Research on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning
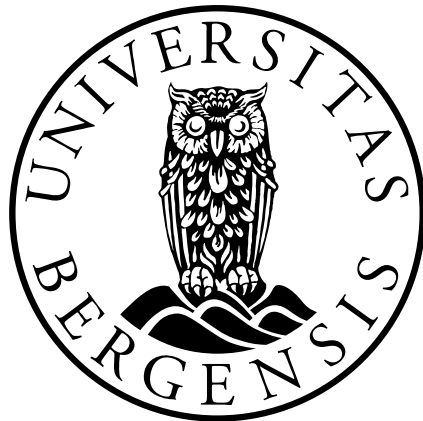
A scoping review

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Forord

The last two years have gone by quicker than I expected, and I'm excited to soon be able to say I have a master's degree in Barnevern. Writing this thesis has been challenging, and at times it has felt like I wouldn't be able to finish. But I have finished, and I have learned a lot in the past ten months. Not just about the subject and my topic, but also about how to organize my own time and to be my own motivator. I want to thank my advisor Sara Jahnke for always replying to my emails quicker than one could expect, answering my questions and guiding me through my process. After not balancing school and work well enough during the first semester of writing this thesis, I had a lot of work to do in a short amount of time, and she was very helpful. I also extended my deadline by two weeks, and she was able to help me although she was prepared for me to be done by May 19th.

I also want to thank my friends, family and classmates for listening to me talk about my topic although it is not of the same interest to them all as it is to me. Thank you for cheering me on when I felt overwhelmed, and for allowing me to send you paragraphs for you to read and give feedback on. Thank you!

Abstract

Childhood emotional maltreatment has been found to be the most frequent form of childhood maltreatment. The consequences later in life include trouble building and maintaining relationships, as well as mental health issues and a poor sense of self. Childhood emotional maltreatment is likely to affect adult romantic relationships, but the amount of research on this is not substantial. This master's thesis reviews empirical literature published between 2012 and 2021 examining the link between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. In this scoping review, I identified 10 articles that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The aim of this study was to gather the current literature on how emotional maltreatment affects later adult romantic relationship functioning and identify possible gaps in the literature. This scoping review shows that individuals with a history of emotional maltreatment are at risk of having dysfunctional romantic relationships in adulthood. Several potential mediators were identified. Intrapersonal issues like maladaptive schemas, emotion dysregulation, poor emotion communication and insecure attachment styles are likely to increase the chances of conflict and poor communication towards a romantic partner. Conflict and poor communication, along with low compassionate goals is likely to lead to dysfunctional relationships with low quality and satisfaction. This study mainly addresses different mediators between emotional maltreatment and relationship functioning while also presenting background research on both topics. Gaps in the literature are discussed. The lack of qualitative research and research on participants who are not currently in relationships are lacking in the current available literature. Limitations of this literature review is presented as well as implications for further research are discussed.

Key words: emotional maltreatment, adult romantic relationship functioning, child maltreatment, relational problems

Sammendrag

Emosjonell mishandling i barndommen har vist seg å være den mest hyppige form av barnemishandling. Dette fordi det forekommer alene og sammen med andre former for mishandling. Konsekvensene av dette har vist seg å være lik andre former for mishandling. Romantiske forhold i voksenlivet har spesielt vist seg å være utsatt for konsekvensene av et dårlig foreldre-barn forhold, enda er forskningen rundt dette noe begrenset. Denne master oppgaven tar for seg empirisk forskning utgitt mellom 2012 og 2021 som dekker linken mellom emosjonell mishandling i barndommen og romantiske forhold i voksen livet. 10 artikler representerer dataene presentert i oppgaven etter å ha møtt inklusjon og eksklusjonskriterier.

Målet med denne oppgaven var å samle den tilgjengelige kunnskapen om hvordan emosjonell mishandling påvirker senere romantiske forhold, samt å finne eventuelle hull i litteraturen. Denne oppgaven viser at individer med en barndom preget av emosjonell mishandling har større risiko for å ha dysfunksjonelle romantiske forhold senere i livet. Flere mediatorer ble identifisert. Indre personlige konflikter som maladaptive skjemaer, emosjonsregulering, problematisk kommunikasjon av følelser og usikker tilknytning har vist seg å øke sjansene for konflikter og kommunikasjonsproblemer i romantiske forhold. Konflikter og svak kommunikasjon, sammen med mangel på gode ønsker for partneren kan føre til dysfunksjonelle forhold med lav kvalitet og tilfredshet. Denne oppgaven presenterer hovedsakelig forskjellige mediatorer mellom emosjonell mishandling og dysfunksjonelle romantiske forhold, samt at den presenterer bakgrunns forskning om begge temaer. Begrensninger på dataen og implikasjoner for videre forskning er diskutert.

Nøkkelord: emosjonell mishandling, voksne romantiske forhold, barne mishandling, relasjonelle problemer

Table of Contents

List of Tables:

7

1. Introduction

1. 1 Presentation of topic

Children who lack a consistent source of support, love and warmth have lower chances of attending college than the average person. They also have lower annual income and poorer mental health than the general population (Beattey, 2017; Canan et al., 2014). This lack of love and support is a form of *child maltreatment*, which is defined by the World Health Organization (2020) as the abuse or neglect of a child under the age of 18. Childhood maltreatment includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect (Fitzgerald, 2021a; Zamir, 2021). When *emotional maltreatment* occurs as a pattern over time, it has been associated with adverse outcomes later in life, which in some cases have appeared to be more severe than the outcomes of other types of maltreatment (Loucks et al., 2019), like, for example, physical abuse (Solomon & Serres, 1999). Understanding childhood maltreatment and its consequences is extremely important when working within health care or child protective services, as the goal of child protective services is to protect children from these experiences and/or to minimize outcomes associated with child maltreatment that a person may have experienced earlier in life. (Blindheim, 2012; Pilkington et al., 2020).

Physical abuse, sexual abuse and physical neglect and their consequences have previously been most heavily researched (Blindheim, 2012), and their potential consequences both long-term and short-term are well-established (Neumann, 2017). Emotional maltreatment on the other hand, was a latecomer to the field (Reyome, 2010), yet it has been established that people who have been exposed to emotional maltreatment are more likely to experience potential mental health and relationship problems later in life compared so someone who have not experienced emotional maltreatment (Yates & Wekerle, 2009). Although the volume of research covering emotional maltreatment has grown over the last few decades, it remains the least researched type of childhood maltreatment (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010; Wright et al., 2009). And as it has been argued to affect relationships across the lifespan, romantic relationships have been argued to suffer when one or both parties have been a victim of emotional maltreatment (Reyome, 2010; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010; Zamir, 2020)

1

In this thesis I wanted to further explore the potential consequences of emotional maltreatment, and specifically the consequences in adult romantic relationship functioning. This refers to psychological components such as communication, trust, safety, warmth and intimacy in adult romantic relationships. Physical violence will be excluded from the functioning of romantic relationships, and a rationale for this will follow.

I have chosen to conduct a literature review in order to examine what the current literature says about how emotional maltreatment affects adult romantic relationship functioning. Based on simple searches prior to starting this thesis, the last decade held less research on the topic than the years prior, which is why empirical literature only published between 2012-2021 will be included in this study. By conducting a scoping review, this study seeks to collect the available literature on the topic, as well as looking for potential gaps in the literature. I wish for this study to contribute to further research on emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationships. It has previously been suggested that the most important source of happiness and life satisfaction in adulthood comes from the quality of one's intimate relationships (Freedman, 1978 as cited in Bartholomew, 1990; Klinger, 1977). I believe it is important to gather knowledge on what could potentially disturb their functioning, and how these factors could be prevented and/or minimized.

The research question is as follows:

«What does the literature say about the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning?»

1. **2. Background**

Child protective services in Norway completed a total of 56 802 investigations of child maltreatment in 2020, and about 53 000 of these led to measures put in place for the child or their families (Bufdir, 2021). It is also found that 1 in 20 children and adolescents in Norway grow up in an environment affected by some form of child maltreatment (Reneflot, 2019). According to Monn (2021), the current statistics in Norwegian child protective services are concerning in terms of prevalence of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment typically comes from a parent, guardian

2

or others responsible for the child's care (Leeb et al., 2008), for example a babysitter, relatives, coaches or teachers. As long as they have a permanent or a temporary responsibility for the child at risk of harm (Reneflot, 2019). But when coming from a parent or other type of guardian, it tends to lead to even further difficulty for the child as well as anyone trying to help, as it makes their home feel unsafe (Felitti et al., 1996; Van der Kolk, 1993).

In a meta-analysis by Stoltenborgh et al. (2014) a high prevalence of the different forms of child maltreatment was documented worldwide; physical abuse (23%), sexual abuse (13%), emotional abuse (36%), emotional neglect (18%) and physical neglect (16%). However, international studies show a variation in prevalence, and differences in definitions and under-reporting are both possible causing factors in the matter, among others (Gilbert et al., 2009).

Childhood maltreatment has been shown to bring out disturbances in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, and may negatively affect trust, communication, sexual functioning, life satisfaction, relationship functioning and physical and mental health (Beattey, 2017; Hart et al. 1997; Reyome, 2010, Rodriguez, 2015). Studies show that survivors of general childhood maltreatment are six times more likely to struggle in marriage later in life than someone who was not a victim of childhood maltreatment (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021). Divorce rates and conflicts are generally higher and marital satisfaction is generally lower after suffering from childhood maltreatment (Zamir, 2021). And marital discord has again been shown to be a predictor of poor mental and physical health as well as a risk in terms of later dysfunctional parenting (Conger et al., 1992) where negative patterns can transfer.

All types of maltreatment could technically happen to anyone at any age (Reneflot, 2019), but the risk of negative consequences following maltreatment during childhood is significantly higher when it happens within the child's primary care system and during the most important developmental years (Felitti et al., 1996; Van der Kolk, 1993).

Emotional abuse and emotional neglect are often seen grouped into the term *childhood emotional maltreatment*, which includes both neglect and abuse (Cao et al., 2020a; Reyome, 2010; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). Emotional maltreatment will also be the term used throughout this study. Emotional neglect refers to unavailable, uninvolved or unresponsive parenting (Loucks et al., 2019), while emotional abuse refers to controlling and critical behavior or verbal assaults (Cao et al., 2020a) In simpler terms, neglect can be seen as more passive harmful behavior from a parent

3

and abuse can be seen as more of an active harmful behavior. Name-calling, rejection, exploitation and unrealistic expectations are also examples of emotional maltreatment (Yates & Wekerle, 2009)

Emotional maltreatment is far less researched than other types of child maltreatment (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010; Wright et al., 2009). This is likely to be due to several reasons. It's possible that it is seen as easier to research specific incidents such as sexual or physical abuse where there could be physical evidence. The consequences of physical or sexual abuse are also more often immediate and visible, while emotional maltreatment is harder to detect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2014). This brings out an important distinction between emotional abuse and sexual- and physical abuse. Sexual or physical abuse can constitute of only one incident or event, while emotional maltreatment is a *relationship* between a child and a caregiver (Wright et al., 2009). Timely intervention can therefore be difficult. And while sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect are typically seen as harmful for a child both physically, emotionally and developmentally (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019), the threshold of intervention and protection when a child has been emotionally maltreated is much lower and the laws are more often unclear (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Wolf & McIsaac, 2011; Yates & Wekerle, 2008). Wolfe & McIsaac (2010) also emphasize the importance of differencing between poor parenting and emotional maltreatment, although both poor parenting and emotional maltreatment has shown to negatively affect general well-being later in life. They refer to child maltreatment, no matter the form, as one of the worst and more intrusive forms of stress put upon a child (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010). Furthermore, Doyle & Molix (2015) again states that internal stress is one of the major contributors to low functioning romantic relationships.

 Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2021) suggested that child maltreatment related attributional styles may become more prominent during the course of a romantic relationship. They argue that as people who have experienced child maltreatment become more comfortable in their partner's presence, it becomes harder to hide their vulnerabilities and their view of their partner may change. This is likely to be relevant in most close or romantic relationships, as one usually gets more comfortable and vulnerable as more time is spent with a partner (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021). Emotional maltreatment specifically has also been shown to lower individuals perceived partner responsiveness more than other types of maltreatment. And a difference in victims of childhood

maltreatment, compared to non-victims, is that their relational history can present more difficulties when creating new relations as well as in keeping them (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021). Problems in building friendships and relationships (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010; Wolf & McIsaac, 2011), constitute an often overlooked aspect and consequence of emotional maltreatment. One area of life that can possibly be deeply affected by the lack of a consistent source of support and love are when these children, as teenagers or adults, start dating and forming romantic relationships. At this time their romantic partners become just as important in their life as their parents were when they were children (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021).

Researcher have stated that there are several similarities as well as differences between a parent-child relationship and future romantic relationships (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999), and these are often explained using attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which will be presented in further detail in the Concepts and Theory chapter. According to Hazan & Zeifman (1999), the parent-child relationship and adult romantic relationships both include four basic features: proximity seeking, safe haven, a secure base and separation protest.

There is typically a shift during adolescence and early adulthood where a person seeks support and intimacy from friends and romantic partners instead of their parents (Black & Schutte, 2006). Fraley & Davis (1997) examined when these basic features start to transfer from relationships with parents to relationships with peers. They found a large number of young adults to have transferred these features over to their peers, friends and partners by the time they went to university. Knowing how to navigate these new relations can be crucial to further development of relationships as well as one's mental health (Tanaka et al., 2011), indicating the importance of having developed these features healthily while still having one's parents as their main base of safety.

When entering a romantic relationship, or simply just engaging in casual dating, communication and trust, among other things, play an important role in both one's life- and possible relationship satisfaction. And if communication, trust and safety were lacking in their child-parent relationship, there is a concern about how this affects expectations of oneself and others in all adult relationships (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021), and for this scoping review specifically; in adult romantic relationships.

5

It has come to researchers' attention in the past two decades that although physical and sexual abuse may more easily be detected than emotional maltreatment, children who have been physically or sexually abused typically also experience emotional maltreatment. This, combined with the fact that many victims of only emotional maltreatment do not experience physical or sexual abuse, makes emotional maltreatment arguably the most prevalent type of child maltreatment (Higgins & McCabe, 2000). According to some researchers, emotional maltreatment is seen as the core component of general child abuse and neglect (Hart et al, 1997).

And as we spend most of our life interacting with others through conversations, television, phones or even just in our thoughts, scholars also argue that interpersonal relations are the core of all human life (Konrath et. al, 2014). Emotional abuse victims have also shown more dysfunctional symptomatology in adulthood, than victims of sexual abuse and physical abuse (Ozerinjauregui, 2015 as cited in Estevez et al., 2017). A history of childhood maltreatment has been found to have a significant effect on mental health issues such as symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety and anger issues (Teicher et al., 2006). And a study by Teicher et al. (2006) looked into the effects of the different types of maltreatment, and the researchers suggested that when several of them happen simultaneously, emotional maltreatment has just as negative consequences as sexual and physical abuse. This may contradict a general belief of childhood maltreatment, as it probable that if one hears of a child being sexually or physically abused, we are more likely to be appalled by this than emotional maltreatment. Which is understandable as one can argue these types of abuse require more sinful and vicious acts. Especially when done to a child. But the consequences later in life could be equally as, or more, adverse as a victim of emotional maltreatment. Different types of maltreatment during childhood can prevent healthy emotional development (Zamir, 2020) and affect attachment not only during childhood, but it can lead to relational dysfunction in adolescence and adulthood due to trouble creating and keeping these close relations (Fett, 2021).

1. **3. Disposition**

The introduction chapter will be followed by a presentation of relevant concepts and theories used throughout this study. Attachment theory, emotion regulation and maladaptive schemas will be accounted for as they are often seen in relation to both emotional maltreatment and romantic relationships. Further I will present my choice of method, where I describe what a literature review is, why I have chosen to conduct a scoping review and how I conducted the study.

The study summarizes and discusses the available relevant literature, and this is presented in an analysis chapter to help organize the findings. I will present and discuss limitations and implications along with a short summary of the findings. Lastly, a chapter with final reflections includes a critical reflection of my own work and the identified literature gaps and implications for further research is summed up.

2. Concepts and theory

For this section I will be defining the main terms used throughout this thesis. I will discuss the difference between emotional maltreatment and poor parenting, then I will be presenting attachment theory as it is highly relevant to the topic at hand. Then I will be presenting relevant schemas and negative outcomes from emotional maltreatment and discuss why they are relevant in terms of later romantic relationships. Finally, I will be linking these negative outcomes of emotional maltreatment to romantic relationships according to relevant literature.

Research on the topic of interest often use mediational hypotheses or mediation models. A moderating variable alter the strength of a given relation, and a moderator represents an interaction effect where causal factors affect the main effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986, as cited in Langeveld et al., 2012). The concepts presented in this chapter are often mediators between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult relationships.

2. 1 Defining childhood emotional maltreatment

Childhood emotional maltreatment can be very harmful to a child's sense of self and personal security and can lead to anxiety and/or mood disorders later in life as well as substance abuse, difficult with trust and jealousy or low self-esteem (Tailieu et. al., 2016; Yates & Wekerle, 2008). Published research shows slight differences in definitions on child emotional maltreatment, emotional neglect and emotional abuse, but for this thesis *childhood emotional maltreatment* will be used when referring to both emotional abuse and neglect if not mentioned otherwise. A short description of the differences between neglect and abuse will still be accounted for:

Emotional neglect refers to emotionally and/or physically distant parents, strong rejection or lack of support or other behavior from a parent or guardian which conveys that the child is useless, worthless, unwanted or only worthy when meeting certain expectations (Yates & Wekerle, 2008). Parents with mental health issues, substance abuse or who are living in poverty may also show signs of emotionally neglecting their children (Wright et al., 2009) without being aware, indicating

that it doesn't have to be intentional, but perhaps simply poor parenting. As a young child all one has are their parents or close family members, so if these are unavailable, a child can feel left alone. Emotional neglect is usually more subtle compared to emotional abuse and can also be described as parents who overlook a child' request for support or comfort (Erickson & Egeland, 1996). And although it may not seem like the worst thing a parent can do, it can produce negative consequences for the child later on (Hassija et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2009)

Emotional abuse is typically more precise than neglect. Some examples of emotional abuse are verbal assaults, threats, name calling, isolating, exploitation, leaving a child unsupervised when not appropriate or even locking them outside (Reyome et al., 2010; Yates & Wekerle, 2008). While emotional abuse does not harm a child physically, the experiences can yield psychological distress (Wright et al., 2009). Locking a child outside is an example that does not involve physical harm alone but is seen as emotionally abusive.

Repeated actions or patterns by the parent or guardian are often a requirement for child welfare systems to interfere, as well as if it is seen that the child's home life will interfere with their development and well-being (Bufdir, 2020).

2. 2 Defining adult romantic relationship functioning

For this thesis, adults will be referred to as anyone over the age of 18. The definition of *adult romantic relationship functioning* is important in understanding what I am looking to investigate through this scoping review. Partner violence seems to be the most researched aspect of romantic relationships. But satisfaction, quality and functioning have also been researched. These aspects can be both difficult to define as researchers and difficult to explain by participants in the research. And although researchers seem to present their topic slightly different while still researching the same aspects, they all still seem to lean towards the same question; how happy one is in a relationship, what reasons lie behind their answer and how can this be linked to childhood maltreatment.

I have chosen to use the word *functioning* as the focus of adult romantic relationships, as it is my understanding that it involves all aspects of a relationship, and that *quality* and *satisfaction* are both parts of the functioning of a romantic relationship. What is important in a relationship will probably differ and depend on everyone, their lifestyle, their past and their goals for the future. But it is fair to assume that everyone entering a romantic relationship does so with a desire for closeness, happiness and safety, whatever that may look like for each person.

Satisfaction has been defined as the fulfillment of a need or want, being content with their situation and as a source of enjoyment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2019) researched sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in adult romantic relationships after childhood maltreatment and specified that there is a difference between sexual satisfaction and relationships satisfaction, although they also found intimacy to mediate both sexual and relationship satisfaction. This shows the complexity of romantic relationships and how so many aspects play a role in how one sees their own, and perhaps also other people's relationships.

Quality in a qualitative context usually refers to an observed quality, and not a measured quality (McLeod, 2019). Even when measured quantitatively, a specific score may look different to different people and the score may change over short periods of time. In research on the topic at hand, it is typically seen from the participants point of view as it is mostly self-reported and can be referred to as how one evaluates their relationship in terms of satisfaction or happiness (Zamir, 2021). Again, this shows the complexity of romantic relationships where, for example, quality depends on satisfaction, and perhaps vice versa.

Functioning in relation to romantic relationships have some vague definitions in research. However, Doyle & Molix (2015) describes it as representing many various features of romantic relationships, including passion, strain and investment. They also state that it is not a unidimensional construct and involves both positive and negative features (Doyle & Molix, 2015). River et al. (2022) stated that functioning also relates to attachment styles. Physical and psychological aggression and stress are examples that would imply lower function (Doyle & Molix, 2015; River et al., 2022). Being supportive of one's partner would imply higher functioning (Doyle & Molix, 2015).

My definition of functioning involves most features of a romantic relationship, as well as those mentioned above. But I chose to limit my definition of functioning to the psychological features, leaving out any physical aggression. By psychological functions I refer to happiness, safety,

communication, jealousy and the ability and willingness to be sensitive and responsive as well as expecting a potential partner to be. Physical aggression will always include some kind of psychological aggression (Berzenski & Yates, 2009), but psychological aggression does not have to involve physical aggression.

2. 3 The difference between childhood emotional maltreatment and poor parenting

I believe it is important to distinguish between what we call abuse or neglect, particularly neglect, and what is simply non optimal parenting. Therefore, a chapter on the differences between childhood emotional maltreatment and poor parenting is included in this study.

Emotional *abuse* is likely to be considered by most as damaging to a child's mental health and future relations (Reyome, 2010), but emotional *neglect* might be more difficult to investigate. Most available research on emotional maltreatment either use emotional *maltreatment* or emotional *abuse* as their dependent variable, but very few researchers use only emotional *neglect* as their variable. This could be due to the vague definition of emotional neglect and whether it is considered maltreatment. Some researcher state emotional neglect to be a failure to act (Webb, 2016), as opposed to acting in an emotional abusive manner, which may be another reason to why it is difficult to research. On the other hand, several researchers have investigated the general quality of parent-child relationships, without referring to maltreatment, and have found there to be a link between low quality parent-child relationships and romantic relationship functioning (Donnellan et al., 2005; Jarnecke & South, 2013; Paley et al., 2002; Shortt et al., 2013).

Differences in parenting styles is likely to always occur, and one parent's idea of the best way to raise a child will not be every other parent's idea of "the best way". Difficult life events like postpartum depression, loss of a loved one, loss of income or housing are all examples of events that are likely to take away the focus on parenting, according to Wolfe & McIsaac (2010). Even if there is no maltreatment or ill-intentions from the parent, the low quality of their relationship can yet affect the child's later relationships similarly to the impact of emotional maltreatment for some (River et al., 2022).

Some parents are also likely to engage in acts that could be considered emotional maltreatment at some point, such as yelling or insulting their child, but if it is not a pattern, it typically does not mean they are maltreating their child (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010).

As already stated, emotional maltreatment happens in a repeated pattern through harmful interactions between the child and their parent (Helsebiblioteket, 2015).

Both emotional maltreatment and poor parenting methods may both impair the relationships between a child and their parents (River et al., 2022). However, according to Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010), some of the differences between the two are that poor parenting is often insensitive, while abuse or neglect might be rejecting. Poor parenting can be inflexible in responding to a child, while abuse or neglect can mean ambivalent responses. Poor parenting could also mean unclear house rules like late or no curfew versus abusive or physically unavailable parenting which might mean sporadic rules, perhaps only if it benefits the parent at a given time (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010). Finally, poor parenting usually does not mean a child is without their basic needs met (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2010). Poor parenting could mean excessively strict parents or parents with no rules or expectations, but the child could seemingly have "everything" they need. Neither poor parenting nor emotional maltreatment is ideal, but poor parenting is generally less severe, although it might still include some similar aspects to emotional maltreatment.

According to Wolfe & McIsaac (2010), the acts of the parent are more important than the outcomes or reactions in the child when defining or differentiating between the two. This can be linked to the concept of resilience, as it has been found that different children can react differently to similar situations (Lee et al., 2019), and that could mean that children's outcome doesn't necessarily define how "bad" their parent-child relationship was. And if a child suffers greatly later in life due to their relationship with their parents as children, one also need to consider the possibility of resilience as well as the possible maltreatment or poor parenting they may have been exposed to. Resilience refers to adaptation within adverse experiences (Luthar et al., 2000, as cited in Arslan, 2016), and experiencing a positive adaptation in difficult situations is typically seen as a protective factor for one's mental health and well-bring (Bonanno, 2008, as cited in Arslan, 2016).

Despite research stating that emotional maltreatment is harmful, it is not a given that every victim suffers serious consequences. This is important to remember when discussing child maltreatment as well; that even though there are possible severe consequences, not every child suffers the same

way. Some children could possibly also suffer more consequences from an upbringing of poor parenting, than a child who experienced emotional maltreatment. Although it has also been found that emotional maltreatment leaves one of a lower resilience and further trouble later in life (Arslan, 2016); Lee et al., 2019).

2. 4 Attachment theory

Attachment theory is a highly relevant theory in regards to relationships, as it can help one understand how close relationships in young childhood can affect how we relate and connect to others as adults. Attachment theory was first developed by Bowlby (1969) and further developed by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) agreed that at least one reliable adult caregiver is needed for a child to develop healthily. Although these authors emphasized the preference of having more than one reliable adult in a child's life, they also caution that too many caregivers could make it harder to make deeper connections (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969). For example, if a child is often moved around, whether that is within child protection services as a foster child or if their parents work a lot and the child often spends time at different friends and family member's houses.

Through reciprocal interactions with a warm, sensitive and caring care-giver or parent the child may learn to better regulate their feelings and feel safe, supported and confident in the role of an initiator in a parent-child relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Bowlby (1973) assumed that if children feel safe to express themselves and to ask for help and support and if they feel sure they will receive their guardian's attention, they are more likely to feel safe and secure in later relationships. This means that if children do not experience a loving and safe parent-child relationship, they are more likely to question other's intentions and to not feel safe to ask for what they need in later relationships. Alternatively, they might feel as if they need to excessively ask for what they need. Although attachment theory has predominantly focused on the relationship between infants and their caregivers, later research has linked attachment theory to all relationships and further focused on how it changes or affects individuals across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1973; Riggs, 2010; Shelley et. al. 2010).

13

Ainsworth et al. (1978) mainly recognized two different attachment styles in children: secure and insecure. The theory was first formed by closely observing children's reactions when their mother would leave the room and then come back later, and a link between their reaction to their mother's behaviors would be drawn to a certain style of attachment. Ainsworth et al. (1978) assumed a strong association between healthy emotional development through the child-parent relationship and a secure attachment, and an insecure attachment was associated with an unhealthy emotional development through the same relationship. Attachment theory indicates that different styles of parenting are connected to different attachment behaviors in a child, and that they reflect an inner working model of relationships (Bowlby, 1973). By inner working model of relationships, it is referred to by Bowlby (1973) that these are different scripts and templates within oneself aimed towards relationships, which is also commonly referred to as *maladaptive schemas* (Estevez et al., 2017) These scripts and templates include information on who one's attachment figures are, where they can be found, how one expects them to respond and how acceptable one is in the eyes of their attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973). These are again related to different levels of self-esteem and efficacy within a child, and later as they become adults. Attachment patterns are also thought of as a core part of human nature, and according to Bartholomew (1990), these patterns indicate the quality of one's relationship bond.

After observing children and their mothers, the children's behaviors were supportive of two attachment styles, secure attachment (type B) and insecure attachment, where insecure attachment was separated by three different insecure attachment styles; Anxious avoidant insecure attachment (type A) most often referred to as avoidant attachment, Anxious, resistant or ambivalent insecure attachment (type C) most often referred to as anxious attachment. Disorganized, disoriented insecure attachment (type D) was added later after further research, but the first three types mentioned are still more commonly recognized today (George & Main, 1979).

A secure (type B) attachment style stems from a caregiver or care-system allowing the child to be an active participant in a relationship with a secure attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1978). In Ainsworth's (1978) observations, individuals displaying a secure attachment style trusts their caregiver to protect and comfort them. They were upset when their caregiver left but explored actively while they were gone. They trusted that their caregiver put them in a safe environment and would later come back to pick them up.

14

Children with an avoidant (type A) attachment showed a lack of interest in their mother and their mother was perceived as cold and rejecting at times. These children showed less attachment behavior, were often rewarded for independence, and were not given comfort and reassurance.

Anxious (type C) attachment was seen in children who seemed to feel unsafe, being very worried their mother would leave, upset when they left and ambivalent when they came back. Their mothers gave inconsistent responses to their needs, causing the child to become desperate for their mother's response, leading to stronger attachment behavior. Inconsistent responses could be to respond with love and care at some times, while responding with stress and ambivalence at other times.

Disorganized (type D) attachment showed contradictory behavior patterns with signs of confusion and negative emotions. The contradicting behavior can be difficult to observe, as it tends to reflect in subtle and rapidly transient behavior (Hesse & Main, 2000).

As one grows older, behaviors and needs change, and although one's attachment style may remain the same, it will reflect itself in different ways and some of these are mentioned in the next sections on schemas. In some cases, it becomes more pronounced (Moretti & Peled, 2004). During adolescence and later in adulthood one is not dependent on their caregiver in the same physical sense, therefore attachment behavior shows more through needs of emotional support from people close to them, and not so much for physical presence and support as in an infant or young child. Attachment styles also become more prominent in friendships and romantic relationships, while previously it was most prominent towards parents and caregivers (Doumas et al., 2008). As attachment styles usually become more prominent in closer relationships, this shift has also been shown to project on to how one fits in with their peers, social status, jealousy or how one explores their sexuality during adolescence (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Close and serious romantic relationships typically don't form until early adulthood, and although these relationships can be highly important in adulthood, how one fits in with their peers is an important focus of relations during adolescence and early adulthood (Fraley & Davis, 1997).

15

1. **5 Schemas**

The current literature on childhood emotional maltreatment often refers to the negative effects on *attachment, emotion regulation* and *maladaptive schemas*, where all three are seen as inner working models or schemas linked to mental health, adult romantic relationships, as well as general relationships both in childhood and later in life. *Inner working models* is usually a phrase used in relation to attachment (Bowlby, 1973), and also typically used when speaking of adults. When one is an adult, these inner working models have had time to form as one is past their initial developmental years. Inner working models or schemas are quite similar, and they both serve an organizational purpose for our pattern of thought and behavior when interpreting the world around us (Nickerson, 2021). Inner working models, according to Nickerson (2021) are more specific in regard to relations, while schemas are typically centered around *objects, the self, roles* or *events*. *Object* schemas refer to how objects function and can be as simple as how to use an elevator. *Self-schemas* refer to how one sees themselves in relation to the world around them. *Roles* refer to how one thinks one is supposed to act in certain situations, such as how one acts at the library or at a bar. Finally, *event* schemas refer to how one acts in an event such as when greeting someone or going on a first date (Nickerson, 2021).

Schemas are built from past experiences, particularly within one's family of origin. They stem from unresolved conflict from earlier experiences where their emotional and attachment needs were not met (Pilkington et al., 2022). If one has repeated negative experiences when seeking support, they have developed a schema to help them avoid being disappointed again and will therefore be reluctant to seek support in later similar situations. But schemas are not the truth, they are simply personal core beliefs (Estevéz et al., 2017).

To further explain schemas, they are also a part of culture. By living in a culture, we are taught how to interact in that culture and that culture becomes what we are most comfortable around (Kvello, 2010). We reject situations that may match with our schemas and are likely to interpret and react according to our schema and culture. One does not greet others the same in every city or country, which is why these schemas can differ. But just as culture can change or differ, schemas can also change.

Finally, Collins & Sroufe (1999) emphasizes three important features to have in order to achieve a well-functioning intimate relationship. These are to a) be able to value and seek closeness, b) be

willing to stand intense emotions that come with close relationships and c) be able to share one's own thoughts, be sensitive and to care for others well-being. *Attachment, emotion regulation* and *maladaptive schemas* are all important aspects in achieving these three features. They can also all be seen connected to each other. They will be further discussed separately in relation to adult romantic relationships, while also connecting them to each other where it is reasonable for proper presentation of the concepts.

2. 5. 6 Emotion regulation and its effect on romantic relationships

Regulating one's own emotions, being able to tolerate difficult situations and recognizing emotions and reactions in others are very important skills for a child to learn (Blindheim, 2012) If these skills are taught in a dysfunctional manner, similar to maladaptive schemas, the holder of a dysfunctional emotion regulation system typically believe they are reacting appropriately, in that moment at least. Their inner beliefs/systems react with the information they have on emotion regulation, and if this is dysfunctional, it may negatively affect the dynamic in romantic relationships (Berzenski, 2019)

Calkins & Marcovitch (2010) viewed emotion regulation processes as skills, strategies and behaviors that inhibit, modulate or enhance the expression or experience of emotions. These can be automatic or by effort and conscious or unconscious. In a safe environment where a child is acknowledged and comforted, it is typically taught how to properly express their emotions, how to postpone immediate needs or reactions if not appropriate at a given time and how and when to ask for comfort. Learning how to comfort themselves is also very important for normal emotional development (Blindheim, 2012). Regulating emotions without too much effort would be the most ideal, but no one is able to perfectly regulate all emotions with no effort. As an infant, these skills are not present and need to be taught as the infant grows older. Hence why small children can get upset about small inconveniences. By interfering with the learning of these skills inhibits a child's emotional development. This is why it is important to give attention to these needs at a young age (Blindheim, 2012).

Berzenski (2019) also linked childhood emotional maltreatment to problems in later social relationships, with the mediating effect of distinct difficulties in emotion regulation. An example

17

of the importance of emotion regulation in romantic relationships comes to show through the need to be able to express positive emotions towards a partner (Shiota et al. 2004). Expressing negative emotions can be an obvious strain on a relationship. but showing little to no emotions can have just as much of a negative impact. Showing little emotions is a sign of trouble in emotion regulation, as it is only human to display and feel emotions and it is needed to read each other's emotions. But showing too strong emotions can also be a sign of the same troubling tendencies. Being overly sensitive and easily overwhelmed in a relationship or expressing little emotions and seemingly rejecting their partner can be referred to as being emotionally overactive or restrictive (Wei et al. 2005), or simply having emotion regulation issues.

Having healthy boundaries set by caring parents, support in managing emotions and reciprocal interactions during childhood can help support emotion regulation (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010). Calkins & Marcovitch (2010) refer to emotion regulation as the foundation of successful conflict resolution. If one is able to listen actively and express their emotions calmly, they will benefit from it in both parent-child relationships, friendships and romantic relationships. Without this, it is likely that relationships will be harder to create and keep. As an example, a child who experienced psychological control by their parents, such as manipulative or overly strict parenting, could feel guilty of their behavior when lacking an explanation as why a certain reaction or behavior was inappropriate. This may lead to them either being submissive in a future relationship and restrain their opinions and values or learn from their parent's behavior and apply similar control over their partner (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010).

Dissociation and fear of closeness later in life are also seen as typical consequences of when a child's ideal source of safety represents danger instead. A conflict within the child arises at times when it is in need of comfort at the same time as feeling the need to withdraw from the person representing danger. This is obviously negative in terms of the parent-child relationship, but can also carry out into later relationships where one believes their partner or potential partner to be dangerous and one can feel torn between whether or not they should get closer to someone or withdraw themselves (Blindheim, 2012), leading to ambivalent relationships.

Parenting that balances love, limits and expectations consistently and exerts them at appropriate times can be seen as the optimal way of parenting (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Social norms and moral codes later in life are more easily facilitated when parents provide their children with a rationale to why their behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate, and when love is used to build

confidence and a strong sense of self (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010). Children who experience insensitive caregiving at an early stage, are also often able to improve their sense of self and others if there is a shift in environment, for example a foster home. Depending on the severity of their negative experiences, and perhaps their age when they are given a new environment, it is possible for a child to change some of their negative patterns into positive (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010). A hamper of the development of healthy emotion regulation leading to either deactivating or hyperactive emotion regulation, is a common issue in individuals who have developed insecure attachment styles and behaviors (Main, 1995).

3. 5. 7 Attachment and romantic relationships

Attachment theory lays the ground for inner working models in all relations and how one perceives themselves and others. Bowlby (1988) stated that adult intimate relationships often mimic the relationship one had with their parents when they were children. The parent-child relationship is then likely to later affect both emotional and sexual intimacy, partner violence, jealousy, communication and conflict management, and it is therefore possible that a victim of emotional maltreatment will show stronger negative attachment behaviors in adult intimate relationships. Rodriguez et al. (2015) similarly stated that if our relationship with our caregivers was unstable, we are likely to behave as if we expect our romantic relationships to be unstable as well. Meaning that there is a larger chance of trust issues, communication issues and lower satisfaction towards a partner which will display itself in insecure attachment behavior.

Although attachment styles have been found to precede into young adulthood, attachment behaviors are still subject to change just like negative or positive life events can lead to intrapersonal changes (Konrath et al., 2014; Nickerson, 2021; Riggs, 2010). Similarly, emotion regulation difficulties can also change as mentioned. One is therefore not exempt from intrapersonal issues or attachment trouble even if one's upbringing was ideal, as well as once intrapersonal issues have arisen, they are not set in stone without the possibility for improvement.

19

As stated, attachment behaviors are typically split into secure and insecure attachment based on the work by Ainsworth et al., (1978), where secure attachment is ideal and insecure attachment is not.

Anxious attachment behavior (insecure attachment style) is characterized by a negative view of self and a positive view of others, typical behaviors in romantic relationships include a strong fear of being abandoned, constantly looking for signs of availability or unavailability in a partner and seeing emotional cues that might not be present to their partner (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Anxious attachment arguably represents the most active form of attachment (Rodriguez et al., 2015), due to a hyperactive emotion regulation (Main, 1995) that reflects itself in constantly looking for cues that their relationship is in danger.

Avoidant attachment behavior (insecure attachment style) on the other hand might stem from the same fears, but the reactions to those fears are different than of an anxious attached individual. An avoidant attached person will typically try to avoid intimacy and closeness, and not seek it like an anxious attached person would. Despite a desire for interpersonal closeness, people with an insecure-avoidant attachment pattern might believe that others are not to be trusted and something bad will happen if one chooses to trust others (Bartholomew, 1990). They are often characterized by independence and a belief that they will be just fine on their own, showing positive views of themselves (Bartholomew, 1990).

A strong correlation between anxious attachment and lower levels of trust was found by Rodriguez et al. (2015). They also found that people who show lower levels of trust were more likely to report jealousy. They separated jealousy by cognitive- and behavioral jealousy, meaning the experience and the expression of jealousy, respectively (White & Mullen, 1989, as cited in Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Rodriguez et al. (2015) refers to stronger cognitive jealousy as feeling a fear of abandonment, feelings of possible rivals or threats to their relationship and fear of betrayal from their partner. Behavioral jealousy refers to how one acts upon these feelings, how one brings up the issue, how one shows their concern and how one might try to find out if their assumptions are true (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Rodriguez et al. (2015) brings up going through a partner's phone or stalking as

extreme examples, and picking fights or trying to control their partner as other examples of behavioral jealousy. The participants showing higher levels of anxious attachment behavior were more likely to have lower levels of trust and show stronger behavioral and cognitive jealousy. Participants showing lower levels of anxious attachment behavior, but still showing some level of anxious attachment behavior also showed lower levels of trust, predicting some levels of cognitive jealousy, but with little to no prediction of behavioral jealousy. The authors furthermore found that trust did interact with anxious attachment to predict non-violent partner abuse, but mostly in individuals with higher levels of anxious attachment. For individuals with lower levels of anxious attachment, trust did not predict non-violent partner abuse. Whether the non-violent partner abuse was characterized by behavioral jealousy or not was unclear through their examination, but with their example of more extreme behavioral jealousy it is likely that the non-violent partner abuse can refer to both behavioral jealousy and other forms of abuse (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, did not predict behavioral jealousy or non-violent partner abuse, and only predicted cognitive jealousy at higher levels of avoidant attachment. Although, avoidant attachment behavior has previously been shown to predict avoidance of intimacy, and not giving the desired ability to create close relationships with their partner (Bartholomew, 1990). This shows a significant difference in relationship behavior between people with difference insecure attachment styles, in the sense that they react to their fears quite differently.

Attachment develops early in life, mainly from relational experiences with parents or care-givers. As with emotion regulation, a balance between love and discipline is expected to help create a healthy connection between the child and parent, within the child and later when the child makes new connections (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Ideally characterizing a secure attachment style (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010; Riggs et al., 2007). In contrast, having experienced an ambivalent relationship with one's parents can develop negative beliefs about oneself and others. It can create a fear of intimacy, anxiousness and abandonment, as well as a strong independence or dependence of others (Reyome, 2010; Riggs, 2007). Insecure attachment styles have also been found to be a risk factor for intimate partner violence (Doumas, 2008). Avoidant attachment styles in particular have been shown to predict avoidance of intimacy, and not giving the desired ability to create close relationships with their partner (Bartholomew, 1990).

Emotion regulation is generally thought to impact attachment styles (Bartholomew, 1990). Difficulty in emotion regulation generally means an insecure attachment style is present, and a healthy and well-functioning emotion regulation system generally means a secure attachment is to be found as well (Cassidy, 1994). However, even though some studies find that an impaired emotion regulation system mediates the link between child maltreatment and relationship dysfunction (Cassidy, 1994), the research evidence is mixed. Hoover & Jackson's (2019) results, for example, showed no support of emotion dysregulation as a mediator when looking into the link between anxious attachment and psychological aggression in romantic relationships. Similarly, Berzenski (2019) did find emotion regulation to explain problems in social relations following a history of emotional maltreatment. Emotion regulation is not necessarily seen in the context of relations, while attachment patterns are always seen in that context.

2. 5. 8 Maladaptive schemas and their effect on romantic relationships

Wright et al. (2009) suggested that individuals with a history of emotional maltreatment who experience mental health problems later in life are affected by *maladaptive schemas.* The presence of anxiety or depression and other mood disorders were also suggested to be a result of maladaptive schemas created during childhood.

As attachment theory posits that children build a representational model of the self and others based on experiences with their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1988), maladaptive schemas represent how a child's caregiver responds in different situations. Their response make up a belief that "everyone" will respond the same way, creating a potentially maladaptive *other* schema as the beliefs are of others. While it can also shape a belief that the self is not worthy of attention or love, meaning one is creating a maladaptive *self*-schema, which are beliefs of how others view oneself. These underlying assumptions can also be referred to as relational schemas (Janovsky et al., 2020). Schemas are general perceptions influenced by previous experiences (Wright et al., 2009), that individuals are using to predict future relational outcomes.

In another study by Messman-Moore & Coates (2008), they found three main maladaptive schemas in particular to mediate the relationship between childhood psychological abuse and adult interpersonal conflict. These schemas were mistrust/abuse, abandonment and defectiveness/shame

(Messman-Moore & Coates (2008). Mistrust and a fear of abandonment are likely to be related to insecure attachment. If one trusts their parents, friend or partner, it is likely that the fear of abandonment is lower (Rodriguez et al. 2015). And if, for example, adding overly accommodating behavior, and perhaps issues in regulating one's emotions, to a fear of abandonment, this is typically a sign of anxious attachment behavior. In romantic relationships, anxious attachment styles in particular have the potential to lead to jealousy and partner abuse (Rodriguez et al. 2015). But the avoidance in attachment needs from one partner might also elicit these behaviors from the other partner, if they come to assume that their partner does not wish for their closeness or presence (Rodriguez et al, 2015).

Defectiveness/shame is a developed maladaptive self-schema which leads to one strongly believing they are not lovable or wanted. They believe they are inadequate and worth less than others (Messman-Moore & Coates, 2008). In a simpler term one can call this extremely low self-esteem. And if one does not believe they are worthy of a partner or potential partner, it is likely that they keep their distance, find signs of rejection that aren't there, or are very hesitant to make the first move with a potential partner. Which can, for example, be a reason why an individual with this schema is less likely to enter a romantic relationship as well. However, it can also trigger a hypersensitivity to rejection or criticism. As anxious attachment behaviors typically overcompensate for what they believe they are lacking as a partner, when believing one is unworthy this ambivalence is likely to create greater conflict within a couple (Rodriguez et al, 2015). One can also argue that the way a maladaptive schema, and especially defectiveness/shame, is carried out, is related to one's attachment style. Where an anxious attached individual will be reacting actively, and an avoidant attached individual will be reacting passively.

Maladaptive schemas may result from maltreatment, reflect a component of emotion dysregulation and attachment (Cassidy, 1994) or all at the same time. *Emotion regulation, attachment* and *maladaptive schemas* are therefore important to consider when researching the effect of emotional maltreatment on adult relationships, and even more important in romantic relationships. When working in therapy or couples counseling, connecting possible emotional maltreatment, or maltreatment in general, to later relationships can help figure out the root of an issue and the best way to treat the issues (Fitzgerald, 2021b). But also when working with children who are being or

have been emotionally maltreated, considering their future relationships can be a way of understanding how to work with these children in the best way possible.

1.   6 Previous research

Sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) and physical IPV have both been positively linked to IPV victimization and perpetration (Schuster & Tomaszewska, 2021). Most research on childhood maltreatment and adult romantic relationships appears to be focused on physical IPV. For instance, Miller (2011) showed a correlation between physical IPV and revictimization due to post traumatic stress syndrome in their study, and Hassija et al. (2017) suggested that dysfunctional parenting led to maladaptive self-schemas such as mistrust and a lack of self-control, which again lead to a greater chance of getting involved in a abusive romantic relationship. These results are similar to how Gay et al. (2013) found a strong mediating effect of disconnection/rejection, and other-directedness (maladaptive other) schema domains, which are all domains of maladaptive schemas, between emotional maltreatment and IPV (Gay et al., 2013). Disconnection/rejection refers to the expectation that others can't meet one's need for safety, security and respect. This domain is also generally related to traumatic experiences in childhood maltreatment (Gay et al. 2013), and can lead to, for example, social isolation (Messman-Moore & Coates, 2008).

As previously mentioned, general child maltreatment and specifically physical and sexual abuse and their connection to adult romantic relationships have also been heavily researched (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2021a; Jonson-Reid et al, 2012; Murphy et al, 2020; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2021; Yates & Wekerle, 2009). But considerably less is known about emotional maltreatment, even though research on emotional maltreatment has grown throughout the last two decades (Yates & Wekerle, 2008).
Riggs & Kaminski (2010), Reyome (2010) and Riggs (2010) summarized the literature regarding different mediators between childhood emotional maltreatment and later romantic relationships. They found that individuals with a history of childhood emotional maltreatment suffer from several psychological and social difficulties (Reyome, 2010). Depression predicted psychological aggression and dysfunctional relationships (Riggs, 2010; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). Insecure

attachment and maladaptive schemas were also a significant result of childhood emotional maltreatment, which contributed to poor mental health and low-quality relationships (Riggs, 2010).

To the best of my knowledge, only two literature reviews linking only childhood emotional maltreatment to adult romantic functioning has been published after 2012. Zamir (2021) wrote a literature review on how childhood maltreatment affected later relationship quality, and he reviewed both mediating and protective factors. He separated his results by type of maltreatment before discussing them all together. Zamir (2021) reviewed 43 empirical studies assessing the link between any form of childhood maltreatment and later relationship quality. Around half of them tested mediating factors and the other half tested protective factors. Eight articles linking emotional maltreatment to adult romantic relationships were included in the review, where only two of these were published later than 2012. Psychological distress and paranoia were found to mediate the link between emotional maltreatment and marital satisfaction only in men, while hostility, self-esteem and obsessive-compulsive tendencies mediated the same link for women. This showed some differences in gender. Self-regulation was a strong mediator in both genders, and interpersonal resources were generally found to be a protective factor for later relationship functioning.

A meta-analytic review of 23 reports was also conducted by Cao et al. (2020b) which included research on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship well-being. Their results were similar to Zamir (2020). They also found actor effects to be larger than partner effects. Meaning that one's own history of emotional maltreatment influenced their relationship well-being, then when their partner had a history of emotional maltreatment. These actor effects were attachment insecurities, emotion dysregulation and psychological distress among others. Childhood emotional maltreatment negatively affected later romantic relationship well-being (Cao et al., 2020b).

Finally, three students from the University of Bergen wrote a similar thesis. Tverå et al. (2013) wrote about how physical and emotional maltreatment during childhood can affect attachment and romantic relationships in adulthood for their main paper for an integrated bachelor and master's in psychology. They analyzed their findings from an attachment perspective and found their study to

25

describe how the two types of maltreatment can impair one's adaptive development of the attachment system, and that it could lead to several issues in adult romantic relationships.

To my knowledge, there is no scoping review linking only childhood emotional maltreatment to adult romantic relationship functioning published between 2012 and 2021. Literature published between 2012 and 2021 are one of my publication inclusion criteria for this study.

2. 7 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to summarize the literature published between 2012 and 2021 on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. The aim of this study is to get an indication of the volume of relevant literature, to identify possible gaps in the knowledge and to gain an overview of the current knowledge on the subject through a scoping review.

It is also of interest to find and discuss which mediators are found to link childhood emotional maltreatment to dysfunction in adult romantic relationships.

This study will now precede into presenting the methodology used to gather the literature, before the results will be presented and later discussed.

3. Methods

For this chapter I will be presenting my method for gathering and analyzing data. I will start by introducing my scientific approach, including the design and choice of guidance. Further I will describe the search strategy and the process from forming the research question, to collecting the data, to the analysis and finally the discussion. I will present the pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria. I will also discuss validity and reliability related to the search strategy and design, along with the ethical considerations considered for this scoping review.

2. 1. Scoping review as a method

A scoping review was chosen to be most suitable for the research question of interest. Unlike a systematic review, a scoping review seeks to summarize the current published literature on a specific topic (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). A systematic review, on the other hand, typically seeks to analyze the data on a deeper level, and a scoping review can also be used to determine the value of conducting a full systematic review of the same topic (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). For someone looking for information surrounding a topic, it is easier to read a summary than reading all available literature separately (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). Scoping reviews also help identify possible gaps and to get an indication of the volume of literature (Aveyard, 2014).

Although scoping reviews are a relatively new approach to conducting a research synthesis and definitions of a scoping review are few (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007), there are still good quality guidelines available on how to conduct and write a scoping review (Aveyard, 2014; Creswell, 2009; Munn, et. al, 2018).

A scoping review typically addresses broad topics, where several different study designs are applicable (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007) and the quality of the studies included are not as important as in a systematic review. It is possible to review both published and unpublished data (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). However, the quality of the literature review is still important (Aveyard, 2014). Arksey & O´Malley (2007) describes five stages of conducting a literature review. These are 1)

identifying the research question, 2) identifying relevant studies, 3) study selection, 4) charting the data and 5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

They recommend recording the data in a chart, where the content depends on what was seen as important to each writer. This is to collect the data and for easier access for the writers, but also to present to the readers in addition to a lengthier results section. Finally, the discussion allows for the researchers to prioritize certain data, and to present the dominant findings of the literature, and one can also base this part on a relevant theory (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007).

I chose to follow recommendations from the PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018), combined with Arksey & O´Malley (2007), Aveyard´s (2014) and Creswell's (2009) guidelines to conduct my search in a systematic way and to ensure good quality of my literature review. The PRISMA-Scr refers to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews and systematic reviews. This is a checklist containing 22 items essential for conducting a scoping review, where two of these are optional. The intent behind it is to build a greater understanding of what is important to include in a scoping review, and how to conduct one in an organized matter (Tricco et al., 2018). The PRISMA Flowchart was actively used to document the results from the search string and can be found on page 33 in Table 2. Aveyard (2014) highlights different steps needed to ensure a "good quality" literature study, while emphasizing the importance of following a systematic method as well as having clear inclusion and exclusion criteria when conducting a literature review. Similarly, Creswell (2009) created a five-step process recommended to organize one's search, which I will be referring to throughout this chapter.

A scoping review does not extensively analyze findings, but it still requires some ability to interpret, compare and analyze the data (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007) to be able to present a reliable and trustworthy analysis (Aveyard, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, I followed the mentioned guidelines and allowed myself to be inspired by their recommendations. Due to them being guidelines and not necessary steps, I found it appropriate to use all three to guide me through the process. The three guides share the same goal, and some steps are almost identical, although there are a few different ones. As it appears, the three are also generally recommended by others who previously have conducted a literature review, therefore it seems reasonable to allow myself to be guided by them as well.

My empirical data material includes only published empirical research articles. I have also investigated gray literature, conducted simple searches on Google, read other reviews and relevant data to become familiar with the topic and its background, as recommended by Arksey & O´Malley (2007)

3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The eligibility of studies was determined based on the following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria as recommended by Aveyard (2014). These are predetermined to exclude irrelevant data and identify relevant studies. Included literature had to be of the English or Norwegian language and published between 2012 and 2021. The years 2012 to 2021 were chosen due there being other literature reviews written before 2012, it therefore would not be necessary to include the same data. Since 2012 there is no scoping review on my exact topic as I am aware of. Research had to be conducted in Europe, North America or Oceania. This inclusion criterion was based on the author's view of what cultures and legal systems are most similar to Norway. It was not a necessity to include data most similar to the country I live and study in, but it is a reasonable limitation as it allows me to better understand the literature and for it to be applicable in Norway. Another reason behind the geographical inclusion criteria was due to the modest size of this thesis and its need for limitations, as well as the importance of cultural differences in dating situations. Cultural differences in this context mostly refers to the possibility of inequality between genders, where cultures are likely to differ in when one start's dating, who goes to universities where most samples are drawn from and other dating preferences (Brimeyer & Smith, 2012). Empirical research was an inclusion criteria. Both qualitative and quantitative research were eligible for inclusion. Research studies needed to include information about how childhood emotional maltreatment, emotional neglect or emotional abuse relate to functioning in adult romantic relationships. Excluded studies were studies reporting exposure to a combination of maltreatment, for example emotional maltreatment and sexual abuse or physical abuse. This is to make sure the data on emotional maltreatment is not affected by other types of maltreatment. Research also had to include a reference to adult romantic relationships. There are several

published articles on the topic using college students as participants where their age is not specified, but it is assumed they are over the age of 18.

When referring to romantic relationships it is referred to intimate interpersonal relationships between two adults, gender non specified. It is assumed that when words such as, or similar to, *couple, dating, relationship and romantic relationship* are used it refers to two people emotionally committed to each other.

3.3 Search Strategy

For this study I have examined what empirical research has to say about the effect of childhood emotional maltreatment on adult romantic relationship functioning. To start off this process, a research question had to be formed. The research question was adapted throughout the process and as I became more familiar with the literature, and the limitations towards the search were also set along the way. This is typical for a scoping review (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). The consequences of emotional maltreatment in adulthood were always the main interest for this thesis, but after becoming familiar with the literature, some limitations and concretization were necessary to form a meaningful research question that was suitable for the time and size of this study.

At the very start of the process, a PICO-form was formed and is presented in Table 1. PICO is a tool that can help create a precise research question, whilst it also helps prepare for the literature search in terms of critical evaluations, forming key words and search words and choosing the data. A shorter version was used as it was more suitable for a qualitative research question (Helsebiblioteket, 2016).

After using simple search terms in different databases, as well as Oria and Google, I gained an understanding of the research topic and how it typically was referred to, and started forming my research question.

Table 1 PICo

P: POPULATION	Adults in romantic relationships
I: INTEREST	Emotional maltreatment
Co: CONTEXT	Adult romantic relationship functioning

I also had help from my advisor and a librarian at the University of Bergen to form a clear research question. Together with other students from our class, we also discussed each other's research questions and search terms in groups. Both alone and together with the librarian, several rounds of test searches were conducted to find suitable search terms, before I started working on the final search string. The aim of this search strategy was to find all relevant data on the topic, to gain as much knowledge on both the topic and the amount of research as possible, and to use this to create a good quality literature search that identifies as many eligible studies as possible, while keeping the number of irrelevant studies at a manageable number.

Following Creswell's (2009) first out of five steps recommended in conducting a scoping review and the PICO-form, I started with a few keywords, then found synonyms to each keyword. Different researchers use different terms for the same concepts or topics, and it is important to include as many options as deemed appropriate to include more data on the topic one is searching for (Aveyard, 2014).

I identified three keywords based on my research question:

(1) child emotional maltreatment, (2) relationship and (3) communication.

Identifying these three keywords makes for the main elements of my research question and helps pick the research question apart to hopefully find all relevant data. Following Creswell´s (2009) second step, I then took each term and found synonyms and similar words to produce a larger search result and more concrete search terms. The third key word, c*ommunication,* was especially important to find synonyms for as it is the outcome of the research question and can be referred to in many possible ways. IPV was not an excluding search term as it could rule out data that still was relevant. I conducted a few test searches, alone and with the librarian, to pull out misleading words or find synonyms I had not thought of beforehand. Truncations were added to make way for the same word with different endings, making the search more thorough.

The search terms ended up being as follows:

1. "child* emotional maltreatment" OR "CEM" OR "emotional maltreatment" OR "emotional neglect" OR "emotional abuse" OR "childhood psychological maltreatment" OR "child psychological abuse" OR "bad parent*" OR "distant parent*"

2. "adult relationship*" OR "romantic relationship*" OR "marri*" OR "dating" OR "couple*" OR "adult* attachment" OR "intimacy"

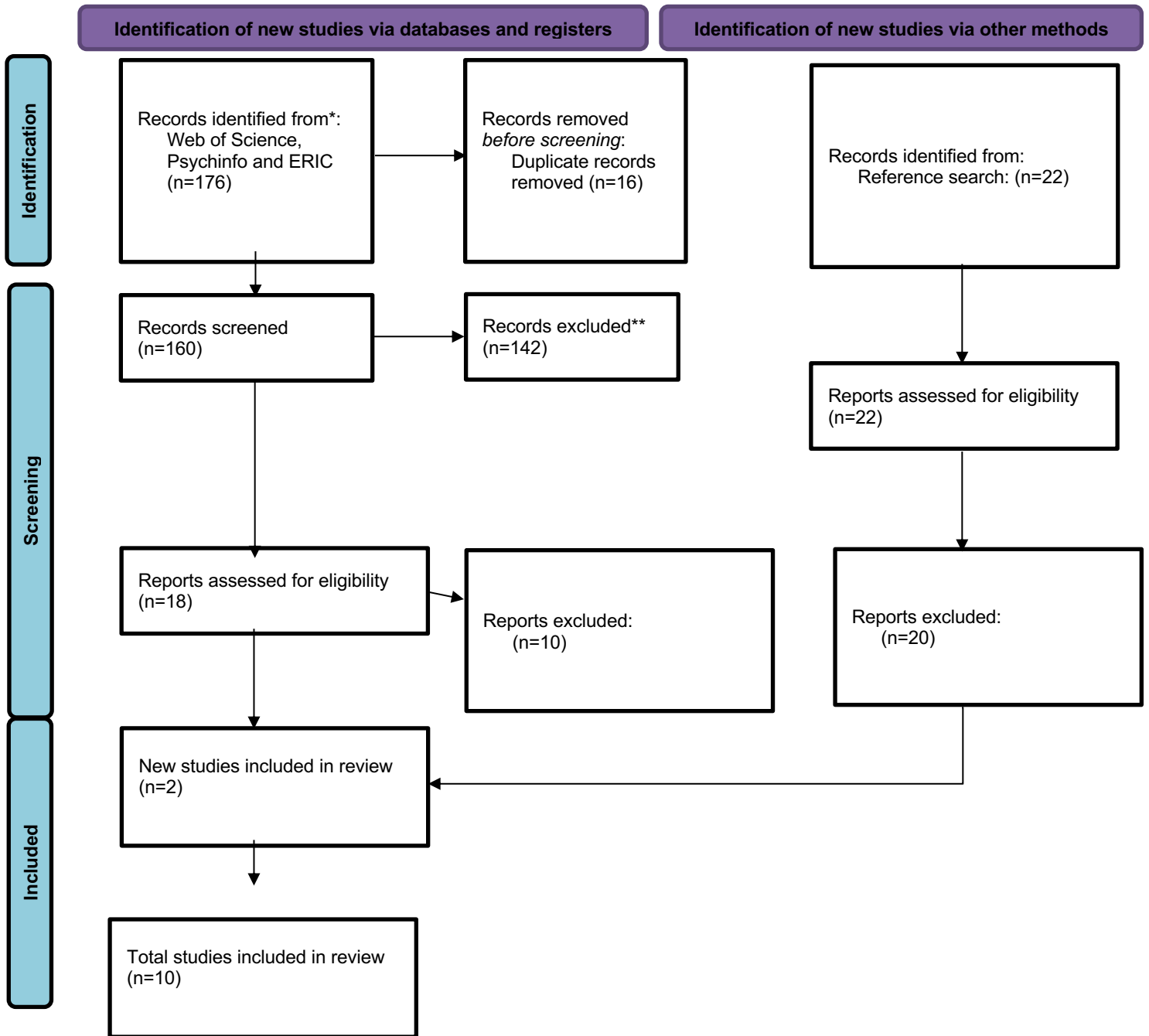3. communicat* OR "functioning" OR "malfunctioning" OR "adaptive" OR "maladaptive" OR trust

I then put each group of search terms separately in search boxes in the different databases. Or I put them in the same box with "AND" between the groups, depending on the way the data bases were set up. The databases searched were *PsychInfo, ERIC* and *Web of Science.* The inclusion and

exclusion criteria were followed by the choice of search terms and by ticking boxes limiting the search. For example; ticking of a box limiting the articles to empirical research articles or limiting the years of publication. An inclusion criteria involving gender or number of participants was not included as there were not enough articles found earlier in the process to put this type of limit on them. I was also advised by my advisor to have at least 10 articles to review. However, it was the aim to identify as many as possible and all available literature I became aware of was identified. The initial database search was conducted on 09.02.2022 and the search yielded 178 articles. Following Arksey & O´Malley´s (2007) 3rd stage, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to all studies. The abstract and titles of each article were first read through, and non-relevant articles were discarded. The remaining articles were read in their entirety. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, eight articles were found to present relevant data for the study. The search terms were translated to Norwegian and used in the same databases as the English search terms, as well as in Idunn and Oria. No relevant Norwegian studies were found to answer the research question, whilst I did still find Norwegian literature that could boost my knowledge around emotional maltreatment and romantic relationships, but not necessarily the connection between the two.

I also did what Aveyard (2014) referred to as *reference hunting*. By looking through the references used in articles I found through my search I was able to find other references I did not find in the initial search. An additional two articles were found to be included, which increased the number of eligible articles to 10.
Details on the search can be found in the Prisma Flow Diagram in Table 2.

Table 2 – PRISMA Flow Diagram

Identification of new studies via databases and registers

Identification of new studies via other methods

Identification

Records identified from*:
Web of Science,
Psychinfo and ERIC
(n=176)

Records removed
before screening:
Duplicate records
removed (n=16)

Records identified from:
Reference search: (n=22)

Screening

Records screened
(n=160)

Records excluded**
(n=142)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n=22)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n=18)

Reports excluded:
(n=10)

Reports excluded:
(n=20)

Included

New studies included in review
(n=2)

Total studies included in review
(n=10)

3.4 Process of analysis

The process of analysis was the most time consuming, as every article had to be read several times for myself to properly understand the data. Notes were taken both on paper and in OneNote so that I could look back on each article without always going back to the original article. This made it possible to get to know the data material well. The quality of this thesis relies on how relevant the data is for my research question and reading the articles several times ensured that each article was indeed relevant and that I was able to pull out important information to be analyzed and later discuss all articles together. Reliability, validity and the exclusion and inclusion criteria were always considered even after the articles had first been chosen for analysis.

Table 3 presents each article, and their main characteristics are presented on page 40 after recommendations from Arksey & O´Malley (2007). It was recommended to extract different forms of data from the articles for this table (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). I found it applicable to extract the author(s), year of publication and study location. Study population aims of the study and important results were also put in the table.

In the results section, methodology is also briefly presented. In the process I became aware that all available research on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning, to my knowledge, is quantitative. I therefore decided to extract information on the most common choices of methods, including the use of different self-report measures.

Two of the included articles, by the same first author (Lassri & Shahar., 2012; Lassri et al., 2016) did not meet the geographical inclusion criteria set prior to the search. The pre-set geographical inclusion criteria asked for research conducted in Europe, North America or Oceania, but the two research articles which also stem from the same group of participants are from Israel. The articles were found to be of such high relevance that it was included even though not meeting one of the criteria. After discussing the matter with my advisor, we concluded that it should be included. The participants in both studies are undergraduate college students, over 80% of the participants were female and two out of four of the authors by Lassri et al. (2016) also represented Yale University School of Medicine in the US and University College London in the UK. It is of my own perception that these participant and author characteristics make the geographical inclusion criteria flexible

when the number of relevant studies generally are quite limited on the topic. This also means there could be other relevant studies from the same or other countries, but as they were not found through the search string, they will be left out of this thesis. It is to be noted that no search terms that could limit the geographical scale were utilized, besides the fact that all search terms were written in English or Norwegian and therefore limited articles written in languages I would not be able to read. It is therefore not seen as more likely that relevant research from other countries could exist, than the possibility that something from the preferred countries also was not found through the search string and reference hunt.

3.5 Reliability and validity

An evaluation of the *reliability* and *validity* of a literature review is important to ensure good quality on the data utilized to answer the research question (Grønmo, 2016). I will present both in each their section and why it is important for this literature review.

3.5.1 Reliability

To ensure high *reliability,* it is emphasized by Aveyard (2014) that documenting one's search well is nessecary. Reliability refers to how well a method can be replicated (Aveyard, 2014) by the method presented. Describing each step of the process and what results were found in a detailed manner will help ensure better quality of the methods section. Again, the PRISMA Flow Chart was used to help organize the documentation of the search. The goal is to be transparent about all steps and choices, and that the data is reliable in the sense that another writer would choose the same data for the research question. I was not aware prior to writing this thesis if the data would primarily consist of quantitative or qualitative research. But through the process I was only able to gather quantitative data.

It is my aim to create a summary of data that can be of value to others. Because of this aim I am focused on the studies I chose do present and how they can be meaningful to others looking for data on the topic.

3.5.2 Validity

Validity refers to how relevant the data material is in answering the research question, and there are several factors influencing the validity of a study. It is crucial to prepare and execute a well thought-out search strategy in order to find literature that can answer the research question in the best way possible, and therefore help achieve high validity.

To ensure high quality in my study I have gone through several steps in my elimination process, following the guidelines mentioned by Arksey & O´Malley, Aveyard (2014) and Creswell (2009). I have also described my method in a detailed and transparent way, to ensure that the study process is understandable and that the data I choose to present is relevant for the research question at hand. I have presented clear inclusion- and exclusion criteria and I have provided an explanation for my choice of criteria as well as possible deviations, found in **4.1 Results.**

3. 7 Ethical considerations

Research ethics refers to the importance of norms, values and institutional arrangements that contribute to the regulation of scientific activity (De nasjonale forskningsetiske komiteene, 2016, s. 5). The quality in research can be seen from three perspectives: *data material, method* and *the researcher,* according to Grønmo (2016). I have already described the measures taken to ensure quality in my data material and method, but my role as a researcher is yet to be mentioned. Aveyard (2014) emphasizes the need for a researcher to be aware of their own perceptions, understanding and background before analyzing other researchers' results. Grønmo (2016) also states the importance of quality control and ethical considerations around the data material and methods. I have personally not been a victim of emotional maltreatment, nor am I currently in a romantic relationship, although I have been in the past. I also have a B.S in psychology, and have previously given thought to my own view of myself, of others around me and personal relations, both from a personal point of view and more of a professional point of view.

It is important to me, both personally and as a researcher, to be aware of my past perceptions and understanding of emotional maltreatment, romantic relationships as well as possible mediators throughout the writing of this study. Through the writing of this study I have also been working as

37

an assistant at a daycare center as well as at a child welfare institution. Through this work I may be prone to making perceptions that may influence my work on this thesis, which I have been aware of in my role as a researcher.

4. Analysis

For this section I will be presenting the findings from my data found through my search. The research question for this scoping review is again:

«*What does the literature say about the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning?*»

 The findings I chose to present are based on their relevance to my research question. The articles themselves might present data that is not seen as relevant for my research question and all data will therefore not be presented. As this is a scoping review, not presenting all findings from each paper is typical (Arksey & O´Malley, 2007). As mentioned, the aim of this scoping review is to summarize the current literature and identity possible gaps, based in inclusion and exclusion criteria presented earlier. By narrowing the data the aim is to map the scope of the current literature regarding the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. For organizational purposes, two main themes were found across the chosen studies. Each will be presented in their own paragraph.

Table 3 also shows a short overview of the articles chosen for this thesis, stating their main characteristics and findings.
The search was conducted as stated in the methods section, some deviations are discussed in the upcoming results section.

4. 1 Results

4. 1. 1 Overview

A total of 10 articles were found relevant for the topic. I first was expecting to find more qualitative data for this topic, but I ended up finding exclusively quantitative research.

All data from the articles was collected outside of Norway. Nine articles (Baugh et al., 2019; Bigras et al., 2015; Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Cao et al., 2020a; Loucks et al., 2019; Maneta et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021) conducted their research in North America, while two were from Israel (Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Lassri et al., 2016). Only *PsychNet* and *Web of Science* yielded relevant articles. A Norwegian search string, similar to the one used in English, was used in the same databases, including Oria, but no relevant data was found. A reference hunt (Aveyard, 2014) led to two additional articles for data extraction (Maneta et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2021), after the initial search. The number of participants varied from 99 single participants (Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Lassri et al., 2016) to 492 participants (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012). One hundred and sixty five couples were the highest number of couples participating (Maneta et al., 2021)

All articles used self-report measures. Loucks et al. (2019) used self-report measures for their first stage, and observational measures for their second stage where participants had to participate in conflict discussion and a problem-solving task, where raters assessed their performance quantitatively. Peterson et al. (2018) used self-report measures for the first stage of their experiment and a romantic relationship assessment observational rating scale for the second stage, but the participants reported on their own behaviors by watching a video of themselves completing the task afterwards.

The most used questionnaire was the *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (Bernstein & Fink, 1998 as cited in Loucks et al. 2019), which was included in 9 studies (Baugh et al., 2019; Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Cao et al., 2020a; Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Lassri et al., 2016; Loucks et al., 2019; Maneta et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2021). This questionnaire measured their history of childhood emotional maltreatment.

Other questionnaires and scales used were the *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS; Hendrick, 1988, as cited in Bradburry & Shaffer, 2012)*, the *Romantic Relationship Assessment Observational Rating Scales (Aguilar et al., 1997, as cited in Peterson* et al., 2018), *The Romantic Relationship Questionnaire* (Braiker & Kelley, 1979, as cited in Cao et al., 2020b) and the *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004, as cited in Lassri et al., 2016), among others. They all measured different concepts relating to relationship functioning.

Peterson et al. (2018), Sun et al. (2021), Maneta et al. (2014) and Loucks et al. (2019) used a dyadic data analysis, where the participants were couples and not sole participants. The couples were heterosexual. Out of the other articles, three of them had both female and male participants (Baugh et al., 2018; Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Lassri et al., 2016) and two had only female participants (Bigras et al., 2015; Cao et al., 2020b). No articles had only male participants.

The type of design and analysis varied. Every article used quantitative methods of reporting. All of the data is therefore quantitative. Although the research was focusing on different aspects of relationship functioning or childhood emotional maltreatment, both measured in different ways with different groups of people, scoping reviews are broad by design. Therefore, the common criticism that it is not appropriate to compare data from studies with different designs (Jensen & Allen, 1996, as cited in Aveyard, 2014) does not apply here. Finally, no articles used the term *childhood emotional neglect.* Only articles using *emotional abuse* or *emotional maltreatment* were found.

Table 3 Overview of articles

Authors	Year	Sample size	Country	Recruitment	Aim	Results
Baugh, M. L., Cox, W. C., Young, R. A. & Kealy, D.	2019	231 participants	USA	Online crowdsourcing pool	To better understand the association between emotional maltreatment and partner trust by three mediators: psychological flexibility, maladaptive self-schemas and maladaptive other schemas.	Psychological flexibility was a more potent mediator between emotional maltreatment and partner trust. Maladaptive self-schemas were a stronger mediator than maladaptive other schemas.
Bigras, N., Godbout, N., Hèbert, M., Runtz, M. & Daspe, M.	2015	184 females	Canada	University campus recruitment	To test if emotional maltreatment can be associated with an impaired self of sense and identity, as well as proclivity to engage in chaotic relationships. And to see if this in turn contributes to less satisfying romantic relationships.	Emotional maltreatment contributed to an impaired identity and more interpersonal conflicts. Which in turn was associated with poorer couple adjustment. Emotional maltreatment was indicated to lead to poor development of relationship distress.

| Bradbury, L. L. & Shaffer, A. | 2012 | 492 participants | USA | Online surveys | To examine the association between emotional maltreatment and young adult romantic relationship satisfaction, mediated by emotion dysregulation. | Emotional maltreatment was positively related to total difficulties in emotion regulation. Emotional maltreatment was also negatively related to relationship satisfaction Emotion dysregulation was indicated to be a pathway from emotional maltreatment to low relationship satisfaction. |
| Cao, H., Zhou, N. & Leerkes, E. M. | 2020 | 159 participants | USA | Drawn from a larger study | To examine adult attachment, emotion regulation difficulties and depressive symptoms as potential mediators for the associations between emotional maltreatment and various aspects of later couple functioning | Adult attachment anxiety specifically accounted for the associations between conflict and ambivalence. Emotion regulation difficulties and depressive symptoms also negatively affected couple functioning. Adult attachment avoidance mediated the association between emotional maltreatment and love and maintenance in couple functioning. |

Lassri, D. & Shahar, G.	2012	91 female participants	Israel	Posters around a university campus	To examine the mediating role of self-criticism as a mediator between emotional maltreatment and impairments in young adult's romantic relationships	The link between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship satisfaction was fully mediated by self-criticism. Even in the presence of general self-efficacy, dependency and dissociation
Lassri. D., Luyten, P., Cohen, G. & Shahar, G.	2016	99 female participants	Israel	Drawn from previous study	To link self-criticism and adult insecure attachment to the relationship between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationships	Attachment avoidance, not attachment anxiety, fully accounted for the mediating role of self-criticism in the relationship between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationships

44

Loucks, L. A., van Dellen, M. & Shaffer, A.	2017	60 couples	USA	Drawn from a larger sample	To examine the relationship between emotional maltreatment and psychological aggression in young adult couples. And to examine the mediating effect of emotion communication.	High levels of psychological aggression were associated with higher levels of self-reported psychological aggression towards partner. High levels of skillful emotion communication showed less psychological aggression in females.
Maneta, E. K., Cohen, S., Schulz, M. S. & Waldinger, R. J.	2014	165 couples	USA	Complementary strategies in different cities	To examine the association between reported severity of emotional maltreatment and one's own and one's partners marital satisfaction by examining empathic accuracy as a mediator	Severity of emotional maltreatment affects both one's own and one's partners marital satisfaction. Higher reported emotional maltreatment indicates greater empathic inaccuracy. Women's empathic accuracy was only influenced by their own history of maltreatment, and this history also led to their partners empathic inaccuracy

Peterson, C. M., Peugh, J., Loucks, L. & Shaffer, A.	2018	52 couples	USA	Campus fliers and University Research Pool	To examine the association between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship satisfaction, mediated by dyadic hostility.	Dyadic hostility mediated the relationship between emotional maltreatment and relationship satisfaction for females especially. Female history of maltreatment predicted lower relationship satisfaction particularly when level of hostility was low or average (not high).
Sun, L., Canevello, A., Lewis, K. A., Li, J. & Crocker, J.	2012	145 couples	USA	College students were offered course credit for participation	To examine the link between compassionate goals and relationship quality over time, after a history of emotional maltreatment	Emotional maltreatment predicts decreased compassionate goals and lower relationship quality. If partners compassionate goals were lower, the actor compassionate goals would also be lower over time. But when partners compassionate goals were high, actor's history of emotional maltreatment did not predict changes in actor compassionate goals over time.

4   1. 2 Main findings

Based on the research question and the aim of this analysis, two main themes were uncovered: 1) *intrapersonal problems* and *2) communication and conflicts.* It was seen as reasonable to only put two themes together as most of the articles present more than one mediator, and it would be confusing to pull articles apart to create further themes. I will be presenting each theme separately.

1)   *Interpersonal problems*

The first theme refers to the link between a history of childhood emotional maltreatment and different intrapersonal problems associated with relationship functioning. This link was mediated by psychological flexibility, maladaptive schemas, self-criticism, emotion regulation difficulties and an impaired identity. Although the studies show different patterns and outcomes, several of the authors used attachment theory framework to interpret their findings. Although the aim of this study is not to focus on attachment, it is still seen as relevant to present as attachment theory is a large part of research on the outcomes of child maltreatment, as well as it adds to the understanding of the matter. Each article in this theme will be presented separately, with explanations of the mediators that have not yet been mentioned.

Cao, et al. (2020) conducted a study among women transitioning into parenthood. The authors examined, in a serial mediation model, how self-reported childhood emotional maltreatment, assessed at different times during transitioning to parenthood, relates to romantic couple functioning. This relationship was assessed in a process model by the mediator's adult attachment, emotion regulation and depressive symptoms. The women were assessed 6-8 weeks before their due-date, 6-months postpartum, 1-year postpartum and 2-year postpartum.

Anxious attachment behavior significantly accounted for the relationship between childhood emotional maltreatment conflict and ambivalence in later romantic relationships. This relationship was also associated with emotion regulation difficulties. Emotion regulation difficulties increased

the risk of depressive symptoms, which again led to further conflict and ambivalence in romantic relationships.

Avoidant attachment behavior, on the other hand, mediated the relationship between childhood emotional maltreatment and avoidance of love and maintenance of a partnership in a later romantic relationship. This relationship was not mediated by depressive symptoms and emotion regulation difficulties like anxious attachment behavior was.

They found emotional maltreatment to disrupt the development of a secure attachment system, and that insecure attachment behavior negatively affected several aspects of romantic relationship functioning.

Baugh et al. (2019) aimed to better the understanding of the association between emotional maltreatment and partner trust by three mediators: psychological flexibility, maladaptive self-schemas and maladaptive other schemas.

Maladaptive schemas have already been accounted for in the concept and theory chapter, but psychological flexibility have not. Psychological flexibility relates to intentional effort and ability to accept stressful experiences. People with higher psychological flexibility also show a stronger sense of belonging in their close relationships, while people with low psychological flexibility show avoidance to commitment, less trust in their partner and typically avoid intimacy (Roush et al., 2018, as cited in Baugh et al., 2019). If one has developed maladaptive schemas, low psychological flexibility has been indicated to emphasize these schemas (Oliver et al., 2012, as cited in Baugh et al. 2019). Psychological flexibility and its effect are similar to emotion regulation in other studies (Baugh et al. 2019).

They found psychological flexibility to be the strongest mediator between emotional maltreatment and partner trust. Higher psychological flexibility appears to be related to more willingness to be more vulnerable and to allow oneself to trust. While if one's psychological flexibility is low, one might be more on edge, more avoidant of intimacy and less trusting in a relationship. Their results also indicated that maladaptive self-schemas, such as having a low opinion of oneself and not believing one deserves love, mediate partner trust more strongly than maladaptive other schemas. However, the researchers emphasize that individuals with higher psychological flexibility might also exert other qualities that may impact their level of trust, such as intentionality.

Lassri & Shahar (2012) examined the link between self-criticism and impairments in young adult romantic relationships in individuals with a history of childhood emotional maltreatment. They conducted two separate studies, although both were accounted for in the same article. They first measured the relationship between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship quality among college students, with self-concept, personality/self-criticism, dependency, self-efficacy, dissociation and psychological distress as potential mediators. The second study replicated and extended the first study by also measuring intimacy, commitment, passion and perceived relationship efficacy as potential mediators, as well as controlling for symptoms of PTSD.

Self-criticism and self-efficacy were the two major factors mediating the association between emotional maltreatment and difficulties in young adult romantic relationships. The authors also found that emotional maltreatment was associated with one's level of intimacy and commitment. Self-criticism fully mediated the relationship between emotional maltreatment and impairments in young adult relationships. Of note, this was found for both romantic relationships, but also friendships and non-romantic types of relationships.

They suggested the development of relational distress to stem from emotional abuse, which again can create conflicts both within a relationship and within oneself.

Lassri et al. (2016) studied adult attachment, along with self-criticism, and how they mediated the association between emotional maltreatment and later relationship satisfaction. Their sample was s subsample of the same sample used by Lassri & Shahar (2012). Their results stated that emotional maltreatment is generally significantly correlated with lower romantic relationship satisfaction. Specifically, they found emotional maltreatment to predict self-criticism, which in turn predicted an avoidant attachment style which negatively affected relationship satisfaction in their serial mediation model.

Bigras et al. (2015) tested the association between childhood emotional abuse and an impaired sense of self and identity, and how this again was associated with lower satisfaction in adult romantic relationships in a mediation model. If one's sense of self and identity is disturbed, it typically means one has difficulties in maintaining a stable identity or regulating one's emotions. They also tend to have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships.

49

Their study included only female participants, and they hypothesized that emotional abuse would be linked to negative couple adjustment in women. They found negative interpersonal communication to mediate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult romantic relationship satisfaction. Their results suggested that childhood emotional abuse could impair interpersonal communication and identity development, which in turn may lead to intrapersonal conflicts. These are in turn associated with difficulties in adjusting in adult romantic relationships.

Bradbury & Shaffer (2012) found the association between retrospective reports of emotional maltreatment and relationship satisfaction in adults to be mediated by dysfunctional emotion regulation. Through their studies they found that dysfunctional emotion regulation in their young adult participants reflected in a lack of emotional awareness, issues with impulsivity and not accepting one's own emotions. Individuals with a history of emotional maltreatment were more likely to report difficulties in regulating emotions, and people with difficulties in regulating emotions reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

2) *Communication and conflict*

A study by Peterson et al. (2018) was one out of three studies using dyadic data analysis, meaning that they included both parts of a couple as participants. They examined dyadic hostility as a mediator between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship satisfaction through both self-report measures and an observational stage. By examining both it allows the researchers to study the combined effect and interaction of both partner's experiences (or lack thereof) of childhood emotional maltreatment. Hostility was defined by distancing behavior and hurtful or mocking behavior towards a partner, without showing remorse. Hostility was assessed by each couple engaging in a discussion on a topic of current debate in their relationship. They were also asked to plan a vacation together. Finally, they filled out self-questionnaires on their experience.

They found that romantic relationship satisfaction in women was significantly compromised by their history of emotional maltreatment, but when conducting the same analysis for men, emotional maltreatment was not linked to their own satisfaction in relationships in adulthood. Nevertheless, a history of emotional maltreatment for men predicted lower levels of romantic relationship

satisfaction for their female partners. The authors furthermore found that in relationships with higher levels of dyadic hostility as well as a reported history of emotional maltreatment, lower relationship satisfaction was reported. In couples with lower levels of dyadic hostility, there was little variation in relationship satisfaction reported by women, while in couples with high levels of dyadic hostility, there was more variation in relationship satisfaction, depending on their reported history of emotional maltreatment. But a contradicting finding was that the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction were reported by women who reported low levels of emotional maltreatment, but still showed higher levels of interpersonal hostility.

Empathic accuracy refers to how accurately one can read one partner's emotions, especially in emotionally charged moments (Maneta et al., 2014). Empathic accuracy was examined as a mediator between emotional abuse and marital satisfaction in a study by Maneta et al. (2014) and was examined by both actor and partner effects. Actor effects refers to how one is affected by themselves, while partner effects refers to how one is affected by someone else (their partner). They found one's history of emotional abuse to be linked to their partner's marital satisfaction for both men and women, as well as their own marital satisfaction.

Reporting more severe childhood emotional abuse was linked to difficulties in accurately reading their partners emotions, with a stronger link for negative emotions than positive emotions. This indicates that emotions during conflicts may be more difficult to read for an individual with a history of emotional abuse, than reading emotions displayed during pleasant moments.

Women's empathic accuracy was linked only to their own history of emotional abuse, while men' empathic accuracy was linked to both their own and their partner's history of emotional abuse. Women's empathic accuracy also mediated the link between their own history of emotional abuse and their partner's marital satisfaction, but men's emotional abuse history and their partner's relationship satisfaction was not mediated by their own or their partner's empathic accuracy.

Sun et al. (2021) studied the importance of compassionate goals, and its mediating role between a history of emotional maltreatment and decline in relationship quality over time. It was the only article measuring positive aspects of a relationship instead of negative. Compassionate goals refer to the good intentions one has for their partner and support of their wellbeing and is assumed to

help build a supportive interpersonal environment (Crocker & Canevello, 2008, as cited in Sun et al., 2021).

In two longitudinal studies, one study including couples and one study including individual participants, their hypothesis of emotional maltreatment predicting decreased compassionate goals was supported. The results also indicated that decreased compassionate goals predicted decreased relationship quality over time. They also found that if a partner had low compassionate goals, then actor compassionate goals would also decrease over time. But when partners had high compassionate goals, actors' history of emotional maltreatment did not predict change in actors' compassionate goals towards their partner over time. This indicates that an individual with a history of emotional maltreatment would benefit from dating someone with high compassionate goals, as their own compassionate goals are less likely to lower over time. Although, it was not indicated that actors' compassionate goals would increase either.

Loucks et al. (2019) examined emotion communication as a factor moderating the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and psychological aggression in adult romantic relationships. The purpose of the study was to identify developmental predictors of psychological aggression in young adult dating couples. Loucks et al. (2019) refers to emotion communication as an aspect of emotion regulation, and effective emotion communication is typically related to better emotion regulation. Emotion communication captures the verbal discussion of emotions, including identification and disclosure of emotions. For example, sharing that one is upset along with the reasoning behind the emotion, and perhaps what can help make them feel less upset. Emotion regulation more often refers to the reaction of emotions, both verbally and physical reactions such as being silent, leaving the room or yelling. Skillful emotion communication has been shown to better relationship functioning. The researchers hypothesized that a history of emotional maltreatment could elicit psychological aggression towards a partner, and that the level of emotion communication expressed during conflict would moderate the relation between emotional maltreatment and psychological aggression. Their hypothesis was supported within a dyadic observational study. Furthermore, individuals reporting higher levels of psychological aggression also reported higher levels of emotional maltreatment. Higher skillful emotion communication was linked to less psychological aggression only in females. Moreover, women also generally showed

higher levels of psychological aggression than males after reporting a history of emotional maltreatment.

5.Discussion

In this section I will be discussing the findings of this scoping review, elaborate on the dominant findings and present limitations and implications on this scoping review as one of the aims are also to identify gaps in the literature. To round off I will sum up the main findings, and include my final reflections of this study.

The purpose of this study was to map the available research on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. It was also the aim to identify possible gaps in the literature. My findings revealed that the amount of research linking childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship is limited. Prior to this, more research was published, but there had already been literature reviews conducted on the topic where data before 2012 was reviewed. Ten articles were included in this scoping review, where two of them had their study separated into two parts. Both articles discussed their findings together as they were closely related to each other. For example, Lassri et al. (2016) only extended their first study and added more mediating factors.

To my knowledge, there is no available qualitative research on this topic, therefore all the included studies were quantitative studies. Although the studies all conclude that childhood emotional maltreatment has a negative effect on later relationship functioning, by different mediating factors, it is interesting that there is no available qualitative research on this link, and this may be the largest gap in the literature of the studied link between emotional maltreatment and later relationship functioning.

To simplify this section, *emotional maltreatment* will be used whether the researchers referred to maltreatment or abuse. *Relationship functioning* will be used when generally referring to the dependent variable. Some articles used marital satisfaction or functioning, but unless needed to present the data correctly, *relationship functioning* will still be used in most cases. To clarify, the results section include the correct terms used by each researcher.

Childhood emotional maltreatment is the least studied form of childhood maltreatment, for several reasons. Emotional maltreatment is difficult to demonstrate (Reyome, 2010), and is characterized by an emotionally maltreating *relationship* between a parent and child, as opposed to a certain event or incident such as physical abuse or sexual abuse (Wright et al., 2009), and can therefore be difficult to recognize. But previous research, as well as the included studies in this review indicate that a history of emotional maltreatment during childhood can be harmful to a person's mental health, identity and close relationships later in life (Bigras et al., 2015; Loucks et al., 2019; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

The topic of adult romantic relationships hold a good amount of research. There is relevant and interesting literature available on what characteristics in people and in couple dynamics can be linked to poor relationship functioning as well as positive aspects of relationships, but it is not a given that these characteristics always stem from emotional maltreatment. As mentioned, only 10 articles directly linked childhood emotional maltreatment to adult romantic relationship functioning after 2012.

As Rodriguez et al. (2015) stated, we are likely to behave towards a romantic partner as if we expect this relationship to mimic the relationship we had with our caregivers as children or adolescence. Therefore, if our childhood rested on unstable emotional connections, we are more likely to act in anxious or ambivalent ways to help protect ourselves in other close relationships. All articles included in this literature review found that emotional maltreatment was linked to problems in adult romantic relationships, which were mediated or moderated by different variables. Hence, it is likely that emotional maltreatment can promote a tendency of thinking of oneself the way it comes across as one's caregivers think of them. This again indicates an internalized critical thinking pattern towards the self, which again is likely to promote stress. However, this does not mean that every relationship is or will be unstable if one has a history of emotional maltreatment. Emotional maltreatment can also be difficult to navigate by oneself as the consequences of emotional maltreatment usually are not immediate, like other types of maltreatment may be (Cao et al. 2020b). Along with how fewer children receive help in these situations this could be interesting to discuss in relation to why the consequences later in life have been stated to be the very similar between the different forms of child maltreatment, and that the

consequences following emotional maltreatment has been stated to be worse by some researchers (Loucks et al., 2019)

5.1 How childhood emotional maltreatment leads to intrapersonal issues, and their effect on adult romantic relationship functioning

This theme focuses on the data found on individuals in a romantic relationship, and not data on couples. It is likely that each person in a relationship will affect the other, but the studies on intrapersonal issues are all based on individual participants instead of couples.

Attachment theory has been frequently discussed across most of the studies on childhood emotional maltreatment and adult relationships. Some studies studied their mediators in the light of attachment theory. Intrapersonal problems and maladaptive schemas were of particular interest to researchers if the study was focused on insecure attachment behavior. Although attachment is not the same as intrapersonal problems, intrapersonal problems are repeatedly indicated to stem from insecure attachment styles. The way different aspects of the self seem to intertwine in terms of adult romantic relationship functioning, shows that the effect of childhood emotional maltreatment and how this affects relationships is a complex matter.

Along with attachment style, emotion regulation (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Cao et al., 2020b), maladaptive schemas (Bigras et al., 2015; Lassri et al., 2012, 2016) and psychological flexibility (Baugh et al., 2019) were the dominant mediators between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship functioning found in the included literature. Trust was also linked to several mediating factors.

The relation between all aspects of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships can be important with regards to treatment, therapy or simply connecting the dots between one's childhood and current relationship for a better understanding of how oneself. Which leads to one of the aims of a scoping review; to be able to sum up available knowledge for someone looking to get an overview.

While maltreatment will not always lead to insecure attachment, and insecure attachment will not always stem from maltreatment, all studies in this scoping review indicate that both concepts are linked. Attachment style was found to play a role either as a separate mediator or by affecting other

mediators between emotional maltreatment and relationship functioning (Cao et al., 2020b; Lassri et al., 2016).

One study (Cao et al., 2020b) conducted a serial mediation model, and this led to interesting findings due to how it separates the mediators. The researchers started out with studying how emotional maltreatment affects adult attachment before continuing to link the effect of adult attachment to emotion regulation and depressive symptoms, and again linking emotion regulation and depressive symptoms to romantic relationship functioning. By looking into the attachment aspect before moving forward, better clarity is given around the role attachment style plays regarding relationship functioning. It further shows general possible consequences of emotional maltreatment, as attachment can be displayed in many areas of life. This aligns with several previously published research articles (Neumann, 2017; Riggs et al. 2007; Riggs, 2010). Attachment- anxiety and avoidance has continuously been shown to later contribute to psychological distress (Riggs et al. 2007) and general intrapersonal issues which again leads to trouble in different relationships, and typically more trouble in romantic relationships (Messman-Moore and Coates, 2008; Wright et al., 2009). Attachment anxiety was shown to reflect in more severe interpersonal consequences than avoidant attachment, and these consequences may stem from emotion dysregulation, as found by Cao et al. (2020b). As previously stated, individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety are often characterized with a fear of abandonment and showing further signs of emotion dysregulation when trying to gain a feeling of closeness to their partner, and therefore being prone to creating conflict based on a lack of trust (Cao et al., 2020b; Rodriguez et al, 2015). The results on the consequences of the different attachment styles found in this study, are consistent with a previous literature review by Riggs (2010) linking childhood emotional maltreatment to the development of the attachment system across the life cycle. Riggs (2010) found that attachment style develops early in life, and meanwhile it is prone to change, these first experiences in life continue to affect a person's interpersonal functioning as well as their functioning in relationships. This makes for the person to continue their acting on their, possibly negative, development of attachment style based on previous expectations and experiences.

Overall, the studies included in this review also found anxious attachment behavior to further elicit conflict and emotion dysregulation in a relationship setting, this aligns with general research stating that attachment anxiety reflects itself in more active attachment behavior (Doumas et al., 2008) than avoidant attachment.

57

Anxiously attached individuals and their hypervigilant appraisal monitoring system (Cao et al. 2020b) tends to elicit less trust, as they are constantly looking for threatening cues to their relationship. They are also shown to be more likely to act on these cues than an avoidant attached individual (Cao et al. 2020b). These cues could be their partner going out to a bar with their friends, where their partner could technically meet someone else. Or if their partner is not responding to text messages as quickly as they usually do, and they could technically be doing something they shouldn't. A lack of impulse control and emotional clarity were shown to be typical signs of emotion dysregulation (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012), and the combination of this and a lack of trust could be problematic. Stronger attachment behavior and needs has previously been shown to lead to further conflict in relationships, as negative tension can become overwhelming (Rodriguez et al., 2015). For a person receiving this behavior from a partner, it can be difficult to understand and navigate as well. It may seem controlling, or at times rejecting. Both can lead to withdrawal from their partner, which is probable to elicit even more problematic behavior from a partner already reaching for closeness (Neumann, 2016). All of these reactions and behaviors were shown to be a part of emotion regulation, or dysregulation in this case. Bradbury & Shaffer (2012) found emotion dysregulation to fully mediate the relationship between emotional maltreatment and couple functioning. The link between emotional maltreatment and relationship dysfunction in several of the articles emphasizes emotion dysregulation to be a likely result of emotional maltreatment, and further shows its role in romantic relationships. Although emotion regulation also hold a decent amount of research, several researchers emphasize the importance of having a well-developed emotion regulation system and this could also be implied for further research in relation to romantic relationships.

The distinction between anxious and avoidant attached individuals regarding their effect on relationship functioning was quite significant. As it has been clearly stated in previous research as well as in the articles used in this review, avoidant attached individuals seem to show and perhaps feel less emotion than a securely attached person and an anxious attached person. They tend to lean on strategies that avoid them feeling vulnerable and rejected (Cao et al., 2020b). Cao et al. (2020b) and Lassri & Shahar (2012) showed similar results regarding avoidant attachment. Self-criticism was linked to how the felt need for independence becomes complicated if they feel rejected, and they therefore tend to actively try to avoid this by not coming too close to a partner.

58

When showing less emotion, maintaining a romantic relationship is likely to become more difficult. They might even avoid closeness all together, and not typically find themselves in romantic relationships (Bartholomew, 1990). Self-reliance is important for them, and through the results of this review, they have been shown to display less affection towards their romantic partner (Cao et al. 2020b; Lassri & Shahar, 2012).

The research included in this review, as well as previous research indicates that anxious attachment behavior is more problematic in romantic relationships. It could be interesting for further research to examine the differences in levels of conflict between the two insecure attachment styles, as research on the two seem to include more emphasis on anxious attachment. It could be possible that anxiously attached individuals simply make it easier to see that they are having issues than an avoidant attached individual, especially if an avoidant attached individual wishes to come off as more independent.

The impact mental health issues have on conflict in relationship functioning has been shown in past research. PTSD, depression, anxiety and anger has been shown to elicit more conflict than emotional avoidance (Brumariu et al., 2013). Similarly, in the article written by Cao et al. (2020b) depressive symptoms were found to link the relationship between emotional maltreatment to poor romantic relationship functioning. No other articles used specific mental health issues to mediate the relationship between the two concepts, although it is likely to assume that several interpersonal problems can affect general mental health.

Baugh et al. (2019) suggested that better psychological flexibility is a trait that allows oneself to be vulnerable and to trust a partner. Vulnerability has repeatedly been shown to be a difficult for an avoidant attached person (Cao et al. 2020b). Which can be tied to self-criticism and high self-standards (Lassri et al., 2016). Self-criticism is a form of maladaptive self-schemas, which was shown to affect relationships more than maladaptive other schemas (Baugh et al. 2019). It was stated in the literature that being self-critical typically does not leave much room for vulnerability, and the feeling of shame or blame may conflict with the ability to trust, if one for example does not believe they deserve a partner's loyalty. One can argue that a lack of vulnerability and a strong self-criticism can lead to avoiding affection in a relationship.

59

Contradicting previous research, on the other hand, states that avoidant attached individuals are prone to having positive thoughts of self, and negative view of others (Bartholomew, 1990), indicating the opposite of what the literature included in this review has to say about self-criticism and maladaptive self-schemas. But one can also argue that portraying negative views of other can be a survival mechanism to avoid showing vulnerability. Avoiding affection in contrast to requesting affection comes across through the literature as less hurtful. Also, the avoidance of intimacy shown aligns with additional research showing lower levels of jealousy (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Especially behavioral jealousy may be seen as a way of forcing a partner to be closer, which is not something an avoidant individual typically wants. Another difference in the two insecure attachment styles could be that it is possible that requesting affection leads to conflict arising faster, while avoiding affection could build up conflict over time.

Psychological flexibility is referred to by Baugh et al. (2009) as living by personal values and being able to adapt in and accept stressful situations. It is also said to be an aspect of particular relevance in the development of trust and has previously single-handedly been shown to facilitate romantic partner trust (Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006). While maladaptive schemas are stated to be more resistant to change than psychological flexibility, having stronger maladaptive self-schemas appears to lower the chances of gaining higher psychological flexibility (Baugh et al., 2019). This may imply that a focus on changing maladaptive schemas would later make it easier to gain better relationship functioning.

The standards that self-critical individuals typically hold for themselves tend to be high, perhaps higher than what is typically substantial. Closeness and intimacy can be difficult as they tend to fear disapproval from others, which in turn can lead to ambivalent relationships, confirming their inner belief of not being good enough and often avoiding commitment (Lassri et al, 2016). This seems to be a danger with maladaptive schemas, where one has negative beliefs of themselves and turn to behavior that, to them, confirms their belief. Although it is not likely to be true. This self-criticism might manifest itself in attachment deactivating tendencies, leading them even further away from the closeness they might desire. By attachment deactivating tendencies it is referred to dismissing emotions and attachment needs and not seeking support from a partner (Luyten et al., 2012). Again, results by Cao et al. (2020b) show that love and maintenance can be difficult for

individuals with avoidant attachment behavior, and that they generally show and possibly allow themselves to feel less emotion than an anxiously attached individual, for example.

It is important to note that in terms of self-criticism, young adults and college students are prone to insecurities and unachievable expectations in terms of looks, personality and social life. This can stem from other areas of life than childhood emotional maltreatment. Social media, for example, is frequently discussed as a tool leading to low self-esteem for its users (Ahadzadeh & Pahlevan, 2017; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018). This may contribute to more self-criticism and although the link found by Lassri et al. (2012, 2016) is significant enough to generalize to a certain extent, the aspect of self-criticism may also be influenced by the young age of many of the participants, as well as the general experience of being a college student.

As emotion regulation difficulties are shown to share a less significant link to attachment avoidance (Cao et al., 2020b), it confirms a speculated deficiency in emotions in an avoidant individual (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012). As compared to a securely attached individual on the other hand, who tend to see themselves as worthy of love, and view interpersonal relations as warm and safe (Lassri et al., 2016). They typically view relationships to be a safe place to be vulnerable and to seek support, and again typically reflecting a healthy emotion regulation system.

This fear of commitment and closeness is understandably difficult to navigate, as it is unlikely that they do not wish for closeness at all. They are, after all, still pursuing relationships.

Bigras et al. (2015) found an impaired identity and interpersonal conflicts to negatively affect relationship functioning, and it is probable to be due to a hampered emotional development, both in terms of regulating and communicating one's emotions. A lack of identity has previously been shown to further contribute to difficulties in trusting others, intimacy and fear of abandonment (Allen, 2011). If one has been hurt or made to feel as less when simply wishing for one of their basic emotional needs to be met by their primary caregiver, a negative style of communication can easily be triggered (Bigras et al., 2015). It was suggested that the impaired identity stemmed from one not being supported to create their own identity during childhood and adolescence (Bigras et al., 2015).

People develop in every stage of life, and adolescence especially is known to be a time where tends to try to "find themselves". But childhood also includes several steps in developing an identity. For example, if a child likes to sing and dance but does not feel like they are safe to do so in their

environment, it could impair them into developing an entertaining personality as they would feel shame and guilt for it. And with every hobby or interest one needs to feel safe to explore them, and without this one can experience themselves as lacking an identity over time (Bigras et al., 2015).

Both previous research and the included research in this study shows inconsistent results on how gender affects the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and later relationship functioning. Some research also included only female participants, none of the included studies included only males, and it would be interesting to compare the studies including only one gender to the general population. Godbout et al. (2006) researched the difference in gender for couple adjustment after childhood abuse and concluded that the differences were in fact small. Yet, some differences were found in Maneta et al. (2015), where women's empathic accuracy was affected only by their own history of emotional maltreatment, while men's empathic accuracy was affected by their partners history of emotional maltreatment. A substantial amount of research studying potential differences in genders are lacking in this field.

As it appears, there is also a gap in the research on how people in general are affected regarding romantic relationships after a history of emotional maltreatment. There is likely to be a time where two people have met and are getting to know each other before they label themselves as in a romantic relationship, and this time may be where people who struggle with interpersonal problems do not take the step into a relationship for numerous reasons discussed through this section. All research, published after 2012, linking the two concepts of interest include only participants who were in a romantic relationship at the time of assessment, leaving out potential important data in the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. Adding participants who have or are currently dating someone, but who would not classify themselves as in a romantic relationship, could be interesting for further research. Comparing the two groups could also be research of interest to the topic.

Overall, the studies show that the hampering of a healthy emotional development is likely to lead to intrapersonal problems that affect relationship functioning. Insecure attachment plays a role in connecting several mediators from emotional maltreatment to relationship functioning, the most

important one's being emotion regulation, depressive symptoms, an impaired identity and psychological flexibility. They also seem to all intertwine with each other, as the researchers often either connect them themselves or present data that is rather similar. It is also possible that being in a poor functioning relationship could have increased their emotion dysregulation or maladaptive schemas at some point, and that it does not solely come from emotional maltreatment (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012).

5.2 How childhood emotional maltreatment affects communication and conflict in adult romantic relationship functioning

Four of the articles used a dyadic data analysis, meaning that both parts of a couple were included in the study to examine a couple dynamic and not individuals in a relationship. These four will be a part of this theme, as communication and conflict were mostly examined by couples in the included studies.

As the amount of research on romantic relationships has grown over the past decades, it is surprising that dyadic analysis methods are not used more frequently. With interpersonal issues it might make more sense, or present more meaning, to study the individuals and their own experiences of a relationship. But in terms of romantic couples functioning dyadic analysis can be quite valuable.

Previous research shows childhood emotional maltreatment to predict couple adjustment more strongly than any other forms of child maltreatment (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

Hostility (Peterson et al., 2018), empathic accuracy (Maneta et al., 2014), compassionate goals (Sun et al., 2021) and emotion communication (Loucks et al., 2019) were the studied mediators between emotional maltreatment and relationship functioning related to relational communication and conflict. The dominating findings from this literature was that they mostly found the results of one person to depend on their partner, and vice versa, which is also why dyadic analysis is important for research on this topic. Gender results were inconsistent, but some differences were found and are worth discussing.

One study showed emotional maltreatment in both parts of a couple to mostly impact female

relationship functioning and not male relationship functioning (Peterson et al., 2018). On the other hand, Maneta et al. (2014) found different data stating that both female's and men's history of emotional maltreatment was linked to both their own and partners' relationship satisfaction. This might come down to several possible factors. There could be differences in the way men and women portray and communicate their emotions. Different expectations in relationships or different levels of maltreatment may also be possible reasons.

Some researchers refer to older research before the 2000's which indicate that female characteristics usually serve as the strongest indicator of relationship distress (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997, as cited in Peterson et al., 2017), which may provide some explanation for the results stating a difference in gender. They also refer to research stating that women are more likely to be attuned to relationship dynamics, meaning that they are more likely to be affected by negativity, but also positivity, in a romantic relationship. Reasons as to why women are more affected by relationships are difficult to explain. It could be cultural, where norms are deciding what role a female takes on in a relationship, marriage or in a family. It could relate to women being the ones to use birth control which can affect them mentally and physically (Salk et al., 2017). If a woman is expected to complete certain tasks throughout the day and behave a certain way, they could be more prone to certain types of stress. It could be gender genetics like hormones, chemical balances or mental health. For example, women have consistently been shown to be more likely to suffer from depression than men (Salk et al., 2017), which again was shown in this study to affect relationships (Cao et al., 2020b). Nevertheless, Maneta et al. (2014) still found there not to be a significant difference in gender and relationship *satisfaction*, and Bradbury & Shaffer (2012) similarly found emotional maltreatment to be linked to both one's own and one's partners relationship functioning. A previous study by Foran et al. (2012) found that in married couples, men's relationship satisfaction was higher if the emotional communication was lower from their female partner. While female partners' satisfaction was higher when their male partner communicated their emotions on a higher level (Foran et al., 2012). This shows a possible difference between gender in romantic relationships, and how this can become problematic in conflict and communication, although the role of gender seems to be inconsistent through the literature. For example, Loucks et al. (2019) found there to be little sex differences in perpetrating psychological aggression towards a partner, meaning coercive or aversive acts intended to hurt

64

someone else's feelings (Loucks et al., 2019). Loucks et al. (2019) also refers to older research backing up this finding, but a slight increase in female psychological aggression towards a male partner was still found in this study, although it was not very significant. Interestingly, a counteracting effect of psychological aggression in both females and males was higher levels of skillful emotion regulation, which could be plausible as if one is better at controlling difficult emotions, they are less likely to turn to aggressive behavior. This indicates that whether gender plays a role in relationship functioning alone is difficult to say, but it does seem like it is possible in some cases and should be further examined.

Empathic accuracy referred to the importance of reading one's partner's emotions accurately, especially during conflict (Maneta et al., 2014). It has been stated that one is more likely to behave out of the ordinary during conflict and when intense emotions are present (Loucks et al., 2019), but these situations can be detrimental to whether a relationship will last. The influence of one's history of emotional abuse was significantly higher when reading a partner's negative emotions rather than positive, which can be linked to the negativity in an emotional maltreating parent-child relationship and the consequences thereafter. This yields a larger focus towards conflict than towards love and the maintenance of a bond. A lack of awareness towards one's own emotions was likely to conflict with reading other's emotions as well, as a form of emotion dysregulation (Bradbury and Shaffer, 2012). As previously stated, reading a partners' emotions can also be seen in relation to emotion regulation and perhaps attachment styles, especially how one reacts to their perception of their partner's emotions or signals (Bradbury and Shaffer, 2012; Cao et al., 2020b). Perhaps if one shows strong anxious behavior patterns or maladaptive schemas, they may inaccurately read their partner's emotions and turn to acts portraying emotion dysregulation. Although Maneta et al. (2014) didn't find a difference in gender and relationship satisfaction, reading one's partner's emotions also depends on that partner's ability to express their own emotions, which researchers state may be the reason why some data is inconsistent (Maneta et al., 2014). Higher reported levels of emotional maltreatment also generally predicted greater difficulties in reading one's partner's emotions accurately. Again drawing the connection to the way we view ourselves and others through attachment styles and maladaptive schemas. An avoidant attached individual might show different emotions than they're feeling, and this becomes a problem when their partner tries to read their emotions. This does not necessarily mean that that

65

partner has low empathic accuracy, but can also be referred to as troubles in emotional communication (Loucks et al., 2019). These studies show that the presence of conflict and a focus on negative emotions simultaneously with the lack of compassionate goals or positive emotions is highly harmful to relationship functioning and may indicate that a positive focus over focusing on negative sides of a relationship could be important. If this shift in focus can help overall relationship functioning, this knowledge could be helpful in therapy, and could be beneficial for further research.

High skillful emotion regulation is typically taught during childhood (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012) but one can be a victim of emotional maltreatment and still have, or gain, skillful emotion regulation. The lack of this in victims of emotional maltreatment and its consequence on levels of hostility and unfriendliness (Peterson et al., 2018) and psychological aggression (Loucks et al., 2019) is still quite clear through the literature. Furthermore, previous research has shown hostility to predict lower satisfaction in marriage and general relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995, as cited in Peterson et al., 2018). With this knowledge, similar to maladaptive schemas, working on one's emotion regulation could hopefully be helpful in mending aggressive behavior or relationships of poor functioning (Cao et al., 2020b). Emotion communication problems as a developmental consequence of child maltreatment has been repeatedly stated to be a common consequence of maltreatment (Fitzgerald, 2021; Reyome, 2009; Riggs and Kaminski, 2008). Communicating one's emotions as well as being able to identify them themselves are a part of emotion communication as well as emotion regulation (Loucks et al., 2019).

Along with emotion regulation, being able to have and show compassionate goals towards a partner has been shown to be positive for relationship functioning (Sun et al., 2021). Sun et al. (2021) studied the positive sides of a romantic relationship instead of negative sides like the majority of research on relationships focuses on. They found the lack of compassionate goals to lead to shorter lasting relationships, which aligns with Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2021) and their study, as they suggested that an individual with a history of childhood maltreatment can have trouble in keeping a relationship as time goes on, due to the difficulty of hiding their vulnerabilities over time. It was also found that their perceived partner responsiveness decreased over time, which is similar to how compassionate goals were seen to lower over time (Vaillancourt-Morel et al.,

2021) When researching romantic relationship functioning, and especially the functioning of relationships after a history of child maltreatment, it is mostly referred to negative mediators. But looking at positive aspects of relationship functioning can work as a way of shifting the focus on what is good, and ideally have this overpower the bad. This does not necessarily mean positive outcomes of childhood maltreatment. However, it is not likely that a person or a couple has no positive characteristics. Another interesting finding was that an individual with a history of emotional maltreatment is likely to benefit from being in a relationship with a person with high compassionate goals (Sun et al., 2021). It was not seen to raise their compassionate goals, but it was not seen to lower them either. For a victim of childhood emotional maltreatment, being with someone who also has low compassionate goals, it was likely to bring their own compassionate goals even lower, which again was shown to lead to a decrease in relationship functioning. This finding points out the importance of finding a partner that can add positivity to one's life, and not the opposite. The findings also suggest that emotional maltreatment can make it difficult to be supportive of others, which affects an important part of being in a romantic relationship, but also friendships. This difficulty could be due to a negative view of others, not believing others deserve it or that they would support one back. It could also stem from a lack of psychological flexibility (Baugh et al., 2019), which again was shown to inhibit the ability to adapt in relational situations.

6. Summary

 This chapter will address a summary based on the discussion to highlight the most important findings of this study. Overall, this summary will shortly present the literature available on the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning.

 The studies indicate that the experience of childhood emotional maltreatment may negatively impact many aspects of relationship functioning such as trust, communication, conflict and how one maintains a relationship. A direct link from emotional maltreatment to difficulties in adult romantic relationship functioning as been shown in every article included, as well as the mentioned previous research. All articles have presented mediators to understand and explain what may cause this connection. Not surprisingly, intrapersonal issues from a poor emotional development seem to be the root of relationship dysfunction as a whole, and these can give rise to communication issues and conflict within a couple's dynamic. *Maladaptive self-schemas*, *emotion dysregulation* and a lack of *psychological flexibility* may be the main areas of concern for an individual struggling with functioning well in a romantic relationship. Although, this does not indicate that if a relationship has issues, it is one person's fault. Dyadic adjustment was shown to be dominated by *emotion communication, empathic accuracy* and *compassionate goals*. This summary is made up of research examining both parties of a romantic couple, as well as examinations of individuals currently in a romantic relationship. This study has presented data on how one individual can affect their partner, but also be affected *by* their partner. The mix of these two types of data is valuable in gaining a wider understanding of how childhood emotional maltreatment leads to dysfunctional relationships.

Attachment theory indicates the level of trust, vulnerability and safety one experiences in a romantic relationship. Attachment theory is widely referred to through the included literature, and the findings show differences between anxious and avoidant attachment behaviors in relationships. A healthy development of the attachment system was found to be disrupted by emotional maltreatment (Cao et al., 2020b), and both types of insecure attachment were linked to higher rates of psychological distress in relationships, causing conflict and trust issues. Attachment anxiety showed more active behavior and led to more active conflict, while as attachment avoidance might

lead to an equal amount of conflict, it typically does not seem to lead to the same level of active conflict. Active conflict refers to more extreme behavior that could escalate quickly, in order to gain, or perhaps try to force, closeness with their partner due to a fear of abandonment and a lack of trust. They might feel a need to prove themselves because of their insecure child-parent relationship. On the other hand, avoidant attached individuals can be prone to self-criticism, unrealistic self-reliance and a strong fear or vulnerability and rejection (Lassri & Shahar, 2012; Lassri et al., 2016). Self-criticism was specifically found to fully mediate the relationship between emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship dysfunction for avoidant attached individuals. Maladaptive self-schemas were also shown to have a stronger mediating effect than maladaptive other schemas (Baugh et al., 2019), and can be seen in relation to an impaired identity and intrapersonal conflicts (Bigras et al., 2015). Emotion dysregulation had a significant impact on functioning and is likely to stem from a lack of support and emotional understanding when developing a healthy emotion regulating system. This reflects itself in conflict especially, and it was suggested by Cao et al. (2020b) that women specifically could benefit from attending training programs on emotion regulation to help them cope with the better in their couple adjustment after a history of emotional maltreatment.

Levels of hostility, empathic accuracy and emotion communication were also significant in conflict and communication. These concepts were measured using dyadic analysis. Results were contradicting in terms of gender differences, but a history of emotional maltreatment mostly had both actor and partner effects on relationship functioning (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012; Maneta et al., 2014). High levels of dyadic hostility were typically linked to lower self-reported relationship functioning, depending on severity of reported emotional maltreatment. Empathic accuracy and emotion communication were likely to impact each other, and a history of emotional maltreatment was significantly correlated with trouble in both aspects. Empathic inaccuracy and poor emotion communication were both linked to poor relationship functioning and, similar to emotion dysregulation and insecure attachment, behaviors they are likely to stem from a poorly developed emotion regulation center. Emotion dysregulation was also likely to affect empathic accuracy.

Lastly, having compassionate goals towards a partner was positively linked to better, or at least not worsen, relationship quality. Low compassionate goals were seen to lower relationship quality over time and were also linked to past childhood emotional maltreatment. This aligned with previous research as well. A person with low compassionate goals could benefit from being in a

relationship with someone with high compassionate goals. A higher level of skillful emotion regulation was also seen to decrease psychological aggression and increase psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility seemed to be impacted by maladaptive schemas. Therefore, working on maladaptive schemas indicates the ability to build skillful emotion regulation, which again could benefit romantic relationship functioning.

6. 1 Limitations of this scoping review

For this study, a scoping review was chosen as it is a transparent method that provides a summary of the available literature, as well as mapping the volume and potential gaps in the literature. The results yielded potentially useful information about the link between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. Some limitations have yet been identified to potentially affect this study. The search terms used could always have been more, and there is a chance that useful literature has escaped the search. Only three databases were searched (Web of Science, ERIC and PsychNet), and even though several articles appeared on more than one database, there is a chance that other databases would have yielded search results that could have added to the scope of this review. It is also possible that a systematic review could have provided greater results, although one of the aims of a scoping review is also to determine whether a systematic review could be beneficial in producing more detailed results.

All studies were reliant on self-report measures by participants. Most of the articles had college students as participants, meaning they are quite young. The late teens and early 20's is typically seen as a stage in life where one is unsure of themselves, more insecure in their social life and have less life experience. This could also lead to more difficulties in romantic relationships. And a gap in the included literature would be the lack of adults over the age of 30 as participants. Another important notice is that all participants were in relationships at the time of the study, which rules out possible victims of emotional maltreatment who have too great of a difficulty to enter a romantic relationship in the first place. All studies included heterosexual couples. Sexuality was mostly not specified in the articles using individual participants, but it is assumed that most of them were also heterosexual. Although the link between emotional maltreatment and relationship functioning did not a show significant association to gender, some association was found. The

70

sexuality of participants could therefore limit the findings of the literature. Further research on gender, and perhaps sexuality, could add to the results found in this review.

Moreover, all data was quantitative. There was no relevant qualitative data that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and this may limit the data. The research on aspects of romantic relationships included in this review could benefit from qualitative data in the future.

Any weakness in my inclusion and exclusion criteria might have left out other relevant data for the research question, and a bigger study might pick up more or different results than I have.

Another weakness is the different definitions, ideas and perceptions of *emotional maltreatment, emotional neglect* and *emotional abuse*. Psychological concepts like these may require some ability and possibility for the researchers to analyze, as well as the results rely on the participants to be able to get their point across and answer truthfully. Their own perceptions, memory and other variables may also skew the results.

Resilience was briefly mentioned in the concepts and theory chapter, but no relevant literature was found to include resilience in their study. Resilience is an otherwise frequently mentioned aspect in research on outcomes in adulthood after an adverse childhood, and this could be interesting to add to the link between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning.

These terms are also not as specific as sexual or physical abuse, and especially cases of emotional neglect may at times be seen simply as non-ideal parenting. One way to strengthen this weakness is adding synonyms to the search string. An example is *"distant parent"*, which was used to draw out data on parents not paying physical or mental attention to their children, but not in the way where the researchers would call it *maltreatment, neglect* or *abuse.* More search words like these could bring forward more literature.

7. Final reflections

The aim of this study was to scope the available empirical research on the link between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning. I have examined how adult romantic relationship functioning is affected by *1) intrapersonal problems* and *2) communication and conflict* after a history of emotional maltreatment. The empirical data material used for the study was found using principles of conducting a literature review, specifically for a *scoping review.* The guides of Aveyard (2014), Arksey & O´Malley, 2007 and Creswell (2009) on conducting a scoping review have been helpful in guiding this study. Especially as I am not an experienced writer. My advisor, Sara Jahnke, and the librarian at the University of Bergen have also been of great help in guiding this study.

This scoping review may serve as an indicator for future research. Future research should focus on prevention, specifically on the development of interventions for victimized children to help them from developing these problems. It should also focus on ways to minimize the consequences of an already hampered emotional development.

The findings of the studies included in this scoping review all found that individuals with a history of emotional maltreatment seem to be more at risk of experiencing dysfunctional relationships in adulthood. The effects parenting has on one's views of oneself and others appear to play an important role in how one later relates to a romantic partner. This indicates that children may mimic the child-parent relationship they had growing up when they later get into a romantic relationship, and if the functioning of that child-parent relationship was poor, it is likely that the romantic relationship will be poor as well. The psychological consequences of lacking a safe emotional environment in childhood may contribute to problems in romantic relationships, whether that comes from a passive (avoidant) or active (anxious) role. Maladaptive schemas, emotion regulation and emotion communication seem to be the superior mediators as they also cover a larger range of issues. Hostility, for example, could be categorized as emotional communication. But although most of the mediators were negative, it is important to emphasize that compassionate goals were seen to neutralize some aspects of relationship functioning, and that the focus in this matter does not necessarily have to be on the negative aspects.

72

This scoping review shows that both emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationships are complex and involves many aspects. But the goal was to find a connection between the two that could add to the understanding of how these two variables connect. The findings imply that in order to improve dysfunctional relationships after a history of emotional maltreatment, identifying and working on the mediating factors could be beneficial, as well as looking at building up positive sides to a relationship and not just the lack of things.

My research has also shown that there can be several reasons as to why an individual acts a certain way in a relationship, and that learned patterns of relations can be a consequence of a situation that was out of their hands. Emotional maltreatment has also been shown to be a rather large topic that should be discussed more. Further research could identify ways of changing these negative patterns or, hopefully, preventing them from developing.

Through this scoping review I have gathered the current literature on the connection between emotional maltreatment and adult romantic relationship functioning, as well as identified gaps and limitations in the literature and implied for further research. These are complex issues that should be given more attention, both during childhood and adulthood.

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74

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