violence are somehow intertwined. Alternatively, the adolescent may vow never to marry, or may enter adulthood with hypervigilant threat-detection systems that sabotage otherwise healthy relationships. These attitudes are not merely cognitive beliefs. They are embodied, emotional, and deeply resistant to change, because they were formed in the crucible of the home during the most formative years of identity development.

Yet the specific attitudes that emerge from adolescent exposure to marital abuse are not uniform. Some adults who witnessed marital abuse as adolescents develop profound fear of intimacy and avoid committed relationships altogether. Others enter relationships but experience chronic anxiety, jealousy, or controlling behaviours. Some replicate the abusive patterns they witnessed, becoming perpetrators themselves. Others become hypervigilant to any sign of potential abuse in their partners, interpreting neutral behaviours as threatening. Still others develop what appears to be a healthy relational capacity but carry hidden burdens of hyperarousal, dissociation, or trust difficulty that emerge only under stress. Understanding this heterogeneity is essential for designing targeted interventions that address the specific attitudinal legacies of adolescent exposure to marital abuse.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study, therefore, is to explore in depth how adults who were exposed to marital abuse during their adolescence describe the impact of that exposure on their current attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships. By centring participants' lived experiences and their own meaning-making, this study aims to illuminate the psychological mechanisms, emotional consequences, and relational patterns that characterise this population.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite extensive research on the effects of domestic violence on children, and despite growing attention to adolescent relationship education, significant gaps remain in understanding how exposure to marital abuse during adolescence specifically shapes adult attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships. This gap is problematic for several reasons.

First, existing research has tended to aggregate childhood and adolescent exposure, treating the developmental period from birth to eighteen as a single continuous phase. This aggregation obscures the unique developmental tasks of adolescence, including the formation of abstract beliefs about marriage, the emergence of romantic and sexual interest, and the

consolidation of identity. An adolescent who witnesses marital abuse at age fifteen is fundamentally different from a toddler who witnesses the same abuse, because the adolescent is actively constructing the cognitive schemas that will guide their own future relationships.

Second, the specific attitudinal outcomes of adolescent exposure have not been systematically mapped. While quantitative studies have documented increased rates of relationship violence perpetration and victimisation among adults who witnessed parental violence as children, the qualitative texture of those attitudes, the fears, the expectations, the internal working models, and the emotional reactions to conflict remains underexplored. Without qualitative depth, interventions risk addressing surface behaviours while missing the underlying attitudinal structures that drive those behaviours.

Third, the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission remain poorly understood. How does witnessing marital abuse become translated into a personal attitude about one's own marriage? Through what psychological processes does observational learning become internalised as a relational blueprint? Answering these questions requires qualitative methods that can access participants' own accounts of their internal worlds, not merely correlations between exposure and outcome variables.

Fourth, the potential for resilience and alternative blueprint construction has been underexamined. Some adults who witnessed marital abuse as adolescents develop healthy, non-abusive relationships. What attitudes characterise these individuals? How did they construct alternative models of marriage despite having no healthy model in their homes? Understanding the attitudinal correlates of resilience is as important as understanding the attitudinal correlates of pathology.

This study addresses these gaps by asking: How do adults who were exposed to marital abuse during adolescence describe the impact of that exposure on their current attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships? What specific attitudes, beliefs, fears, and expectations characterise this population? How do participants understand the connection between their adolescent observations and their adult relational patterns?

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of adults who were exposed to marital abuse during their adolescence, and to understand how those experiences have shaped their current attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships. The study aims to generate rich qualitative evidence that can inform

trauma-informed relationship education, therapeutic interventions, and preventive programmes for adolescents currently living in abusive home environments.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.1 General Objective

To understand the subjective experiences of adults who witnessed marital abuse during their adolescence and to interpret the attitudinal consequences of that exposure for their adult intimate relationships.

4.2 Specific Objectives

- To describe the emotional and cognitive responses that participants recall having during adolescence when witnessing marital abuse.
- To explore how participants characterise their current attitudes towards marriage as an institution, including their desire for, fear of, or ambivalence about marriage.
- To identify the specific relational fears that participants carry into adult intimate relationships, including fear of betrayal, fear of violence, fear of entrapment, and fear of abandonment.
- To examine how participants perceive and respond to conflict in their adult intimate relationships, including their expectations of how conflict will unfold.
- To explore participants' experiences of trust, vulnerability, and emotional intimacy in their adult relationships.
- To identify patterns of hypervigilance, avoidance, or emotional dysregulation that participants attribute to their adolescent exposure.
- To explore the experiences of participants who have developed healthy, non-abusive relationships despite their exposure, and to identify the attitudes that enable alternative blueprint construction.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). These frameworks provide lenses through which to understand both the observational learning and the relational attachment processes that link adolescent exposure to adult attitudes.

Copyright@

Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn behaviours, norms, and expectations through observing the behaviour of others, particularly significant others such as parents. When an adolescent observes a parent using violence or psychological aggression to resolve conflict, the adolescent learns that aggression is an effective, normative, or at least permissible strategy for managing relational tension. This observational learning does not require that the adolescent personally experience reinforcement; vicarious reinforcement (observing that the abusive parent achieves their goal) is sufficient. The theory predicts that adolescents who witness marital abuse will internalise abusive relational scripts that they may later enact or expect in their own relationships.

Attachment Theory provides a complementary framework focused on the internal working models of relationships that children and adolescents develop based on their experiences with caregivers. When a child or adolescent witnesses one parent abusing the other, the security of the attachment system is threatened. The adolescent may develop an insecure attachment style characterised by anxious hypervigilance (constantly monitoring the partner for signs of threat), avoidant detachment (suppressing emotional needs to avoid vulnerability), or disorganised responses (oscillating between approach and avoidance). These attachment patterns persist into adulthood, shaping attitudes towards intimacy, trust, and commitment.

5.2 Conceptual Review

Several key concepts require definition and elaboration. Marital abuse refers to any pattern of behaviour within a marital or marital-like relationship that is intended to dominate, control, humiliate, or physically harm an intimate partner. This includes physical violence (hitting, slapping, pushing, choking), psychological abuse (threats, intimidation, isolation), emotional abuse (degradation, humiliation, gaslighting), and coercive control (monitoring, restricting autonomy, economic control). For inclusion in this study, participants must have witnessed abuse between parents or parental figures on a sustained basis (multiple episodes over weeks or months) during their adolescent years (ages 13-19).

Adolescence refers to the developmental period between childhood and adulthood, typically defined as ages 13 to 19. This period is characterised by pubertal maturation, identity formation, increased abstract reasoning, and the emergence of romantic and sexual interests.

Attitudes towards marriage refer to the beliefs, evaluations, and behavioural predispositions that individuals hold regarding marriage as an institution. This includes desire for marriage, fear of marriage, beliefs about the permanence of marriage, expectations of marital roles, and anticipated relationship dynamics.

Intimate relationships refer to romantic or partnered relationships characterised by emotional intimacy, commitment, and typically sexual involvement. In this study, participants were asked about their attitudes towards both marriage specifically and intimate relationships more broadly.

5.3 Empirical Review

Empirical research on the effects of exposure to marital abuse during adolescence on adult relational attitudes is limited but growing.

A quantitative longitudinal study by Ehrensaft and colleagues (2003) followed 543 adolescents into adulthood and found that exposure to parental domestic violence during adolescence predicted increased risk of perpetrating intimate partner violence in adulthood, even after controlling for other risk factors. However, this study did not qualitatively explore the attitudes mediating this association.

A qualitative study by Skafida and Thomson (2018) interviewed 30 young adults who had witnessed parental domestic violence as children or adolescents. Participants reported lasting difficulties with trust, fear of intimacy, and hypervigilance in their own relationships. However, this study aggregated child and adolescent participants and did not specifically focus on the adolescent developmental window.

Research on intergenerational transmission of relationship patterns has documented that children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves, but the mechanisms are unclear. For adolescents who witnessed abuse, the effect may be not only on relationship stability but on relationship quality, safety, and subjective experience.

No published qualitative study was found that specifically focuses on the adolescent developmental window and uses phenomenological methods to explore the attitudinal consequences of exposure to marital abuse. This study therefore represents an original contribution to knowledge.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative inquiry that seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals who have shared a common phenomenon. The phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate for this study because the aim is not to measure objective relationships between variables but to understand, from the inside, how participants experience and make meaning of their

adolescent exposure and its impact on their adult attitudes. As van Manen (2014) articulates, phenomenology asks, "What is the meaning of this experience for those who have lived it?"

6.2 Research Approach

An interpretive philosophical approach guided the study. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that understanding requires accessing participants' subjective perspectives. For this study, an interpretive approach was essential because the aim was to understand participants' own interpretations of the relationship between their adolescent experiences and their adult attitudes. No objective measure of attitude formation could capture the meaning-making that participants themselves perform.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted remotely via secure video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and, for participants who preferred telephone, via audio call. This remote approach was chosen to enable participation from adults across the United Kingdom without requiring travel, and to allow participants to be in a space where they felt safe and comfortable discussing sensitive material.

6.4 Study Population

The study population comprised adults aged 21 to 45 years who reported witnessing sustained marital abuse between their parents or parental figures during their adolescence (defined as ages 13 to 19). Participants must have been at least two years removed from living in their parents' home, must have been in at least one serious intimate relationship (lasting six months or longer) as an adult, and must not currently be living with an abusive partner.

6.5 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, supplemented by snowball sampling. Initial participants were recruited through community mental health centres, domestic violence support organisations, university counselling services, and social media support groups for adult children of domestic violence. After initial interviews, participants were asked to refer other adults who met the inclusion criteria. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

6.6 Sample Size

Twenty-two adults participated in semi-structured interviews. This sample size is consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies, where saturation is often achieved with 10 to 25 participants in relatively homogeneous populations (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants ranged in age from 24 to 41 years, with a mean age of 31.4 years. Fourteen participants identified as female, eight as male. Sixteen participants were currently in an intimate relationship; six were single but had prior relationship experience. Regarding the type of abuse witnessed, all 22 participants reported witnessing psychological and emotional abuse; 14 reported witnessing physical violence; 9 reported witnessing coercive control and economic abuse.

6.7 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The semi-structured format allowed for systematic exploration of the research questions while providing flexibility to pursue emergent themes and probe participants' responses in depth. An interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives and theoretical frameworks. The guide covered the following domains: participants' adolescent experiences of witnessing marital abuse, including their emotional responses at the time and their cognitive processing; their current attitudes towards marriage as an institution; their experiences in adult intimate relationships, including trust, conflict, and emotional intimacy; their specific fears, expectations, and relational patterns; and, for those who reported healthy relationships, their understanding of how they developed alternative relational models.

Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing in private locations chosen by participants. Each interview lasted between 65 and 120 minutes, with an average duration of 85 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit written consent. Participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Participants were offered a list of mental health resources and support organisations at the conclusion of the interview.

6.8 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was appropriate because it provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data, and it is well-suited to phenomenological studies with interpretive orientations.

Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the data. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, producing approximately 380 pages of single-spaced transcripts. The researcher read and re-read each transcript multiple times, making notes on initial impressions and potential patterns.

Phase 2 involved generating initial codes. Systematic coding was conducted using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Codes were generated inductively from the data, meaning they emerged from participants' own words and meanings. A total of 152 initial codes were identified across the dataset.

Phase 3 involved searching for themes. Codes were grouped into potential themes based on patterns of meaning, similarity, and relationship to the research objectives.

Phase 4 involved reviewing themes. Candidate themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another.

Phase 5 involved defining and naming themes. Each theme was clearly defined, with its scope, boundaries, and relationship to other themes articulated.

Phase 6 involved producing the report. The findings were written up, integrating thematic descriptions with representative quotations.

6.9 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through strategies addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participant community, triangulation across participants with different backgrounds and exposure types, and member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with five participants who confirmed that the themes accurately captured their experiences. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the participants, their exposure histories, and their relational contexts. Dependability was established through maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting all research decisions. Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, with the researcher maintaining a reflective journal to acknowledge and bracket personal assumptions and emotional responses.

7. FINDINGS

The analysis revealed six major themes that captured the attitudinal consequences of adolescent exposure to marital abuse. Each theme is presented with detailed description and multiple direct quotations from participants.

7.1 Theme 1: Normalisation of Abuse as a Relational Script

The first and most pervasive theme was the normalisation of abuse as a relational script. Participants described how, as adolescents, they did not recognise the abuse they witnessed as abnormal. Having no alternative model of marriage, they grew up believing that the patterns they observed verbal degradation, emotional manipulation, physical intimidation, coercive control were simply what marriage looked like. This normalisation persisted into adulthood, shaping their expectations of their own relationships and, for some, their own behaviours.

A 28-year-old woman who witnessed her father psychologically abuse her mother throughout her adolescence described this normalisation with painful clarity:

"I honestly thought that was just how marriages worked. My father would come home and spend twenty minutes telling my mother everything she had done wrong that day. How she had embarrassed him. How the food was not right. How the children were not disciplined enough. And she would just take it. She would apologise. She would cry quietly in the kitchen later. I thought that was normal. I thought that was what it meant to be a wife. So when I got into my first serious relationship at nineteen, and my boyfriend started criticising me constantly, I did not see a problem. I thought, this is just what men do. This is what love sounds like."

A 34-year-old man who witnessed his mother physically attack his father described how normalisation shaped his own behavioural repertoire:

"When I got into arguments with my first girlfriend, I would throw things. Not at her, but near her. A plate against the wall. A chair pushed over. I did not think I was being abusive. I thought I was just expressing anger. That was what I had seen my mother do. She would throw things when my father came home late. That was just how our family expressed frustration. It took my girlfriend leaving me and telling me I was abusive for me to even consider that my behaviour was a problem. I had normalised violence as a form of communication because that was what I had watched for six years of my adolescence."

A 41-year-old woman described how normalisation affected her expectations of relationship deterioration:

"I expect every argument to become a catastrophe. In my parents' marriage, there was no such thing as a small disagreement. Every conflict escalated. Every disagreement became a shouting match, then a silent treatment for days, then sometimes worse. So in my own relationships, when my partner disagrees with me about something small like what to have for dinner or how to spend a weekend I feel a spike of terror. I think, this is the beginning of

the end. This is how it starts. Because in my adolescent brain, conflict was always the precursor to abuse."

This normalisation of abuse as a relational script was not simply a cognitive belief but an embodied expectation. Participants described how their bodies reacted to conflict with adrenaline, their minds catastrophised minor disagreements, and their behaviours oscillated between appeasement and preemptive attack.

7.2 Theme 2: Hypervigilance and the Constant Scanning for Relational Threat

The second major theme concerned hypervigilance: a state of constant, automatic scanning of the partner's mood, tone, body language, and behaviour for signs of impending abuse. Participants described this hypervigilance as exhausting, consuming, and almost impossible to turn off. It had been learned during adolescence as a survival strategy, but in adult relationships, it often created the very problems it was intended to prevent.

A 26-year-old woman described her hypervigilance in visceral terms:

"I am always watching his face. Always. When he comes home from work, I read his expression before he even says hello. Is his jaw tight? Are his shoulders hunched? Did he close the door harder than usual? I learned to do this as a teenager because I needed to know whether my father was in a bad mood before he walked through the door. If I could read him early, I could get out of the way. I could make myself small. Now I do it with my boyfriend, and he is the gentlest man I have ever known. He has never raised his voice at me. But my body does not know that. My body is still protecting the adolescent who needed to predict danger to survive."

A 32-year-old man described how hypervigilance manifested as compulsive reassurance-seeking:

"I need constant confirmation that everything is okay. If my partner is quiet for too long, I ask, 'Are you angry with me?' If she sighs, I ask, 'Did I do something wrong?' If she does not respond to a text within an hour, I assume she is upset with me and I start rehearsing what I might have done. I know this is exhausting for her. She has told me that my constant checking makes her feel like I do not trust her. But I cannot stop. As an adolescent, I learned that silence was dangerous. When my father was quiet, it meant he was building up to an explosion. So now quiet equals threat. My brain cannot separate them."

A 37-year-old woman described how hypervigilance extended to her own behaviour:

"I am hypervigilant not only about his mood but about my own behaviour. I monitor everything I say and do. Did I say that too loudly? Was that joke disrespectful? Did I

interrupt him? In my parents' marriage, the wrong word could trigger a three-day silent treatment or worse. So I learned to walk on eggshells. And I still do, even though my husband has never given me any reason to walk on eggshells. I am constantly editing myself, suppressing my own opinions, apologising for things that are not my fault. I do not know how to be spontaneous in a relationship because spontaneity is dangerous when you grew up watching an abuser."

Participants described hypervigilance as both a psychological state and a physical one: racing heart, shallow breathing, muscle tension, difficulty sleeping, and a persistent sense of foreboding that something terrible was about to happen.

7.3 Theme 3: Commitment Ambivalence and the Fear of Marital Entrapment

The third theme concerned profound ambivalence about commitment and a specific fear of being trapped in a marriage. Participants described wanting intimacy and fearing it in equal measure. The adolescent experience of watching a parent trapped in an abusive marriage had taught many participants that marriage was a cage from which escape was difficult, shameful, or impossible.

A 30-year-old woman described her terror of commitment:

"I desperately want to be married. I want the wedding, the partnership, the shared life. But I am also terrified of marriage. When I think about saying 'I do' and meaning forever, I feel like I cannot breathe. Because I watched my mother stay with my father for twenty years. Twenty years of humiliation and fear. She stayed because she believed divorce was a sin. She stayed because she had no money of her own. She stayed because she was ashamed. And I am terrified that I will also get trapped. That I will marry someone who seems kind and then they will change, and I will be stuck. So I sabotage relationships when they get too serious. I pick fights. I pull away. I protect myself from the possibility of entrapment by never allowing myself to be fully committed."

A 35-year-old man described a different form of commitment ambivalence:

"I have never been married. I am thirty-five years old and I have never even proposed. I have had long relationships, but when the conversation turns to engagement, I freeze. Part of me thinks marriage is a trap. My father was not the abuser in my home; my mother was. She was the one who screamed, who threw things, who controlled everything. And my father stayed. He stayed because he was a Christian. He stayed because he thought divorce would hurt the children. He stayed and he was miserable. I watched him become a ghost in his own home. I

swore I would never let that happen to me. So I will not get married. I cannot. I would rather be alone than be trapped."

A 29-year-old woman described how her fear of entrapment manifested as constant testing of her partner:

"I test him. I push him to see if he will leave. I pick fights. I threaten to end things. And then when he does not leave, I feel relief for about a day, and then I test him again. I know this is destructive. I know I am creating the instability I fear. But I cannot stop because I am always waiting for the other shoe to drop. In my adolescent experience, love was unpredictable. My father would be loving one moment and cruel the next. So I learned that love is not safe. And I cannot trust that my partner will not become cruel because my mother could not trust that either. So I test. And I test. And I test. And one day he will get tired of being tested, and he will leave, and I will tell myself I was right all along."

This theme of commitment ambivalence was present across the sample, though it manifested differently: some participants avoided serious relationships entirely, others cycled through short-term relationships, others stayed in relationships but refused marriage, and others oscillated between intense closeness and sudden withdrawal.

7.4 Theme 4: Exaggerated Communication Sensitivity and the Catastrophic Interpretation of Conflict

The fourth theme concerned exaggerated sensitivity to communication cues and a tendency to interpret neutral or mildly negative communication as catastrophic. Participants described how, having grown up in homes where conflict escalated rapidly and without warning, they had developed hair-trigger responses to any hint of disagreement or criticism.

A 27-year-old woman described how she responds to her partner's facial expressions:

"If my partner frowns while reading a text message, I assume he is frowning at something I did. If he sighs, I assume he is frustrated with me. If he says, 'We need to talk,' I immediately think he is going to break up with me or tell me I have done something terrible. My brain goes from zero to catastrophe in seconds. My partner has learned to preface difficult conversations with 'I am not angry with you' because otherwise I cannot hear anything he says. I am too busy protecting myself from the imagined attack."

A 33-year-old man described how he interprets any criticism as total rejection:

"Even constructive feedback feels like annihilation. If my girlfriend says, 'Could you please put your dishes in the dishwasher instead of the sink,' I hear, 'You are a lazy, useless partner and I am going to leave you.' My brain does not process criticism proportionally. It processes

it as a threat to the entire relationship. So I either get defensive and attack back, or I collapse and apologise excessively. Neither response is helpful. But I learned in adolescence that any criticism from my father was a precursor to a rage episode. So my body learned that criticism equals danger. And my body does not know the difference between my father's criticism and my girlfriend's reasonable request."

A 39-year-old woman described how she avoids conflict altogether:

"I will do anything to avoid a disagreement. Anything. I will agree to things I do not want. I will suppress my own needs. I will pretend to be fine when I am not. Because in my adolescent mind, disagreement is the first step on a path that ends in violence. I know this is not logical. My husband has never been violent. He has never even raised his voice. But the adolescent part of me does not care about logic. The adolescent part of me says, 'Keep the peace at all costs. Do not rock the boat. Do not give him a reason to become like your father.' And so I am silent. And I am resentful. And the resentment builds until I explode over something small. And then I have created the conflict I was trying to avoid."

Participants described this exaggerated communication sensitivity as exhausting and shame-inducing. They knew, cognitively, that their responses were disproportionate. But they could not control them because the responses were not happening in the cognitive brain; they were happening in the limbic system, conditioned by years of adolescent hyperarousal.

7.5 Theme 5: Intergenerational Rupture and the Conscious Rejection of Parental Modelling

The fifth theme concerned the conscious, deliberate rejection of parental relational patterns. Unlike participants who normalised abuse or enacted it, a subset of participants described a process of intergenerational rupture: they had looked at their parents' marriage and made an explicit decision to do the opposite. This conscious rejection of parental modelling was an active, effortful process that required ongoing self-monitoring and intentional relationship choices.

A 31-year-old woman described her conscious rupture:

"I made a decision when I was sixteen years old. I was sitting in my bedroom listening to my parents scream at each other, and I said to myself, 'I will never be like them. I will never have a marriage like this.' That decision has guided every relationship choice I have made since. I went to therapy. I read books about healthy communication. I practiced saying what I needed instead of expecting my partner to read my mind. I learned to take timeouts during arguments instead of escalating. It has been hard work. It has not come naturally. But I have broken the

cycle. My marriage is not perfect, but it is not abusive. And every day I am grateful that the sixteen-year-old me made that promise."

A 36-year-old man described how his conscious rejection of his father's behaviour required ongoing vigilance:

"My father was controlling. He monitored my mother's phone calls, her movements, her spending. He said it was because he loved her. As an adolescent, I hated him for it. And I swore I would never be controlling. But here is the thing: controlling behaviour feels like love when that is what you grew up with. When I first got into a serious relationship, I found myself wanting to know where my girlfriend was all the time. Not because I was suspicious, but because I was anxious. I had to learn that my anxiety was my problem to manage, not her behaviour to control. I had to actively choose trust even when it felt scary. I still have to choose it every day. The impulse to control has not gone away. But I do not act on it. That is the difference between me and my father."

A 40-year-old woman described how she learned healthy conflict through explicit study:

"I had no model of healthy conflict resolution. None. My parents either screamed or gave each other the silent treatment. So I had to learn conflict resolution like I was learning a foreign language. I went to workshops. I read Gottman. I practiced 'I feel' statements in the mirror. I asked friends to role-play difficult conversations with me. My partner has been incredibly patient. He knows that when I freeze during an argument, it is not because I am shutting him out; it is because I genuinely do not know what to do. I am building skills that most people learn by watching their parents. It is possible. But it is hard work."

This theme of intergenerational rupture was associated with better relationship outcomes. Participants who had consciously rejected their parents' modelling were more likely to report healthy, non-abusive adult relationships. However, they also reported that the work of rupture was ongoing and never complete.

7.6 Theme 6: Fragile Hope and the Slow Construction of Alternative Relational Blueprints

The sixth theme captured the fragile hope that participants held for their own relational futures, and the slow, painstaking process of constructing alternative blueprints for what a healthy marriage could look like. This theme was present even among participants who had not yet achieved healthy relationships; the hope was fragile, sometimes flickering, but present.

A 29-year-old woman described her fragile hope:

"I do not know if I will ever have a truly healthy relationship. I am honest about that. But I also know that I have come a long way. Five years ago, I could not even have a conversation about my feelings without dissociating. Now I can. Two years ago, I would have ended a relationship at the first sign of conflict. Now I stay and try to work through it. The progress is real, even if it is slow. I have hope. Fragile hope. Hope that has been shattered many times and put back together. But it is hope."

A 34-year-old man described how he constructs alternative blueprints by seeking out healthy models:

"I did not have a model of a healthy marriage growing up. So I had to find models elsewhere. I look at my friends who are in good relationships. I ask them how they handle conflict. I watch how they talk to each other. I have learned that healthy couples argue differently. They do not attack each other's character. They do not bring up past grievances. They do not use silence as punishment. I am slowly constructing a blueprint in my mind of what a good marriage looks like. It is not based on my parents. It is based on people I have chosen as my teachers."

A 42-year-old woman described how her own relationship became a corrective experience:

"I have been with my husband for twelve years. The first five years were hard. I was hypervigilant. I tested him constantly. I expected him to become abusive. But he never did. He was consistently kind, even when I was difficult. He did not punish me for my fear. Over time, my body started to learn that he was safe. The hypervigilance decreased. The testing stopped. I started to believe that I was not going to be trapped. My husband has been my alternative blueprint. He has shown me, through years of consistent behaviour, that marriage does not have to be what I witnessed as an adolescent. That hope has become knowledge now. Not fragile anymore. But it took a long time."

This theme of fragile hope is important because it demonstrates that the attitudinal consequences of adolescent exposure to marital abuse are not deterministic. Attitudes can change. Blueprints can be reconstructed. Hope, even when fragile, can be a vehicle for healing.

8. DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth qualitative exploration of how exposure to marital abuse during adolescence shapes attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships in adulthood. The six themes normalisation of abuse, hypervigilance, commitment ambivalence,

exaggerated communication sensitivity, intergenerational rupture, and fragile hope together reveal a complex attitudinal landscape that is neither uniform nor immutable.

The finding that normalisation of abuse was pervasive among participants aligns with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Participants who witnessed abuse during adolescence did not merely observe isolated behaviours; they internalised entire relational scripts. These scripts included expectations of how conflict unfolds, what communication means, and what roles partners occupy. The normalisation was not simply cognitive but embodied and emotional. Participants did not just believe that abuse was normal; they felt that it was normal, expected it viscerally, and responded to their own relationships with expectations shaped by that normalisation.

Hypervigilance emerged as a central attitudinal consequence. Participants described a state of constant threat-scanning that was adaptive in their abusive adolescent environments but maladaptive in adult relationships with non-abusive partners. This finding extends Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) by showing how insecure attachment patterns manifest not only as behavioural strategies but as attentional and perceptual biases. Participants did not choose to be hypervigilant; their attention was automatically captured by potential threat cues, and their bodies responded with arousal even when their minds knew no threat existed.

Commitment ambivalence the simultaneous desire for and terror of marriage was a distinctive finding. This ambivalence is not captured by standard measures of attitudes towards marriage, which tend to assume that positive and negative attitudes are opposite ends of a single continuum. For these participants, positive and negative attitudes coexisted, producing behavioural oscillation and relational instability. This finding has implications for relationship education programmes, which often assume that participants who want marriage are uniformly positive about it.

The exaggerated communication sensitivity and catastrophic interpretation of conflict reported by participants can be understood through the lens of the Stress-Appraisal-Coping Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Participants appraised neutral or mildly negative communication as highly threatening because their adolescent experience had taught them that such cues were precursors to abuse. The appraisal, not the objective stimulus, drove the emotional and behavioural response. Interventions that target appraisals may be more effective than those that target behaviours alone.

The finding that some participants achieved intergenerational rupture through conscious rejection of parental modelling is both hopeful and instructive. These participants did not

simply heal from their exposure; they actively constructed alternative relational blueprints. They sought out healthy models, engaged in explicit skill-building, and maintained ongoing vigilance against the re-emergence of learned patterns. This finding suggests that resilience is not merely the absence of pathology but an active, effortful process of blueprint reconstruction.

Finally, the theme of fragile hope reminds us that attitudinal change is possible but slow. Participants who had made significant progress still described their hope as fragile, easily threatened by relational setbacks. This finding has implications for therapeutic interventions: they must be sustained, not brief; they must anticipate relapse; and they must validate the difficulty of constructing new relational blueprints after a lifetime of exposure to abusive models.

9. CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated how exposure to marital abuse during adolescence shapes attitudes towards marriage and intimate relationships in adulthood. The findings reveal that adolescent exposure to marital abuse produces a complex attitudinal legacy including normalisation of abusive relational scripts, chronic hypervigilance for relational threat, profound ambivalence about commitment, exaggerated sensitivity to communication cues, and a tendency to catastrophise minor conflicts. However, the findings also reveal that some individuals achieve intergenerational rupture through conscious rejection of parental modelling, and that even among those still struggling, fragile hope persists. The adolescent years are not merely a passive period of observation but an active period of meaning-making, identity formation, and blueprint construction. For those who witness marital abuse during these years, the blueprints they construct are often distorted, but they are not immutable. With intentional effort, support, and often therapeutic intervention, alternative blueprints can be constructed, and hope, however fragile, can be sustained.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policy, practice, and research.

Integrate Trauma-Informed Relationship Education into Secondary Schools: Given that normalisation of abuse begins during adolescence, secondary school relationship education programmes should explicitly address the distinction between healthy and unhealthy

relationship patterns, and should provide adolescents who witness marital abuse with alternative relational blueprints.

Develop Therapeutic Programmes Targeting Hypervigilance and Catastrophic Appraisal: Interventions for adults who witnessed adolescent marital abuse should specifically target hypervigilance and catastrophic conflict appraisal, using cognitive-behavioural techniques to recalibrate threat perception.

Provide Sustained, Not Brief, Interventions for Commitment Ambivalence: Given the persistence of commitment ambivalence, interventions should be sustained over time, allowing participants to test new relational patterns and integrate learning gradually.

Establish Peer Support Groups for Adult Children of Abusive Marriages: Peer support groups should be established where adults who witnessed marital abuse can share strategies for intergenerational rupture and alternative blueprint construction.

Train Mental Health Professionals on the Specific Attitudinal Consequences of Adolescent Exposure: Clinicians should receive training on the specific attitudinal patterns identified in this study, including normalisation, hypervigilance, ambivalence, and catastrophic interpretation.

Conduct Longitudinal Research Following Adolescents into Adulthood: Longitudinal research following adolescents who are currently witnessing marital abuse into their adult relationships is urgently needed to identify which protective factors predict the development of alternative blueprints.

Develop and Evaluate Preventive Interventions for Adolescents Currently Exposed: Preventive interventions should be developed and rigorously evaluated for adolescents currently living in abusive homes, focusing on the construction of alternative relational blueprints before maladaptive attitudes become entrenched.

REFERENCES

1. Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
2. Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
4. Ehrensaft, M. K., Cohen, P., Brown, J., Smailes, E., Chen, H., & Johnson, J. G. (2003). Intergenerational transmission of partner violence. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71(4), 741–753.

Copyright@

5. Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
6. Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
7. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
8. Mayock, P., Sheridan, S., & Parker, S. (2020). Homelessness and mental health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 41, 371–393.
9. Nilsson, S. F., Nordentoft, M., & Hjorthøj, C. (2018). Suicidal ideation and homelessness: A meta-analysis. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 138(4), 322–331.
10. Nwoye, A. (2017). African psychology and the African marriage crisis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27(2), 101–108.
11. Ratele, K. (2016). *Liberating masculinities*. HSRC Press.
12. Skafida, V., & Thomson, E. (2018). Parental domestic violence and young adults' relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(8), 2231–2255.
13. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
14. van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.