

# Romantic Relationship: The Interpretation of Memory in Representation (An Cognitive Anthropology Perspective)

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**Abstract** - The purpose of this paper is to examine the relation between the life history of young adult women and their romantic relationship with their partners. This research methodology is qualitative study, conducts a cognitive anthropology approach, an interpretative approach, and in-depth interview method with five young adult women who are currently involved in a romantic relationship. Result of this study show that romantic relationships can be seen as an expression of young adult women's life experiences. In this context, the experiences that they have undergone regarding their parents marriage have affected the way they take meanings of romantic relationships. Also, the figure of their father's have also affected the way they determine the kind of men's figure they seek in a partner of a romantic relationship. In conclusion for this study, that both cognitive schemas and life experiences of young adult women play a significant role in determining the meanings they take of romantic relationships and also how they see romantic relationships in a greater scale in their life. Recommendation of this research, cognitive anthropological perspective studies need to be linked in a multi-disciplinary way so that the holistic explanation is achieved.

**Index Terms** - *romantic relationship-life history-meanings-expression- young adult women*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Survei Kesehatan Reproduksi Remaja Indonesia (SKRRI) conducted by Badan Kependudukan dan Keluarga Berencana Nasional (BKKBN) in 2012 stated that young adults experience their first romantic relationships in the age of 15 to 17 years old, presenting the number of 45.3% of young adult men and 47.0% of young adult women (Pramudiarja, 2013). A man and a woman can be seen together as a couple showing off their intimacy—by holding hands, hugging, and kissing—in the malls, in the parks, and in other public spaces. Hence nowadays, romantic relationship has become part of everyday life among millennial generation.

Five basic human needs: (1) physiological; (2) safety; (3) love; (4) self-esteem; and (5) self-actualization [5]. As a social being, one individual needs one and another to meet those needs. In this paper, I focus on the personal relationship between two individuals, which is in line with the third basic human needs as stated before—the love need. He described that there are two important things to do in order to meet that need, which are giving and receiving the love. In this context,

I view romantic relationship as one of the attempts individuals do to obtain the love need—as one of the basic human needs.

The term romantic relationship is often understood as dating or intimate relationship. In Bahasa Indonesia, the term romantic relationship is widely understood as '*berpacaran*'. A romantic relationship usually involves two individuals—a man and a woman—although it can also involve more than two individuals and/or two same-sex individuals which is then defined as a same-sex/homosexual romantic relationship. However, in this paper I focus on romantic relationships between two heterosexual individuals which brings us to a heterosexual romantic relationship as a main discussion here.

Romantic relationship is one which involves two individuals who do activities together in order to get to know each other [3]. For example, a man and a woman are having meals together, talking about their interests and/or their goals in life, going on a vacation together, et cetera. While doing those activities together, both parties are trying to get to know each other better. Romantic relationship as one in which the individual perceives an ongoing, reciprocated, emotional, erotically charged connection with a partner [4]. Thus I conclude that romantic relationship is a relationship that involves two individuals who are doing activities together in order to get to know each other in which there is an emotional and sexual connection with their partners.

In explaining how romantic relationship works in the society, marriage has long become the only institution which legitimates the intimate interaction between two individuals. In 1970, romantic relationship is seen as a formal practice which has the ultimate goal to a marriage [7]. However alongside the emergence of the 'modern' term in the context of romantic relationship such as 'friends with benefits' and 'open relationships'—in Bahasa Indonesia; '*teman tapi mesra*' or '*hubungan tanpa status*'—marriage is no longer seen as the only purpose of and/or an end to a romantic relationship nowadays, especially in the year of 2017. In other words, romantic relationships nowadays do not always end up in the form of marriage.

In this paper, I focus on how young adult women take meanings of the romantic relationships that they are having with their partners. I argue that life history plays a significant part on the way they take meanings of their romantic relationships in the way they see the purposes and also the functions of it. Therefore in this study I explore two questions: (1) what do young adult women search for in a romantic

relationship?; and (2) how does the process of life history interpretation of young adult women underlie the way they take meanings of their romantic relationships with their partners?

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, I use ethnographical approach with life history method—one of the methods in qualitative research which emphasizes on collecting the experiences and requirements of the individual—how the person copes with society, rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals to provide a personal and holistic perspective about their meanings of life [6]. Using the life history method, I conduct an in-depth interview with five young adult women who are currently involved in a romantic relationship to gather the primary data regarding their life histories which leads them to take meanings of their romantic relationships.

Participatory observation is also conducted in this research where I observe the interaction between five young adult women and their partners. In choosing my informants, I use a snowball sampling technique which relies on my friends networking and map out three important characteristics of young adult women needed in this research which are (1) in the age of 20 to 25 years old; (2) heterosexual; and (3) currently involved in a romantic relationship by the time this research is conducted.

## III. FINDINGS

What do young adult women search for in a romantic relationship? All of my informants explained thoroughly the characteristics of their desired partners which I then mapped out into five components in a romantic relationships—*maturity, family background, comfort, security, and sexual activities*. One of my informants, Vira, said that maturity is an important aspect that she seeks in her romantic relationship partner. Although Vira's partner is indeed two years older than her, maturity in this context does not always coherent with an older age. Instead, it implies more of a partner's capability to provide the feeling of security in material, financial, and also in the way he treats her with patience and maturity when they are facing a problem in their relationship.

Vira also stated that a mature partner will have the ability to guide her to go through life's difficulties together. In this case, she explained that all this time, she is lack of a man figure is capable of providing her a guidance in life—in this context she referred to a father figure. Vira's parents have been divorced since she was in her sophomore year of university because of her father's infidelity, which she then explained was one of the reasons why she was not really fond of her father. Even long before the divorce, she had also felt that her father had been too busy with his own life and thus it leads her to a construction of her ideal figure of a partner—someone who is *not* like her father.

Aside from maturity, family background is also an important component which young adult women seek in a romantic relationship.

My ex-boyfriends tend to have a harmonious family background. [...] I think it would also affect the children. Aryo [Vira's partner] is a *good guy*. I mean, he has his father as his ideal figure of a man and I see his dad as a good father. (Vira)

Vira stated that she is looking for a partner who has the opposite family background of her—in this context she implied that she looks up to a harmonious family background in which she does not have.

A similar statement is also delivered by Andrea, another informant of mine. Similar to Vira, Andrea's parents have also been divorced. However, Andrea said that rather than looking for a partner who has the opposite family background of her, she searches for a partner who has the same family background with her instead. Unlike Vira, Andrea feels more at comfort when she encounters a partner who has a similar—if not the same—family background as she does.

The way he accepts his family's history and the way they had treated him—he is able to make peace with that. That, I could hardly do. So I learn something from him...I can learn to make peace with the fact that my family is like *this* and *that*. And that is what I think is important—to find a partner whose life history is *not okay*. (Andrea)

Andrea also said that her father had inspired her in choosing the figure of a partner in a romantic relationship—someone who is *not* like her father. In this case, Andrea had experienced the kind of similar experience to Vira. She said that the figure of her father does not comply with her idea of a man thus she has a tendency to find a partner in a romantic relationship who does not possess the same characteristics as her father's. In this context, she looks at her father as an example of a *not-ideal* figure of a partner that she needs to avoid.

In addition to maturity and family background, comfort is another important component that young adult women seek out in a romantic relationship. One of my informants, Jane, stated that one of the things that attracted her to Nara, her partner, is due to the similarity of their personalities. She said that both of them are really expressive regarding their emotions thus Jane explained that both she and Nara are able to understand each other, making them feeling comfortable with each other.

Jane also said that she can basically tell everything that she undergoes and feels in her life openly to Nara. Long before they are finally committed in a romantic relationship, Jane and Nara started off as best friends. At the beginning, both of them still had another partners and even then they were able to listen to each other's story regarding their romantic relationship with their partners.

Even all that time I was still in a relationship with my ex-boyfriend, Nara

is the one I tell my stories to everyday. I feel comfortable with him. (Jane)

Jane feels that Nara can understand her stories and her feelings so she then decided to be committed in a romantic relationship with him.

When I asked if Jane has an ideal figure that inspires her about the idea of a partner in a romantic relationship, she answered that her father plays a significantly important part for her to decide the kind of a partner she wants in a romantic relationship.

I know I am not a well-behaved daughter and my father yells at me a lot. *'Don't smoke too much'* or *'don't drink too much'*. But even so, I know that he accepts me the way I am without judging me as a delinquent (Jane)

Jane said that her parents, especially her father, is able to treat her the way she wants them to. In this context, she does not feel any pressures coming from her parents regarding her behavior—which she can also find in the figure of Nara. She explained that Nara is also able to tell her what to and what not to do without her feeling burdened about it. Therefore, she finds that Nara can give her the comfort that she needs.

Apart from comfort, security is another important component that young adult women seek out in a romantic relationship. I map out three dimensions of the security in this study, which are (1) financial; (2) physical; and (3) emotional. Young adult women seek a romantic relationship where they can find a form of financial security in their partners.

One of my informants, Emma emphasized the importance of financial security in a romantic relationship. She stated that she gets the financial security from Ross, her partner, because she knows that Ross already has a stable job and income. However, she stated that a stable job and income are not the primary reasons on why she finds the financial security in Ross.

I feel secured because I know that he can make money. Whatever he is doing, I know he is capable of supporting my needs. Whatever he is doing, I know that he will be successful with his personalities now. (Emma)

In other words, Emma believes that Ross has the capability to provide her the financial security—regardless what Ross is doing for a living.

In accordance to that, Andrea also believes that financial security provided by her partner is important in a romantic relationship.

...because he is financially stable. He already has a good job and a stable income. He has vivid plans for his future so I can also trust mine in his hands. (Andrea)

In this context, Andrea explained that the provision of financial security from a partner in a romantic relationship comes in the form of a good job, a stable income, and vivid

plans for the future. She sees that Saga, her partner, is able to provide her all of them. Also, Andrea said that Saga is able to fulfill the financial security that her father cannot do in the sense that Andrea feels that Saga is deeply responsible of his spending—which is totally different from her father's disorganized priorities.

Another dimension of security in a romantic relationship is physical security. Vira said that physical security is a crucial thing in a romantic relationship because it determines her decision to hold on to the relationship, or not. She then continued that Aryo can make her feel physically protected, especially when they are together because she feels that he can protect her in public places: picking her up, bringing her medicines and foods when she is sick, et cetera.

... he can pick me up everywhere. For example, he can pick me up at my house, at my campus... When I look for a place to stay in he also helps me to find it, he accompanies me. (Vira)

One of my informants, Kidung, stated that physical security can also come in the form of sexual context. She said that every time she and Rama, her partner, are doing sexual intercourse, Rama always makes sure that it is consensual. Also, Rama initiated the use of the contraception without forcing her to also use it.

Rama sees me as a subject, as a human. Whatever that he is doing, when we're going to have sex for example, he always makes sure that this is consensual. We both have a say in this. I feel secured. (Kidung)

The last dimension of security in a romantic relationship is emotional security. Emotional security is when young adult women are able to trust her partner regarding their emotions.

His [Ross'] existence means a lot to me. Even though he is not physically present but he always is, emotionally, via telephone, chatting, or anything... So when I'm feeling sad and down, although he cannot physically comfort me, deep down I know that I have someone to tell my problems to at the end. And that is all that matters. (Emma)

Emma said that she can feel at ease whenever she thinks of Ross' existence—even when he is not physically exist. In her subconscious, she knows that Ross is *there* for her therefore she feels secured.

Kidung also reflected that her partner has provided her the emotional security that she needs.

I feel secured with Rama because he can give me moral support whenever I'm feeling down. It doesn't mean that my friends can't give me all that, but it's different when you get it [moral support] from your partner (Kidung)

Therefore she feels that she is emotionally secured in the romantic relationship she is involved in with her partner.

Another component that young adult women seek in a romantic relationship is sexual activities. In this context, sexual activities do not always equal sexual intercourse only. Sexual activities can also come in the form of holding hands, hugging, and kissing.

I need assurance. [...] I feel like I'm being loved when I am hugged, when I am kissed, when I am touched. I'm being loved. (Kidung)

Kidung stated that sexual activities are important in a romantic relationship because she can feel her partner's existence in her life by holding hands, hugging, kissing, and also by doing sexual intercourse with him.

According to what my informants have stated about their ideal idea of a romantic relationship, they have reflected on their life experiences. In this context, the figure of a father plays a significant part on determining the ideal idea of a partner in their romantic relationships. Modeling that an individual tends to adopt the behaviors of someone who is closely related to them (e.g: parents or other individuals) [9]. The process of modeling is also closely related to social evaluation where an individual adjust the behaviors of their 'role model' with their self-embedded values [9]. In this context, the process of modeling has explained the way young adult women determine what kind of partner that they want in a romantic relationship—by portraying their fathers as their 'role model' of what characteristics to and not to find in the figure of a partner in their romantic relationships.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The findings show that individuals' experiences play a great role in what they do in their lives. In fact, individuals' experiences have affected the way they act in their lives. This is also relevant to what have said that experiences shape one's behavior. In this context, life experiences have a significant role in shaping individuals' conception of things in their lives. The term experience which I use in this study is not only a mere 'experience', but more of 'an experience'. Using hermeneutics paradigm, he explained that 'experience' is nothing but a mere memory if it is not expressed whereas 'an experience' is more of individuals' articulations of those 'experiences'. 'An experience' thus can be transformed into 'an expression' which can result in texts or performances—in this case I view romantic relationship as an expression of young adult women's life experiences.

In this study, I also use cognitive paradigm which views individuals' behavior as their internal representation of their surroundings [2]. The decision of young adult women to engage in a romantic relationship is a result of their understanding of their surroundings. In other words, individuals can experience various things in their lives, take on the significant ones and express them according to their understandings.

The findings show that schemas have reconstruct the memories of past events of young adult women and determine

what they are doing in the present and also what they are going to do in the future [9]. Cognitive anthropology, schemas emerged from the marriage of young adult women's parents thus determine how they view marriage and also how they take meanings of romantic relationships by [9].

Five young adult women whom I interviewed in this study have stated that the marriage of their parents have inspired the way they see romantic relationships. One of my informants whose parents have divorced stated that her parents' *failed* marriage has led her to strive for a 'better' marriage than her parents'. Therefore, she looks for a partner whom she thinks is able to meet her needs—in this case a partner who can realize her desired idea of a marriage.

The findings also show the significance of personal understanding of the life experiences which have been experienced by young adult women. [9] indicated that:

*Much of the world is organized in exactly such a way as to ensure that people in the same social environment will indeed experience many of the same typical patterns.*

Two of my informants have a similar family background—although their parents are not divorced, they emphasized that the relationship of their parents are not harmonious. Therefore, they have been skeptic of marriage as a 'goal' of a romantic relationship. However, another two of my informants whose parents have been divorced said that the separation of their parents have inspired them to 'create' a harmonious marriage with their partners. Although they have experienced 'similar' experience in the same social environment, they have different interpretations of romantic relationships. The differences of the way they take meanings of romantic relationships thus can be mapped out through their personal understandings about it.

Four functions of meanings, which are (1) representative; (2) constructive; (3) directive; and (4) evocative [2]. In this study I found that meanings have indeed represented, constructed, directed, and evocated individuals' behavior. First, the findings show that life experiences and social environment have represented the romantic relationships of young adult women. In this context, their parents' marriages have taken a great role in the way they represent their romantic relationships with their partners. Second, the life experiences of young adult women have constructed the desired idea of the figure of a partner in romantic relationships by looking at the figure of their fathers. Third, the life experiences of young adult women have directed them to the desired idea of romantic relationships in general and of partners in romantic relationships in particular. Lastly, the life experiences of young adult women are evocative to the formation of the desired romantic relationships with their partners.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The findings show that romantic relationships can be seen as an expression of young adult women's life experiences. In this context, the experiences that they have



undergoneregarding their parents' marriage have affected the way they take meanings of romantic relationships. Also, the figure their fathers have also affected the way they determine the kind of men's figure they seek in a partner of a romantic relationship. In conclusion, this study elaborates the way young adult women take meanings of romantic relationships using their cognitive schemas and also their life experiences. As a result, this study shows that both cognitive schemas and life experiences of young adult women play a significant role in determining the meanings they take of romantic relationships and also how they see romantic relationships in a greater scale in their life.

#### RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation of this research, cognitive anthropological perspective studies need to be linked in a multi-disciplinary way so that the holistic explanation is achieved.

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