Oral Presentation Script

**Title slide**

My name is Kayla Gay, and I am a senior undergraduate studying psychology and sociology. The research study I have conducted over the past two semesters, with the help of Dr. Longmore and members of the sociology department, focuses on sources of anxiety in romantic relationships for emerging adults. It is a qualitative analysis using data from a larger study called the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, which I will discuss in more detail later on in this presentation.

As a psychology major, I have always had a research interest in mental health and the things that cause individuals to have poor mental health. As a sociology minor, I am also interested in how mental health is influenced by the relationships that individuals have with family, friends, and especially romantic partners. These romantic relationships become increasingly important during emerging adulthood when individuals are beginning to settle down and create a family. Because this is a critical time of romantic development for adults, it is a good stage of the life course to examine when studying relationship functioning. To get an idea of what is currently known about anxiety, sources of anxiety, and romantic relationships and mental health, I will begin this presentation by reviewing some relevant research.

**Background: Anxiety**

Anxiety is a common emotion that every person experiences many times throughout their lives. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that anxiety disorders are known to be the most prevalent mental disorders in children, adolescents, and adults (Merikangas et al., 2009). The high prevalence along with the detrimental impact anxiety can have make it an important topic of interest for researchers and practitioners alike. A few important studies show just how common anxiety disorders are. Bandelow and Michaelis (2015) found that 33.7% of the population experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives using large population-based surveys. Kessler et al. (2005) reports that nearly 1 in 5 U.S. adults are impacted by anxiety disorders. The literature on anxiety also suggests that there are gender differences in anxiety. For example, McLean et al. (2011) discovered that women were significantly more likely to meet the criteria for all anxiety disorders except for social anxiety disorder, for which no gender differences were found. Research has indicated that there are gender differences in prevalence rates of anxiety and the impact it has on individuals. Therefore, I wanted to look for gender differences in the current study.

**Sources of Anxiety**

There are many things that can cause individuals to be anxious. For the purposes of this study, I have focused on some of the literature surrounding factors that could lead to anxiety both on an individual and a relational level. Merolla (2017) found that financial resource loss led to increased anxiety and that this anxiety predicted passive-destructive behaviors and neglect during conflict in romantic relationships. Financial problems create anxiety within the individual, which then creates conflict in their relationships as well. On a relational level, Bebanic et al. (2017) discovered that psychological and physical violence increased the risk of comorbid anxiety and depressive symptoms for both men and women. It is known that these experiences can create anxiety for individuals and between romantic partners. However, few studies have emphasized romantic relationships themselves as sources of individuals’ feelings of anxiety. Instead of simply looking at the factors that lead to anxiety, this study will look at how romantic relationships create anxiety or how they can lead to the development of some of these known factors. Now, I will review some of the literature on how relationships impact overall mental health.

**Relationships and Mental Health**

Research has shown that relationships with romantic partners can have both positive and negative influences on an individual’s mental health and levels of anxiety. Beckmeyer and Cromwell (2019) discovered that emerging adults who were involved in romantic relationships reported less loneliness and greater life satisfaction than those who were single, regardless of whether or not they expressed interest in a romantic relationship. This suggests that being in a relationship can have a positive impact on individuals’ overall well-being.

Conversely, Priest (2013) found that lower relationship quality with a spouse or partner was associated with an increased risk of generalized anxiety disorder, panic attacks, and post-traumatic stress disorder. This research suggests that being in a romantic relationship or not and the quality of these relationships have significant impacts on well-being and experiences with anxiety.

**Life Course Perspective**

I viewed this data with a life course perspective in mind, which emphasizes how different phenomena vary over the life course. As I will discuss in the upcoming slide, the data for this study is from an ongoing longitudinal study. Therefore, respondents discuss some events and experiences that occurred during previous stages of their lives, so it was important to take this theoretical perspective into consideration when analyzing the data.

Many studies have investigated how experiences with romantic relationships change or impact individuals over time. When studied from adolescence to adulthood, (17-27 years old), individuals who experienced higher levels of conflict during adolescent relationships exhibited an increase in externalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, and worry (Kansky & Allen, 2018). This research exemplifies the impact that romantic encounters during earlier stages of life can have in later stages, especially from adolescence to emerging adulthood.

Going back even further in the life course, Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2010) found that connectedness in romantic relationships was predicted by earlier mother-child relationships that were characterized by high support and low conflict. This finding shows how even early life experiences can have a lasting impact on individuals that effects how they function in relationships later in life.

**Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS)**

For my study, I used data that was already collected from a larger study called the The Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). This is an ongoing longitudinal research project that faculty in BGSU’s sociology department have been working on for over 20 years. Dr. Wendy D. Manning, Dr. Monica A. Longmore, and Dr. Peggy C. Giordano have conducted survey interviews with 1,300 individuals from the time they were teens through their early adult years.

They have also conducted face-to-face interviews with subsets of individuals at six different times over the 20-year span. With its longitudinal design, it is an effective way to study individuals and see how they change throughout the life course. This past summer in 2019, the TARS research team collected face-to-face interviews (wave six) with both men and women in which the individuals were asked about experiences with intimate partner violence and the ways that individuals stopped this kind of behavior. This research project received federal funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Justice.

**Current Study**

The interviewer on the project who conducted these wave six interviews noted that many respondents discussed anxiety, although anxiety was not the intended focus of the interviews. The TARS team wanted to explore this observation, so I chose to create my own project in an attempt to investigate:

(1) What are the individuals anxious about?

(2) Is the anxiety discussed due to their romantic relationships? and

(3) Do men and women talk about their experiences with anxiety in different ways?

Based on the previous research that I have presented about anxiety and what causes anxiety in relationships, I expected to find that respondents might discuss financial problems, their own mental health issues, and possibly familial relationships. I also expected to find that violence and conflict in relationships would be sources of anxiety for respondents, especially because the TARS team specifically asked about these experiences in this wave of interviews.

Second, I was interested in finding whether the sources of anxiety individuals discussed were directly caused by their romantic relationships or whether the sources themselves created anxiety within their relationships. I was curious to see if the respondents would discuss their relationships as being sources of relief from their anxiety. I expected respondents to either say their romantic relationships caused anxiety for them or that these relationships helped alleviate anxiety. I thought that some might say their partners have helped them deal with or overcome anxiety as opposed to causing or exacerbating it. Since the literature on this topic was mixed, I was not sure if I would find more of a positive or negative influence of romantic relationships on anxiety for these respondents.

Third, I expected to find some gender differences in this data since literature has shown so many differences in the ways men and women experience anxiety and how it influences them.

**Measures of Anxiety**

In the TARS study, participants are regularly measured through self-report surveys to gather demographics and other important information. For the current study, I was interested in participants’ experiences with anxiety. Respondents were asked how often they felt distressed or bothered by the following issues over the past week:

* Feeling tense
* Suddenly feeling scared for no reason
* Restlessness
* Spells of panic/terror
* Feeling nervous/anxious

Respondents indicated on a 1 (never) to 5 (very often) scale how often they experienced each of these measures in the last week. They received an overall anxiety score from 0-25. These anxiety measures were based on the Symptom Checklist 90 (Derogatis, 1975), which is an inventory of indicators of generalized anxiety disorder. Dr. Longmore, my main advisor on this project, helped me select the six respondents (3 M and 3 F) who scored the highest on these anxiety measures from the most recent wave of TARS qualitative interviews (wave six). These six respondents had scores ranging from 15-21.

**Respondent Demographics**

This table shows a breakdown of some of the important demographic characteristics of the six respondents. The age range is a bit higher than what is typically thought of as emerging adulthood. However, respondents discussed events and relationships that have occurred in their lives for the past seven years since their last interview. Many of them are still in the process of finishing their education, moving into their own place, and settling down and/or creating a family. Therefore, myself and faculty I have worked with on the TARS team believed the emerging adulthood label was appropriate.

**Qualitative Analysis**

With my sample of six qualitative interviews, I analyzed the events and experiences that caused anxiety for respondents, specifically relating to their romantic relationships. With a life course perspective in mind, I also examined how experiences throughout childhood and adolescence may impact the way individuals behave in relationships and what factors may lead to anxiety.

I began this data analysis process by listening to the recorded interviews and editing the transcripts that were made through the Otter system, which records interviews while transcribing them. The system does not distinguish well between the interviewer and respondent and it makes some writing errors that have to be corrected by hand. While listening and transcribing, I wrote an abstract summary for each respondent. The TARS team provided me with 10 different topics to focus on, since these may also be used for future analysis for the larger study. These topics are:

1. Basic transition information: How the respondent is doing and any important new updates
2. Romantic relationship status: This can also include a mention of prior relationships that have ended since the last interview
3. Conflict/Violence: Any conflicts or violence in past or present relationships. This can also include reasons why respondents have changed their use of or views about conflict and violence, such as having children, effects of formal or informal systems, etc.
4. Family context: How the use of violence or how conflict was resolved in the family has an impact on respondents and how relationships with family have influenced their romantic relationships
5. Peer context: Any information about the impact of their peers/friends on romantic relationships
6. Comparing and contrasting specific partners
7. Attitudes and beliefs that support the use of violence under certain circumstances (if any)
8. Stay leave decision-making: Reasons why respondents decided to stay, leave, or go back certain romantic partners
9. Relationship learning curve: What the respondents learned from each of their past romantic relationships
10. Overall well-being and sense of control: The sense of control aspect could be with regard to their relationships or life in general.

The goal of these abstracts is to give an overview of what is going on with the respondent in each of these areas using as many direct quotes from the interview as possible. Creating the abstracts helped me identify these anxiety themes as well.

As I went through each interview, I pulled out quotes where the respondents discussed anxiety. Once I had completely gone through each interview, I used qualitative content analysis to look for themes in the data. I looked for common sources of anxiety between all the respondents based on the quotes I had pulled out. Then, using the conceptual files method, I separated the quotes into separate documents based on each of the common sources of anxiety I had identified. All of these sources were related to their romantic relationships in some way.

**Results**

This table shows the top five sources of anxiety that respondents talked about. It was interesting that almost every respondent talked about each of these sources of anxiety throughout their interviews. Family conflict as a source of anxiety was only experienced by 3 respondents, but the impact was very strong for these individuals, and it was even the main source of relationship anxiety for one respondent. Family conflict and familial relationships have been found to cause stress and anxiety in previous research as well, so I felt that it was an important source to include in the results of this study. I found no significant gender differences in the ways that men and women talked about anxiety or the sources that caused them anxiety. All of these five sources of anxiety were discussed by both men and women. The way respondents talked about their anxious experiences was also essentially the same with neither gender using different words to describe their anxiety. Although there were individual differences with what each respondent was experiencing, there were no clear distinctions between men and women.

All of these sources were found to both directly lead to stress and anxiety for individuals *and* to cause stress and anxiety in their romantic relationships. Interestingly, in support of my second research question, these sources of anxiety were also found to be directly caused by romantic relationships. Many respondents discussed how their mental and/or physical health issues, financial stress, and even family conflict were a direct result of their romantic partners and the dynamics in those relationships. More obviously, anxiety about divorce/break-ups and violence and conflict were a direct result of romantic relationships. I will go through each of these sources in detail in the upcoming slides, including examples of direct quotes from respondents. **Please note that the respondent names have been changed to protect their anonymity and to do match their real names.**

**Financial Stress**

Financial stress was one of the prominent issues that respondents discussed. I expected to find that some respondents would discuss money as a source of stress, but I had only thought of it in the context of not having enough money. Some of the reasons for financial stress that these respondents mentioned did not occur to me until reviewing this data. All six of them experienced anxiety over money for one or more of these reasons:

1. Not having enough money to support themselves and their children (5 respondents)
2. Not having a job (3 respondents)
3. An ex-partner stole money from them (2 respondents)
   1. This led to anxiety over her home being foreclosed on for one respondent.
4. Having to pay child support (1 respondent)

All of these reasons for financial stress were either directly caused by their relationships (1, 3, and 4) and/or created anxiety within them (1 and 2).

Maria describes how her ex-boyfriend stole money from her, which led to her house being foreclosed on. The ex-boyfriend had been taking her money for the house payments and bills, leaving her in a bad financial situation. She didn’t realize he had been stealing the money until after their relationship ended. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

Jennifer talks about how money was the biggest stressor in one of her past relationships. She could not work at the time due to health issues and, he would not get a job. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

Rachel says not having a job or a car is causing her stress because she has two children and herself to provide for. She also mentions that money was a source of stress in her last relationship. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

**Divorce/Break-ups**

This may be the most obvious source of stress and anxiety for individuals when it comes to romantic relationships, and this finding is consistent with previous research. Rhoades et al. (2011) found that going through a break-up was associated with increased psychological distress and a decrease in life satisfaction. All six of the respondents talked about at least one (sometimes multiple) past or current divorces or break-ups that have added anxiety and other negative effects to their lives.

Stephen talks about how his divorce had a negative impact on him. He had so much trouble with it that he turned to Unison, a mental health clinic, for help. As you will see in the upcoming slides, he already has pre-existing mental health issues, and this divorce really added to those issues for him. He was not able to work very many jobs because of his social anxiety, so that’s why he was going to apply for disability. His problems had gotten much worse after his divorce. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

Interestingly, two respondents even discussed anxiety over deciding whether or not they should divorce their current wives. Both of these male respondents explained that their wives were causing them a great deal of issues with their friends, families, and especially their own mental health. However, they claimed to still love the women and want to be with them, despite all the negativity they are bringing to their lives. The quote from Tyler shows the internal struggle that he and another respondent, David, are both facing. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

**Violence and Conflict**

Finding that violence and conflict within relationships causes anxiety was not unexpected in this study, based on previous research. The TARS team member who conducted these interviews specifically asked respondents about their experiences with violence and conflict in romantic relationships. Because they were asked about it, respondents discussed violence and conflict and it ended up being a source of anxiety for all respondents. All six respondents talked about both physically violent incidents with romantic partners and nonphysical conflicts.

Rachel talks about some of the violent fights between her and her long-term ex-girlfriend. After being broken up for a year, she says she will never put herself through a violent relationship like that again because of the negativity and stress it brought to her life. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

Maria describes both the physical and nonphysical conflict that occurred in one of her past relationships and how it took an emotional toll on her. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

David also describes the physical violence that occurred between him and his ex-wife. **(Refer to quote on slide)** This violent conflict ultimately led to their divorce, which he seems to still have some sad emotions about. When asked if he wished things had turned out differently with her, he said, “I don't even want to even try to- try to pretend to deal with those emotions.” It’s clear that violence and conflict have negative effects on individuals as well as their romantic relationships.

**Mental or Physical Health**

Four out of the six respondents discussed how their own mental health issues were impacted by their relationships and how their relationships impacted their mental health issues. These respondents discussed a range of mental health issues, including social anxiety, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety, and depression. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that the association between mental health and romantic relationships goes both ways. For example, Rhoades et al. (2011) report that people who have more problems with their mental health and generally have lower levels of life satisfaction may have more trouble entering and maintaining romantic relationships.

Stephen supports this research finding when he talks about how his mental health issues negatively impacted his marriage. **(Refer to quote on slide)** Similarly, Maria, who has bipolar disorder, says her relationship with her children’s father ended because she “went manic.”

Tyler shows how romantic relationships can have a negative impact on mental health and create anxiety for individuals. He talks about how emotionally drained and depressed he is because of how his wife treats him. **(Refer to quote on the slide)** When the interviewer asked him if she adds to his depression and anxiety, he said “Oh, fuck yeah she does, you know, fuck yeah she does.”

Two respondents discussed how physical health issues contributed to their own anxiety and how these issues were exacerbated by their relationships. Jennifer talks about her neuro cardiological syncope, a condition in which fainting spells occur when the body is under certain conditions, such as intense emotions. She explains that her spells are often brought on by stress, and that when she was in a volatile relationship with a lot of fighting, she was fainting very frequently. **(Refer to quote on slide)**

**Family Conflict**

Only three respondents discussed family conflict as a source of anxiety in their romantic relationships, but the anxiety was so significant for these respondents that it is important to include. The main type of family conflict that occurred was conflict between the respondent’s family and their romantic partner.

David talks about how the conflict between his wife and his family is affecting him emotionally. He is trying to decide whether to stay with his wife or divorce her, and he is feeling a lot of pressure from his family to do what would make them happy. **(Refer to quote on the slide)**

Jennifer talks about how there was conflict between her and her ex-boyfriend when they were living at her parents’ house because they could not contribute to the household income. She explains that during that time, “it was pretty tumultuous” between her, her boyfriend, and her family because of his unwillingness to contribute. **(Refer to quote on the slide)**

Rachel mentions that her father used to beat her as a child, and she also talks a lot about experiencing and using physical violence in her most current long-term relationship. Although she does not directly say that these two experiences are connected, it would be an interesting thing to look at with this respondent or others in the sample in future studies.

**Unexpected Findings**

I expected that some respondents would talk about their children as a source of anxiety, but none of the respondents in this sample did. Every respondent had at least one child, and each one talked about how much they love their children. Respondents talked about their children changing them and their lives for the better, making them happy, and wanting to give them the best lives possible. Some respondents talked about anxiety due to disagreements with ex-partners about their children, but none of the respondents talked about children being a source of stress or anxiety.

I was surprised to find that only one respondent talked about their partner having a positive impact on their well-being. Jennifer talked about her past relationships causing her anxiety, but she praises her current partner for being communicative and being there for her when she’s feeling down. **(Refer to the quote on the slide)**

Most respondents reported distress when romantic relationships came to an end. However, Maria actually wanted one of her ex-boyfriends to leave, and she felt relieved when he did. She felt anxiety over trying to end the relationship because it was so volatile and violent. After some help from a male friend, she was able to push him to the point of leaving. This illustrates an important point that if a relationship is not good for an individual’s mental health, dissolving the relationship may actually relieve anxiety instead of cause it. **(Refer to quote on the slide)**

Another interesting finding with Maria was that she had a different view than the other respondents about her justifications for using violence against romantic partners. Most respondents mentioned not wanting their children to see these incidents, but Maria had a different opinion:

“He would emotionally abuse me like, I am nothing, you know, I'm this, you're a fat bitch or, you know, just- he would- and he would do that shit in front of my kids… you're not gonna disrespect me in front of my kids. I have boys, and I do not want them to be raised around the fact thinking they can downplay any type of a woman of their width and uh I want them to understand, you do this? This is what's going to happen.”

**Conclusions**

The results of this study show that there are clearly five overarching themes that stand out as being the most impactful on the mental health of respondents and their levels of anxiety. Evidently, there are some individual differences in the specific situations that cause these sources of anxiety for respondents. However, these themes reflect previous research about certain stressors causing anxiety, such as financial problems, violence and conflict, and divorce/break-ups. The results also support the idea that relationships can negatively impact pre-existing mental/physical health issues and vice versa. This study also shows that break-ups do not always cause anxiety but can sometimes alleviate it.

This study helps to fill an important gap in the literature on anxiety and relationships. Previous studies have investigated certain stressors that can lead to feelings of anxiety, such as financial problems, relationship conflict, and breaking up, but few studies have looked at how romantic relationships themselves can be sources of anxiety for individuals. My study and its findings contribute to the literature on anxiety in a significant way by providing evidence that romantic relationships themselves have the ability to create these sources of anxiety for individuals, such as financial issues and family conflict.

**Limitations of the Study**

I have identified a few possible limitations of this study.

1. Small sample size
   1. Although the results of this study align with some findings from previous research about sources of anxiety, the results may be more generalizable if more respondents were included in the analysis. However, with the time constraints of this project and with myself being the only researcher, I was only able to analyze six interviews. These interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2 ½ hours in length.
   2. The small number of respondents may have also caused the lack of gender differences. Gender differences in the way anxiety impacts men and women have been found in previous studies, but no significant gender differences emerged in this sample. This could also be due to the fact that all of the participants had similarly high scores on the anxiety measures with no gender differences. A sample with more respondents, including some with lower anxiety scores, may have shown some gender differences.
2. Objectivity of researcher
   1. I was the only researcher conducting this project, so I did both the transcribing and the analyzing for this data. I knew what the larger study was about, and I knew what information I was looking for. This could have caused me to be more objective when analyzing the data without realizing it. Having a second researcher review the data or having two separate researchers do the transcribing and analyzing could help eliminate some of this potential lack of objectivity.
3. Disadvantages of qualitative interview data
   1. There are two biases that can occur when conducting qualitative interviews that can impact the results of a study. Recall bias occurs when participants do not remember past events or experiences accurately or they omit details. Participant bias occurs when participants respond to questions the way they believe the interviewer wants them to or in a way they think is socially acceptable. This can occur consciously or unconsciously, but either way, it can have an impact on the data. Because this data is qualitative, these possible biases should be noted.

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