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## Shared Family Identity and Emotional Abuse From a Childhood Caregiver as Predictors of Self-Censorship Willingness

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Jillian Theryon

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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Shared Family Identity and Emotional Abuse From a Childhood Caregiver as Predictors  
of Self-Censorship Willingness

by

Jillian Theryon

MSW, Fordham University, 2013

BSW, Sacred Heart University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

## Abstract

Childhood emotional abuse may be underreported and unnoticed. The purpose of this quantitative cross-sectional study was to examine whether shared family identity (SFI) with an emotionally abusive childhood caregiver was linked to self-censorship of social and political opinions in adulthood. The study also examined whether this relationship is intensified among those with a strong sense of SFI with that caregiver. Linear multiple regression analysis of survey data collected from 119 participants, recruited through Survey Monkey Audience, revealed that willingness to self-censor was significantly shaped by the interaction between SFI and emotional abuse, especially overcontrol. Although SFI is often seen as a marker of intimacy with primary childhood caregivers, findings suggest that high SFI may intensify self-censorship when paired with a history of overcontrol from those caregivers. Drawing on spiral of silence and communication accommodation theories, results indicate that self-censorship may function as a learned survival strategy rather than a conscious choice. By uncovering links between emotional abuse, family identity, and political self-censorship, this study offers insights to foster positive social change through emotionally safer environments, to support authentic expression, and to promote more inclusive democratic representation.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Alexander Declan and Andrés Piers, who so graciously lent me a bit of headspace back for a little while so that I could find a way to complete this academic endeavor while waiting for our real lives together to begin.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The experience of childhood emotional abuse is often isolating by design. Childhood emotional abuse can often be underreported and unnoticed (Barnwell, 2019). However, little research had been completed on how an adult's emotional abuse in childhood can affect how that adult makes decisions about how they share their authentic ideas with others. The current study explored what happens to a person's sense of willingness to self-censor (WSC) their opinions when communicating in groups about their social or political perspectives when they have experienced emotional abuse in childhood from their primary caregiver. Furthermore, this study explored how the level of shared family identity (SFI), or sense of belonging or not belonging to the same familial in-group (Soliz & Harwood, 2006), the adult feels toward a primary caregiver affects their WSC.

The concept of self-censorship when discussing social and political opinions can be defined as an inclination that a person may have to refrain from sharing an authentic opinion when communicating with a group of others who may disagree with their authentic opinion (Wu, 2021). Spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) explains that individually, instances of self-censorship of communicating one's social or political beliefs may appear to be inconsequential. Self-censorship is neither inherently negative nor inherently positive behavior. However, when instances of self-censorship of political opinions are collected, the truth of what most people believe on any given social or political subject becomes skewed. Therefore, in instances when a person's authentic opinion that they are self-censoring may be prosocial, constructive, or compassionate, a

lack of expression of those views may result in tacit endorsement of oppressive, deconstructive, or uncompassionate opinions. As a result, these oppressive, deconstructive, or uncompassionate opinions can perpetuate, and may come to be considered the majority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This can make way for misguided policymaking based on a false sense of majority opinion, and can leave those with more prosocial, constructive, or compassionate views without adequate societal or governmental representation of their values, needs, or best interests (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

The initial process of understanding why an adult may be willing to self-censor when discussing social and political opinions is to understand the foundational function of self-censorship in interpersonal communication. According to communication accommodation theory (CAT), individuals make communication decisions throughout their lives based on one of two functional desires for how that conversation may result for the individual socially. The first of these desires is to pull the interlocutor or interlocutors emotionally closer through finding common ground. These are called accommodative communication behaviors. The second of these desires is to push the interlocutor or interlocutors emotionally further away through highlighting differences between themselves and the interlocutor or interlocutors. These are called nonaccommodative communication behaviors (Giles et al., 1991). This theory posits that a person may be willing to self-censor, and thereby misrepresent, their authentic perspectives as a method of communication accommodation. However, this is a complex mechanism for communication accommodation in that it requires that a person misrepresent their

authentic opinion, and this behavior of feigning common ground that is not truly there is reinforced with emotional intimacy. The person may then be aware that emotional intimacy may be lost should the person then later share their authentic but opposing opinion.

The complexity of this perception of needing to be willing to self-censor an authentic opinion to achieve emotional intimacy can explain why individuals may be willing to do so. However, this premise leads to another question of what groups of individuals may have the largest deficit of emotional intimacy compared to others, as well as what groups of individuals may be comfortable with oppressing their authenticity in exchange for achieving that intimacy. One potential group of individuals who may meet this criterion may be those who experienced emotional abuse from primary caregivers in childhood. Emotional abuse in childhood has been assessed as a predictor of behavioral reticence (Barnwell, 2019). Another variable related to this decision to be willing to self-censor an authentic opinion in exchange for emotional intimacy may involve whether an individual feels that they belong or do not belong to their own familial in-group, namely when considering their relationship with their primary caregiver. This sense of in-group belonging or not belonging is called SFI (Wittenberg et al., 2023).

### **Background**

Self-censorship has been studied at the societal level through political and sociological study of public opinion (Wu, 2021). However, little research had been completed to identify possible predictors of an individual's WSC and how individual

personal influences may predict the likelihood of the willingness to engage in this behavior. One influence that has not been researched as a predictor of the likelihood of WSC is the effect of SFI an adult has with their first conversation partners: their childhood primary caregivers. SFI in the relationship between an adult and their childhood primary caretaker was explored in the current study. Previous studies connected emotional abuse behaviors with adult emotional regulation process (Berzenski, 2019) and, when combined with identity formation, the internalizing of problems (Zong et al., 2019). Therefore, the current study examined the presence or nonpresence of emotional abuse (see Momtaz et al., 2020) from an adult's childhood primary caregiver as well as shared family identity with this caregiver as a possible predictor in adult WSC.

### **Problem Statement**

The research problem that was addressed in this study was whether there is a relationship between an adult's degree of SFI with their childhood primary caregiver and their degree of WSC. Additionally, the study examined whether there is a relationship between an adult's level of frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from childhood primary caregivers and the adult's degree of WSC.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine how adults' self-reported present degree of SFI and having an emotionally abusive primary caregiver in childhood may predict their level of WSC when discussing their social or political opinions with others in adulthood.

## Research Questions

RQ1: Does the frequency of emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors experienced in childhood from a primary caretaker predict an adult's willingness to self-censor their social or political opinions with others?

*H<sub>01</sub>*: There is no relationship between childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver and an adult's willingness to self-censor social or political opinions with others.

*H<sub>a1</sub>*: There is a positive relationship between childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver and an adult's willingness to self-censor social or political opinions with others.

RQ2: Does shared family identity interact with childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver to predict an adult's willingness to self-censor their social or political opinions with others?

*H<sub>02</sub>*: Shared family identity does not interact with childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver to predict willingness to self-censor.

*H<sub>a2</sub>*: Shared family identity interacts with childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver to predict willingness to self-censor.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theories and concepts that grounded this study included the CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021) and the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-

Neumann, 1974). The logical connections between the framework and the nature of my study included that the study focused on one key element of CAT (Giles et al., 1991) that relates to why self-censorship may happen in communicative relationships about social or political subjects, and one key element of spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) that relates to how individual self-censorship on these subjects can lead to societally impactful outcomes. The element of CAT that was the focus of the current study included that individuals actively elect to engage in certain communication accommodation behaviors with the purpose of increasing intimacy between themselves and their interlocutor or interlocutors. Self-censorship meets the criteria of a communication accommodation, and this theory offered a perspective of why individuals might choose self-censorship behaviors.

This study sought to examine whether the variables of SFI with a childhood primary caregiver and emotionally abusive behaviors from childhood primary caregivers relate to self-censorship as a type of communication accommodation (see Giles et al., 1991). The current study relied on spiral of silence theory to support the societal implication of the study. Spiral of silence theory explains that when members of a community engage in self-censorship and do not share their authentic opinions, what comes to be known as the majority popular opinion becomes skewed. This skewing can also involve the overemphasis of opinions that are oppressive, creating a societal impact that policies and norms are based on that are represented as popular but in actuality are not (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

## Nature of Study and Design

To answer the research questions in this quantitative study, I chose a cross-sectional design that included linear multiple regression. The first research question was the following: Does the frequency of emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors experienced in childhood from a primary caretaker predict an adult's willingness to self-censor their social or political opinions with others? The second research question was the following: Does shared family identity interact with childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary childhood caregiver to predict an adult's willingness to self-censor their social or political opinions with others? The two independent variables were the degree of SFI with a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Shared Family Identity Scale, and the frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Overcontrol Subscale of the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ). The dependent variable was the degree of willingness to self-censor as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale.

## Methodology

Data included survey responses from the EAQ Overcontrol Subscale (Momtaz et al., 2020) containing seven Likert-type questions on a scale from 0 to 4: *always*, *often*, *occasionally*, *rarely*, *never*. Data also included survey responses to the full Shared Family Identity Scale (Soliz & Harwood, 2006) containing six Likert-type questions on a scale from 1 to 7: *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. In addition, data included survey responses to the full Willingness to Self-Censor Scale (Hayes et al., 2005) containing

eight Likert-type questions on a scale from 1 to 5: *strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree* with the statement), Scale 1-5, and average score 0-8, up to 2.13=low, up to 2.50= moderate, 3.00 or more=high compared to national average. Participants were recruited using Survey Monkey Audience, a research population sourcing service. The target sample size for this study was 119 participants, and 180 participated.

### **Definitions**

*Communication accommodation*: The way an individual changes the way they speak or behave when interacting with others depending on the person they are speaking to. Accommodative behaviors include changes that are made to a way of communicating with the objective of finding common ground to build a closer connection. In contrast, nonaccommodative behaviors include changes that are made to a way of communicating with the objective of creating more distance in a connection (Gasionek & Vincze, 2016).

*Emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors*: A pattern of behavior from one individual toward another that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuates psychologically harmful effects through behaviors that include placing demands that interrupt an individual's ability to make their own choices and/or that ignore an individual's preferences or needs (Momtaz et al., 2020).

*Self-censorship*: An individual's conscious decision to intentionally withhold expression of their authentic opinion when they perceive that their opinion may differ from the person they are speaking with (Fox & Holt, 2018). For the purpose of the current study, a focus was placed on self-censorship of social or political opinions.

*Shared family identity (SFI)*: The degree to which an individual identifies their family members as members of their in-group (Wittenberg et al., 2023). For the purpose of the current study, a focus was placed on SFI between adults and their childhood primary caregivers.

### **Assumptions**

For the purposes of this study, I assumed that all participants read and understood the survey questions and provided honest responses. I also assumed that the EAQ (operationalized using the Overcontrol Subscale), the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale, and the Shared Family Identity Scale sufficiently measured emotional abuse, willingness to self-censor, and shared family identity. Finally, I assumed that the population of participants was a representative sample of the population of study (see Stadtlander, 2018).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study included research related to self-censorship willingness of adult individuals when they consider their relationship with their childhood primary caregivers in terms of emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors and SFI. Emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors were selected for study because emotional abuse had been linked to challenges with self-perception in adulthood (Berzenski, 2019). SFI was selected as another variable to determine whether the degree of in-group affiliation between an individual and their childhood primary caregiver had any effect on adult decisions regarding emotional intimacy and lengths to achieve emotional intimacy as it had in other studies (Wittenberg et al., 2023).

The study included all adult individuals age 18 and older with access to the internet who were residing in the United States at the time of survey. Those who completed the study were also assumed to be individuals who felt comfortable enough to discuss themes of childhood experiences with their primary caregivers to complete a questionnaire regarding this subject. Per the nature of the study, those who are passionate about issues related to childhood experiences with primary caregivers, adult relationships with childhood primary childhood caregivers, or the impact of self-censorship of authentic social and political opinions may also have been among the most motivated to participate (see Stadtlander, 2018).

### **Limitations, Biases, Measures to Address Weaknesses**

Access to participants at the initial planning stage may have been daunting because participants with an emotionally abusive childhood primary caregiver may not have been able to fully reflect on the emotional abuse experienced prior to reading the survey questions. Ethically, this population may have been challenging to target, considering the subjects addressed in the survey that may have triggered unpleasant memories. I am a licensed clinical social worker; therefore, I provided a list of appropriate resources to support participants, but this was a novel circumstance not to be playing a clinical role.

### **Significance and Social Change Implications**

Individuals make decisions to self-censor for several reasons. However, little was known about whether the relationships that individuals have as adults with the individuals who cared for them in childhood has any role in the individual's decision to self-censor.

Self-censorship, although common and insignificant on the small scale, can have meaningful impacts if done by a large group. For example, if enough people remain silent on their personal views, then what is understood as popular opinion may be statistically skewed. By examining whether the relationship between adults and their childhood caregivers, namely whether they engaged in emotionally abusive behaviors, has any relationship to self-censorship, I sought to understand societal impacts of these parental choices. If understanding the societal impact of these otherwise private, individual experiences could bring more interest to these behaviors, potentially more research could be done regarding ways to change these parenting behaviors in the first place.

### **Summary**

This chapter included information about the overall structure of this study, including information about the theoretical foundation of the research, the selection of relevant variables of study, and the way variables were studied. Sections included information about the background of the study and foundational research, which supported a need for further research, followed by the selection of research themes, thereby resulting in an overview of the methods in which those themes were introduced and carefully researched through the collection and analysis of data. Additionally, this chapter included information that was essential in understanding the terms that were used. Terms were operationally defined, allowing for a more fluid understanding of the technical terminology that was used in data analysis. Theories were introduced and preliminarily explained. Scales of measurement were introduced, including a brief description of their function and previous use. The quantitative approach to this study

was explained, and the essential questions and problems of the study were functionally described. Also, a discussion of the ethical implications and overall impact of the study was preliminarily introduced.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the foundational research that supported the need for this study. Literature is reviewed, themes are defined, and variables are more clearly isolated for study. Theories, scales, and terms are also more thoroughly reviewed and analyzed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the field of social psychology by providing information on the social psychological concept of WSC (see Hayes et al., 2005). More specifically, this study examined WSC when discussing social and political opinions and how WSC may or may not relate to emotional abuse in childhood when SFI is or is not present. Researchers explained which sociological groups are more likely to have a WSC based on large-scale societal factors that qualify whole groups as more or less likely to self-censor (Burnett et al., 2022). However, there was a gap in research regarding why some individuals in society may have a higher degree of willingness to self-censor than other individuals. Although research had been completed on the individualized later-in-life outcomes for adults with a history of childhood emotional abuse (Berzenski, 2019), little had been completed regarding how these individual outcomes contribute to individuals' communication behaviors in adulthood. Similarly, how or whether these adults' sense of SFI with their childhood primary caregivers who engaged in emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors played any role WSC had yet to be researched.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to this study. The application of the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and CAT (Giles et al., 1991) is described in this chapter. WSC is examined including studies involving major political movements (Chia, 2014), tense intergroup communications, and motivation and demotivation on an interpersonal level (Matthes et al., 2018). Some of the literature reviewed attributed the behavior of self-censorship to society, and some attributed the

behavior of self-censorship to situations that happened in an individual's personal life. This review of research provides a better understanding of the need for more information about the predictive factors related to the behavior of self-censorship, namely the variable of emotional abuse (Momtaz et al., 2020) from their childhood primary caregiver. Additionally, the degree of SFI that an individual has with their childhood primary caregiver was examined as a predictive variable in this study.

This literature review addresses the key variables of this study. The two independent variables were the degree of SFI with a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Shared Family Identity Scale, and the frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Overcontrol Subscale of the EAQ. The dependent variable was the degree of WSC as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale. The chapter concludes with a summary of the subjects covered and a preview of the next chapter addressing the research methods for this study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Walden University Library databases were used to search the following keywords and search terms: *self-censorship*, *willingness to self-censor*, *emotional abuse*, *family self-censorship*, *communication accommodation theory (CAT)*, *spiral of silence theory*, *shared family identity (SFI) scale*, *Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) Scale*, and *Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ)*. These terms were selected following a preliminary review of the research on willingness to self-censor and trends within that research that indicated a need for further exploration. In addition, these terms were

determined following a preliminary review of the trends in emotional abuse and shared family identity literature.

Specific databases searched included PubMed, PsycINFO, JSTOR, Sage, and EBSCOhost. These databases were selected following Walden University library personnels' advice and guidance concerning the best resources for psychological, sociological, and public health research related to the subjects of this study. These resources provided access to modern, peer-reviewed studies completed across related disciplines as well as seminal research that exists as the foundation for studies on the willingness to self-censor, SFI, the spiral of silence theory, and communication accommodation theory.

Research articles supporting the concepts in this study included peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2023. This range of years encapsulates research completed within 5 years of the initiation of writing of this study. However, older foundational research and publications of original theories were also reviewed and included as the theoretical foundation for this research with original publication dates noted. This seminal research was acknowledged as such within this study.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Spiral of Silence Theory**

The theoretical origins of studies on self-censoring behavior began in 1974 with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory. This theory assumes that one source of self-censorship may come from an individual learning their interlocutor or interlocutors' opinion on a subject, comparing it to their own authentic opinion, and deciding to

suppress their authentic opinion out of fear of retribution for dissent against their interlocutor or interlocutors' opinion (Matthes et al., 2018). This pattern becomes problematic when several individuals suppress their authentic opinions, namely when the opinions involve social or political issues that affect society at large (Fox & Holt, 2018). When the number of those self-censoring is large enough, what can be considered a factually popular opinion is no longer possible to detect.

Jamwal et al. (2023) used the spiral of science theory as a foundation for their quantitative study on young adults' political-opinion-sharing on Facebook. Their study focused on how online political brand engagement plays a role in how individuals choose to express opinions. By measuring the systemic group behavior of 20 to 32-year-old participants using a structural equation model, the researchers found that when individuals expressed feeling supported socially (in this case, on Facebook), they were more likely to share their opinions. Additionally, Kang et al. (2023) conducted a survey of 529 participants to better understand how online circumstantial problems, specifically when situations escalate to include cyberbullying, can be mitigated by the popularization of mindfulness techniques. These studies highlight variables that occur within specific interactions that may contribute to self-censorship, but they do not address external variables that contribute to the behavioral state of self-censoring opinions in social or political conversations, regardless of the interlocutor. This study focused on contributing to the closure of this meaningful gap in research.

The spiral of silence theory relates to the subject of this study because it exemplifies the risks to large groups when individuals begin to self-censor and refrain

from sharing their political thoughts and ideas (Fox & Holt, 2018). According to the spiral of silence theory, when enough individuals self-censor their authentic opinions regarding social or political issues, the lack of communication of their opinions and ideas naturally leads to suppression of those opinions and ideas (Fox & Holt, 2018).

Highlighting this spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) helps illuminate the need for social, psychological, and public opinion researchers to better understand the micro-level behavior of self-censorship so they can work to reduce this adverse effect on larger groups.

Spiral of silence theory is also relevant to the current study in that it served as the foundational theory for the development of the social psychological tool, the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale (WSC; Hayes et al., 2005). This tool allows social psychologists to explore willingness to self-censor through a numeric scale, providing for continued quantitative research on this subject (Burnett et al., 2022). This tool was used as an integral part of the data collection for the current study.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

The communication accommodation theory was developed by Giles et al. (1991) under the initial title of speech accommodation theory. This theory describes how individuals change the way they speak to create closer intimacy or further emotional distance between themselves and those with whom they are speaking. The original title was changed when Giles began expanding his understanding of accommodation not only to speech but to all variables of communication (Giles et al., 1991). Communication accommodation theory, as it was renamed in 1991, describes that when individuals

decide to communicate with one another, they make intentional decisions about how they do so to control the perception that the conversation partner, or interlocutor, has of them (Giles et al., 1991).

The theory states that accommodative behaviors are behaviors that individuals engage in to attract their interlocutor or interlocutors to them by way of highlighting common ground. The theory also suggests that nonaccommodative behaviors are behaviors that individuals engage in to create distance between themselves and their interlocutors (Gasiorek & Vincze, 2015). Self-censorship is a complex behavior in that it is typically employed as an accommodative behavior to generate intimacy between interlocutors (Hayes et al., 2005). However, self-censorship results in the individual omitting information that may lead an interlocutor or interlocutors to believe there is common ground regarding an opinion where there is not. This omission can be perceived as nonaccommodative if uncovered by their interlocutor or interlocutors, therefore encouraging the individual to continue to self-censor. Communication accommodation theory is relevant to the current study in that the theory not only acknowledges that humans make decisions to both withhold and share information in communication, but it also potentially explains what social gains may be sought after by doing so.

When self-censorship of the same authentic opinion or opinions, namely if that opinion involves a social or political subject relevant to society at large, is executed in enough repetitions by enough individuals, it can lead to a stark misrepresentation of what most people authentically believe. This problem can evolve into assumptions about large scale normative beliefs on which laws and policies may become based (Fox & Holt,

2018). In this way, self-censorship presents a major disruption because it clouds understanding of what a factually substantiated majority-held belief is and what is simply a maladaptively reinforced belief that emerged from self-censorship of authentic opinion expression (Chia, 2014).

To address this problem, further exploration is needed into why an individual elects to maintain common ground with those who disagree instead of expressing their authentic ideas, namely when discussing social or political subjects. This exploration was the subject of this study. Researchers on childhood emotional abuse indicated that experiencing emotional abuse in childhood may leave an individual internalizing a message of lack of self-value (Zong et al., 2019). This research substantiates how an adult's emotional abuse from a primary childhood caregiver may contribute to their self-censorship behavior.

This decision to explore emotional abuse from a childhood primary caregiver as a potential variable also encouraged further exploration into other gaps in research regarding what is known about individual adults' relationships with childhood primary caregivers. This review of research revealed an additional concept for further research called shared family identity (SFI; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). This concept is the degree to which an individual feels an ingroup affiliation with their family members. Research on SFI indicates that this affiliation or lack thereof may have a meaningful impact on whether an individual heeds messages regarding emotional intimacy from the family member that were instilled in childhood (Zong et al., 2019). Therefore, this was an additional variable that was to be explored in this study.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables**

Self-censorship has been consistently present since early human civilization.

There has been a demand for censorship in communication found in different areas of the world over time. This is evidenced by examples of clearly modified forms of writing and art completed as far in history as the Qing dynasty in early China (Li, 2023), to military and political strategy and tactics during Britain's Great War (Smith, 2023), to censorship of the release of scientific discovery in early modern Italy (Celati, 2023). At the time of the Qing dynasty, people self-censored according to what was or was not permitted to express based on what was favorable or unfavorable to leadership at the time. In this sense, individuals would self-censor to remain in positive political favor and to balance expression to remain able to communicate ideas at all without repercussion. As a result of the high level of censorship in all public writing, including creative writing, there were discovered to be some ostensive differences in how language developed over time, which research suggests has resulted in the loss of certain words and expressions from the common vernacular at large (Li, 2023).

At the time of World War I, voluntary and politically influenced self-censorship was less about limiting personal opinion and more about preventing individuals from revealing state secrets. In this form of self-censorship, individuals more voluntarily censored the sharing of their knowledge, which, while potentially protecting the ambitions of a small, powerful group, had a similar effect as other forms of self-censorship. These effects include alienation of the population at large, who, as social beings, expect a level of transparency from their leaders (Smith, 2023). In early modern

Italy, there appeared to be a combination of the themes of self-censorship found in the Qing dynasty and during the time of Britain's Great War. Self-censorship in early modern Italy involved writers, scientists, and politicians making decisions to self-censor to protect their own political standing or potential for oppression or consequences, often, perhaps inadvertently, withholding information from the public through the keeping of information from being transparently shared (Celati, 2023). Per all these examples and many more, it is clear that there have always been social-psychological purposes for individuals electing not to share their whole ideas, values, opinions, and perspectives.

There appear to be four areas of research about self-censorship. These topics are covered in the four sections of this literature review. The first section includes research exploring the idea that individuals self-censor based on the reinforcement or consequences they receive from sharing or not sharing their opinions (Fox & Holt, 2018). The second section includes research that indicates self-censorship is a typical socialization behavior found in basic human development (Muir et al., 2016). The third section addresses research that describes environmental variables such as political climate (Shahar et al., 2018) as predictors for self-censorship. The final section includes research on relationship roles as predictors of self-censorship behavior (DiVerniero, 2013; Speer et al., 2013).

## **Self-Censorship**

### **Rewards and Punishments**

One area of research regarding the predictors for how individuals communicate or censor communication with one another is the perceived rewards and punishments

individuals procure in exchange for their communicative decisions (Fox & Holt, 2018). Fox and Holt (2018) conducted a quantitative study of 399 participants on the social media online environment as it related to self-censorship of socio-political opinions about police discrimination. The findings indicated that the longer an individual perceived that their opinion would remain available to new readers, the more likely they were to self-censor that opinion. Because popular opinion often changes, individuals were often unwilling to risk their words supporting less popular beliefs if remaining in public spaces over time. This study supported the concept that when an environment projects a majority opinion through mass communication confirming that opinion, any dissension is marginalized or punished. For example, in online communities, confirmation of majority opinions happens quickly using comments and endorsements (i.e., likes), each of which alienates those who may have original or complex opinions. Through the frequent spreading of endorsed material via social media algorithms, a true consensus of opinions has the potential to be skewed, and truth can be misrepresented through overconfidence in the meaning of what users put on their social media (Celedonia et al., 2022). Individual opinions that deviate from the most highly promoted opinions may be heard less often, resulting in those opinions being incorrectly presumed to be the minority opinion.

In current quantitative research, Matthes et al. (2018) completed a meta-analysis to determine if communication behaviors are more influenced by positive reinforcement, or in other words, the rewards that the presentation of a favorable stimulus brings. Matthes et al. noted that the more predictable positive reinforcement individuals receive from larger groups of people when choosing to agree with the most popular opinion, the

more likely they are to censor any dissenting opinions. The results indicated that so long as there were cues indicating what a majority or minority opinion was, the participants consistently favored reporting whatever the majority opinion appeared to them to be. This is relevant to the present study in that this meta-analysis showed that across many English language articles that include data from across three continents (Europe, the United States and Asia), it appeared to be commonly concluded that individuals were likely unwilling to isolate themselves through self-censorship. The purpose of the present study was to determine if childhood experiences with emotional abuse may add an additional variable to consider in terms of why individuals self-censor.

A summary of quantitative research regarding 120 Moroccan journalists and their unique relationship to self-censorship also offered additional insight into these themes (El Kadoussi, 2022). This study found that while rewards and consequences were once related to punishment for idea sharing in journalistic writing in Morocco, the more prevalent punishments are social consequences, particularly if a journalist shares too much of their own opinion in what they write. In this way, self-censorship has become a somewhat normalized behavior within the profession, with those who do not engage in this behavior appearing to misstep socially. Therefore, among these colleagues, this socially accommodating behavior is not only to self-censor but also to accept self-censorship as the most socially correct way of behaving. This research connected to the nature of this study in that it introduced the role rule-following, a common expectation of parents of children, can play in self-censorship. However, there had not been a study of how rewards and punishments issued by childhood caregivers affect adult self-censorship

behavior, especially if the use of rewards and punishments was maladaptive, meeting the criteria for emotional abuse. This study sought to further the discussion of rewards and punishments in this manner through the study of the variable of emotional abuse.

### **Basic Human Development and Socialization**

Another research topic indicates that individual communication behaviors are consistent with how humans are socialized to behave throughout different stages of development (Muir et al., 2016). In other words, self-censorship and related behaviors of reticence appear to be part of the human social experience in young adulthood as individuals learn to develop the skills of advocating for their own individual thoughts (Muir et al., 2016).

In quantitative research by Etchegaray et al. (2019), it was found that self-censorship willingness may be connected to an individual's developmental response, depending on what took place in their surrounding public environment between the ages of 18–25. These ages in an individual's development, as studied through respondents in Chile, are what Etchegaray et al. (2019) hypothesized to be the most impressionable years in terms of self-censorship behavior, or the years in which an individual is the most susceptible to external sources of information about how to socialize. The study found, through an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), that those who experienced a higher level of repression from the Chilean dictatorship when they were the ages of 18–25 showed a higher level of willingness to self-censor. While this research indicates that the political climate during those developmental years may play a role in self-censorship, it does not clearly discuss how experiences with childhood caregivers during milestones in

development at younger ages (under age 18) may influence self-censorship. This exploration was the subject of the present study.

Wu (2021) researched how norms relative to developmental age impact self-censorship in social media. Wu wrote that individuals are socialized to understand the ramifications of endorsing or not endorsing certain social media material and often self-censored because of trying to maintain what they perceive is expected of them without much emotion connected to the decision.

Nicolini and Filak (2022) studied student journalists in a high school setting, examining the self-censorship that high school students elect to employ when discussing particular topics in their journalism endeavors among peers who are also developing socially and emotionally alongside them. The authors found that not only were there specific topics that resulted in student journalists' self-censoring at a higher rate, but there also appeared to be a gender bias in how and when students self-censor. This study indicated that topics of sexuality appeared to be the most controversial; however, which gender self-censored more also related to whether a student's journalism supervisor shared the same gender. These results contribute to the idea that certain human development milestones come with age-old strife, and therefore, when it comes to self-censorship, these more general communication dynamics appear to remain consistent.

Studies such as those that research basic human development can offer great insight into how self-censorship can be a typical experience for most humans of a certain age. However, for some individuals, as development continues past adolescence, there is still evidence of self-censorship remaining a common behavior into adulthood and older

age (Matthes et al., 2018). Therefore, this study sought to focus on how circumstances that a person experiences during younger developmental years may affect their adult behavior.

### **Environmental Context**

Another collection of research regarding reasons for how individuals make self-censorship decisions includes an exploration into the environmental context of the person making the communication decision. Self-censorship and other communication state behaviors vary within an individual depending on the temporary or permanent context in which the individual finds themselves in when the communication is taking place (Chia, 2014). Furthermore, the studies referenced below indicate that certain aspects of an individual's broader environment can provide context and insight into what may have contributed to the self-censorship behavior in those environments.

Experimental studies also explored self-censorship behavior among individuals living in environments with major societal conflicts and highly challenging social or political dynamics, such as within the Palestinian and Israeli conflict (Shahar et al., 2018). One of the most significant findings of these studies noted that the individuals in these environments were most willing to self-censor information about the in-group when communicating with individuals from an out-group (such as outside military or volunteer forces). This self-censorship took place namely when communicating in a public forum in front of an out-group, even if that out-group was demonstrating a desire to assist the in-group. This tendency to self-censor depending on the perception of in-group and out-group was also studied in Chia's (2014) quantitative work regarding the self-censorship

of 520 Singaporean adults to determine if fear of disagreement with the authoritarian government would result in willingness to self-censor the sharing of their socio-political opinions. The study's findings showed, through a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, that a government's stance on an issue does play a role in how individuals decide to share their political opinions. However, individuals are not persuaded to share only opinions that are congruent with government stances, but rather, they are persuaded to share only opinions that they believe are popular among the population at large. In other words, the respondents were likely to dissent against the government publicly, but only if they believed their dissenting opinion was shared with the population at large (Chia, 2014). This research by Chia supported the present study in that it showed that while government or larger scale influence does play a role in opinion development, there must be more research on the social influences that contribute to willingness to self-censor.

The nature of political correctness has been similarly researched, which, in execution, often involves a great deal of self-censorship to maintain the ability to promote or avoid different topics, phrases, tones, or other forms of communication while attempting to meet the criteria of accepted conversation (Koopman et al., 2023). For this study, Koopman et al. (2023) focused on the use of this type of self-censorship in the workplace. In this study, individuals self-censored by adjusting the way that they communicate to be sensitive to gendered phrasing, avoiding humor that can be perceived as derogatory or offensive to certain larger groups, or avoiding what are or what could be perceived as microaggressions between groups. Self-censorship behavior related to

environmental context appears to be directly related to the environment of the communicator at the time of communication, as opposed to being a behavior that is long held by the communicator across settings. The purpose of the study of this dissertation was to explore reasons that individuals may foundationally self-censor regardless of the environment.

### **Relationship Roles as a Contributing Factor**

The broadest topic related to self-censorship involves the idea that communication behaviors are related to the relationship roles interlocutors view themselves as holding in the broader social context of a small or large group (Barnwell, 2019). Barnwell (2019) researched the relationship between the self-censorship behavior of family secret-keeping and the concept of *slow violence*, or deep interpersonal, emotionally treacherous ramifications that carry through generations. The researchers found that while reticence or secret-keeping within larger public groups is still problematic, this societal secret-keeping is inherently short-term as secrets tend to be revealed over time. However, because of the roles individuals feel compelled to maintain within family units, Barnwell (2019) posited that secret-keeping among family members often persists for decades, as secrets are kept from generation to generation, with personal opinions about these secrets kept silent. The research design for this study included qualitative surveys, which differs from the design and methodology of this dissertation. That said, the content and subject matter of this study were similar to the subject of this dissertation in that it also discussed family identity and how relationships within families affect adult behavior.

Familial relationships have also been studied as a source of communication augmentation when roles change based on the discussion subject. One such study involved the concept of when adult children begin conversations with aging parents for the first time regarding a parent's end-of-life decisions (Scott & Coughlin, 2015). Another study involved the subject of when older adults attempt to express novel challenges for the first time to their newly defined familial caregivers (Fowler & Soliz, 2013). A study of when children grow into adolescents with differing religious views from their parents was also completed, which indicated how variables related to intimacy and trust play a role in the reasons young people may self-censor (Chia, 2014). This dissertation sought to expand this vast body of knowledge regarding what other variables may play a role in dictating the types of relationships in childhood and adolescence that might have an impact on self-censorship in adulthood.

### **Emotional Abuse**

Despite each of these subjects studied to understand the social psychology of an individual deciding to withhold their own opinion, one area that has not been researched is the effect of abuse on an individual's self-censorship behavior, such as in the case of emotional abuse that may occur from a primary caregiver to a child. According to the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ; Momtaz et al., 2020), emotional abuse can occur in a variety of different forms, including verbal abuse, emotional rejection, overcontrol, insufficient control, over-expectation, and terrorizing. Berzenski (2019) further addressed the implication of emotional abuse on adult behaviors. For the purposes of this study, the overcontrol subscale was utilized in that it most directly asks questions regarding the

most direct attempts for parents to exert control over the behavioral decisions that individuals could or could not make in childhood. The research methodology and approach for Berzenski's (2019) study included a factor analysis and mediation. Like in the current study, Berzenki's study utilized the same scales of measure and examined relationships and influence.

Cultural identity within an individual's environment has also been researched as a contribution to psychological development. A study by Zong et al. (2019) revealed an interconnected relationship between individual parenting behaviors, identity, and effects on adult life. This study found that a parent's support of autonomy and their child struggling with fully developing a sense of identity both contribute to the behavior of internalizing problems. This research relates to this dissertation's focus in that self-censorship behavior is a similarly internalizing behavior, and if identity formation and parenting behaviors affected internalizing problems, perhaps, shared family identity with an emotionally abusive primary caregiver could do the same regarding self-censorship.

### **Shared Family Identity**

In addition to the result of emotional abuse taking place in a primary caregiver-child relationship being explored as a variable potentially contributing to self-censorship in adulthood, shared family identity (Wittenberg et al., 2023) was also explored as a variable. The concept of shared family identity can be defined as the idea that an individual may or may not identify their own family members as members of their own ingroup (Soliz & Harwood, 2006).

An example of the study of this concept included Wittenberg et al. (2023)'s research regarding the role of the Shared Family Identity Scale and research in the development of a new tool to specifically measure the social implications of the role of individuals who are caretakers for a family member with chronic illness. The development of this new tool is based in part on the need for more comprehensive research and understanding of how the roles played in families and behaviors engaged in within relationships can greatly define how those relationships themselves are regarded by the individuals in them. This relates to the present study because the subject of the present study was to further understand not only the nature of the roles intimate connections play for each individual but also how that intimacy can indicate the impact of those relationships on the overall behavior of the individual when they engage socially with the world.

Previously, the relationship between emotional abuse and shared family identity has not been studied, nor have these concepts, neither collectively nor separately, been explored in conjunction with self-censoring behavior. Emotional complexity was studied by Fowler and Soliz (2013) when researching painful disclosures between familial and non-familial older adults. The study investigated the overall effects of certain communication behaviors from older adults when they discussed challenging subjects (such as issues of pain or end of life). The study compared older adults' processing with family members who identified them as such and processing with non-familial interlocutors. The overall effects revealed a deeper impact on family members than on non-familial relationships. This is congruent with what this dissertation also predicts.

While somewhat scarce, there have been studies of shared family identity among young adults (Schrodt & Scruggs, 2021) which is the population surveyed in the present study. This research indicated that the nature of conversations with children affected how children identified with their caregivers as adults. Children who converse openly with their parents have a greater degree of shared family identity with those parents (Schrodt & Scruggs, 2021). Since it is understood through the review of research on emotional abuse that conversation openness is directly disrupted in families with emotionally abusive caregivers (Momtaz et al., 2020), a need for continued research to uncover information about shared family identity in these relationships is apparent. In this sense, studies involving the identified research questions that relate to shared family identity, willingness to self-censor, and emotional abuse in childhood have been synthesized. Additionally, using a quantitative approach that involves the specific questionnaires implemented in this study assisted in keeping the linear multiple regression selected for this dissertation meaningful and consistent with the existing research on the subject.

### **Summary**

While a great deal of research has been completed on self-censorship as an accommodative behavior best understood through the lens of the spiral of silence theory (Fox & Holt, 2018), research has not yet been completed regarding what the results are when an individual experiences emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from primary caregivers in childhood. This dissertation sought to close this gap in research and explore not only if experience with emotional abuse in childhood is a predictor of a willingness to

self-censor but also if an individual's decision to identify with emotional abusers is an additional predictor.

The major concepts in the literature regarding self-censorship include that individuals are most likely to self-censor when they have a real or perceived risk of social exile or when they have a real or perceived direct punishment or reward for doing so (Wu, 2021). Additional concepts in the research regarding self-censorship include an increase in willingness to self-censor when individuals have a specific relationship role to play in a group that informs their behavior or when their social development from a biological or environmental perspective has shaped this behavior directly over generations (Barnwell, 2019). These previously noted studies have provided insight on what general circumstances may contribute to self-censorship behaviors in similarly situated individuals; however, there is still a gap regarding why specific individuals who are similarly situated from a biological, environmental, relational, or developmental standpoint still may behave differently from one another regarding willingness to self-censor. This dissertation was designed to contribute to closing that gap in literature.

This study worked to fill at least one of the gaps in literature and seeks to extend knowledge in the discipline. It is not yet known to the fields of social psychology and public opinion research how individual micro-level differences may alter self-censorship behavior when individuals interact in groups. The group patterns that have begun to be uncovered through self-censorship research, while informative, do not specifically address the unique personal experiences that an individual may have that might increase their proclivity to have a sense of willingness to self-censor more than an individual who

may otherwise be a member of the same general group. Additionally, it is not yet known to the fields of social psychology and public opinion research how the variable of childhood emotional abuse may contribute to an individual's behavior when connecting with others socially, nor how their behavior in these social interactions may contribute to larger scale challenges when these individuals self-censor. It is also unknown to the fields of social psychology and public opinion research what may vary more when the concept of shared family identity is applied to the premise of emotional abuse in childhood contributing to self-censorship. In the following chapter, the methodology for this dissertation is described in more detail, informing on how a linear multiple regression assists in the closing of this gap.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this quantitative study to address the gap in research regarding an individual's WSC and variables that may contribute to an individual's willingness to do so. This subject is of particular significance considering the social psychological implications of individuals restricting communication of their authentic opinions, namely about social or political issues, which can lead to a mass misunderstanding of what can be factually considered the majority opinion. This is consistent with what is understood through the spiral of silence theory, which indicates how such restriction in sharing authentic opinions can have a major impact on social and political policymaking (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The variables that were studied in this quantitative study included emotional abuse (Momtaz et al., 2020) from childhood primary caregivers and SFI (Soliz & Harwood, 2006) with those caregivers as adults. These variables were of particular interest in that the societal-level consequences of personal emotional abuse had not been studied in depth, and whether SFI contributes to those consequences had not been studied at all. This chapter includes the quantitative methods that were used for the study, including the research design and rationale, instrumentation and operationalization of constructs, data analysis plan, threats to the validity of that plan, and ethical procedures that were followed.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The independent variables in this study were emotional abuse as measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire Overcontrol Subscale score (Momtaz et al., 2020) and SFI as measured by the Shared Family Identity score (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). The

dependent variable was self-censorship as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor score (Hayes et al., 2005). The study was a quantitative cross-sectional study using survey research methods. Data analysis was linear multiple regression. Time and resource constraints included the need to collect all data for the completion of the study. There had been quantitative studies measuring WSC, but there had not been any studies that examined the effect of emotional abuse or SFI on a person's WSC.

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The sample for this study was drawn from a population that had registered for the SurveyMonkey Audience subject pool.

### **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

Convenience sampling was used for this study through the assistance of Survey Monkey Audience, a sourcing program designed to solicit compensated research participants. A convenience sample was selected because it is a method of research that allows for a select sample to be studied from a larger population that would be impossible to fully survey. Secondly, a convenience sample was selected because this research was an initial study to determine if any further, more specific, research may be appropriate using a more specific sampling type (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). Sampling included data collected from adult participants living in the United States who are able to independently read each question and respond, who consented to participate in the study, and who completed all questions included in the study. Sampling excluded those who were under 18 years old, those who are not living in the United

States, those who are unable to read questions independently, and those who do not consent to participate. A power analysis was used to calculate sample size using  $g^*$ power for linear multiple regression. Parameters included an effect size of .15,  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $\text{power} = .95$ , with 2 predictors. The two independent variables were the Degree of Shared Family Identity (SFI) with a childhood primary caregiver measured by the Shared Family Identity scale, and the frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Overcontrol subscale of the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire. The dependent variable was the degree of Willingness to Self-Censor as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale. The result indicated that a sample size of 119 was required for the study.

### **Procedures For Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was consulted to plan for best practices for how to approach this study. The recruiting procedure for this study included employing the use of Survey Monkey Audience, a population recruiting program. The study included a comprehensive informed consent which included the basic measures of informed consent for a quantitative study and included additional measures to fully inform on the emotionally involved nature of this study. To be certain that participants are fully informed, the informed consent fully disclosed the nature of the questionnaire and included sample questions for participants to preview before agreeing to participate. The survey concluded with a debriefing page that includes how the study was used and provides a list of free or low-cost resources for participants who wished to therapeutically explore the themes of the study.

## **Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs**

### **Willingness to Self-Censor Scale**

The Willingness to Self-Censor scale was developed by Hayes et al. (2005). The scale measures how likely a person is to share their opinion or withhold their opinion if they think it would be unpopular with the audience they are speaking with. The measure consists of eight questions where participants rate their willingness to self-censor on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The published Cronbach Alpha score was 0.82, with cross-validation used to determine single-factor reliability (Hayes et al, 2005). With a sample size of 70 across four groups, the Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI) results showed that the scale met the criteria for a good fit (Hayes et al., 2005). Permission for use of this scale was granted from the author on February 8, 2024 through the means of E-mailed consent, included in the appendix.

Self-Censorship is a state of behavior, The Willingness to Self-Censor scale and methodologies in the development of the scale have been cited extensively. For example, Al-Khouja et al. (2022) used the scale to discuss whether self-expression can be authentic or inauthentic and how that related to overall psychological satisfaction when studying the self-censorship and self-consciousness of 120 Moroccan journalists. While the Al-Khouja et al. (2022) study did not measure willingness to self-censor because of early childhood relationships, it did measure how self-censorship is related to psychological conditions. Additionally, Al-Khouja et al. (2022) measured how oppression toward a particular group may result in more self-expression within that same group. Like this dissertation, this study measured how negative psychological experiences can relate to

self-censorship. In the study for this dissertation, this scale was used to measure adult children's willingness to self-censor depending on whether their childhood caregivers engaged in emotionally abusive behaviors or not. The scale is rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with an average score determining willingness to self-censor. Higher scores indicate a higher degree of self-censorship. A sample question includes "It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say" (Hayes et al., 2005). This scale has been utilized with populations with student participants and non-student participants, and in both groups, it has produced statistically reliable data (Hayes et al., 2005).

### **Emotional Abuse Questionnaire**

The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire was developed in 2020 by Momtaz et al. (2020). This scale measures the severity of emotional abuse in childhood. The scale contains 30 questions where participants aged 12 years and older indicate the severity of their experiences within six sub-categories: verbal abuse, emotional rejection, overcontrol, insufficient control, over-expectation and terrorizing. The published Cronbach Alpha test results indicated Cronbach 0.93 and concurrent reliability 0.87. Overall reliability was also published as being significantly acceptable (Momtaz et al., 2020). Permission for use of this scale was granted on February 8, 2024, from the author through the means of emailed consent, which is included in the appendix.

This scale has been used for several other studies related to child abuse. Jaroenkajornkij et al. (2022) used the scale to differentiate between sexual, physical, and emotional abuse when reviewing and evaluating self-figure drawings. Waqas et al. (2023)

used the scale to examine the relationship between different types of abuses in the workplace. While employer-employee relationships do differ from familial relationships, the power dynamics examined through this research can be like a primary caregiver-child relationship per the subordinate nature of employees. The Waqas et al. study used eight items from this scale to evaluate emotional abuse. In the present study, emotional abuse was operationalized by participants only answering the questions included in the *Overcontrol* subscale of this scale. This was used to measure the adult participant's perspective of emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from their childhood primary caregiver. The Overcontrol subscale describes behaviors that caregivers engage in that attempt to excessively manage the experience and actions of the child outside of what would be typical parental engagement (Momtaz et al., 2020). This scale is measured in the same manner as the full Emotional Abuse Questionnaire; through a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Higher scores indicate a higher frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behavior. A sample question from this subscale includes: "Those around me used to ban me from participating in social groups or they still do (sport clubs, art clubs, etc.)" (Momtaz et al., 2020). The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire was specifically studied for validity and reliability in 2021 (Yavas Celik & Elmaoglu, 2022). The results of this study, completed by Yavas Celik & Elmaoglu, determined that this questionnaire was valid to measure Emotional Abuse across populations, and is valid per ease of use (Yavas Celik & Elmaoglu, 2022).

### **Shared Family Identity Scale**

The Shared Family Identity scale was developed by Soliz and Harwood (2006). This scale measures the degree to which a person identifies with their family members. The published Cronbach Alpha test results indicate 90-.96 (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Permission for use of this scale was granted on January 31, 2024, through the means of emailed consent from the author, which is included in the appendix.

The initial study featuring this scale involved an analysis of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. The scale was used to determine how closely children identified with their grandparents as well as how grandparents and grandchildren employ communication accommodations or adjustments each person made in their use language to help the interlocutor feel more comfortable. (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). The scale was additionally used to discuss complex semi-familial relationships, such as studies of dynamics between families and their in-laws (Soliz et al., 2009). In the study for this dissertation, the scale was used to measure Shared Family Identity between adult children and their childhood primary caregiver. The items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Higher scores mean a higher degree of shared family identity, or a higher degree of perception of sharing a common ingroup with their family member. A sample question includes “I feel as if we are part of the same family” (Soliz et al., 2009). This scale has been used to measure various dyads within family relationships and has proven to produce valid and reliable data for these several studies (Child and Starcher, 2019).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The software that was used for analysis in this study was IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Data was cleaned and screened by checking for normalcy in data trends, through the examination of outliers, and through evaluating responses to possibly screen for misunderstandings of questions (Stadtlander, 2018). The two independent variables were the Degree of Shared Family Identity (SFI) with a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Shared Family Identity scale, and the frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caregiver as measured by the Overcontrol subscale of the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire. The dependent variable was the degree of Willingness to Self-Censor as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale. Results were examined by exploring relationships between the variables (Sathyanarayana & Mohanasundaram, 2021).

### **Threats to Validity**

Some threats to the validity of the sampling process may include that the surveys were not completed in a controlled environment and that there was no face-to-face contact with participants. Threats to internal validity could include how the instruments themselves may perpetuate errors, the population having been recruited by SurveyMonkey's recruitment agency, how the instruments may interact with one another, biases in responses, or threats to the instruments used to clean and screen the data. Threats to the construct or statistical conclusion could be that new variables or patterns may emerge that were not otherwise foreseen, such as specifications for population

sourcing that may have assisted in providing more accurate or meaningful data (Vazire et al., 2022).

### **Ethical Procedures**

All agreements made with SurveyMonkey Audience, a population sourcing agency, to gain access to participants are included in this document. Some ethical concerns for this study included that there was no face-to-face contact, which may otherwise allow for participants to ask questions before consenting, and that there may be some content within the questionnaire that can cause emotional distress when participants are considering their responses. Also, the informed consent for the study included sample questions for participants to preview, and both the informed consent and exit page for the survey included links to free or low-cost resources to support further therapeutic support on emotionally distressing themes.

Refusal to participate after reviewing the informed consent, and thus exiting the survey, as well as an early termination of participation also both populated the same exit screen, which included these same resources for therapeutic support. Participants remained anonymous when completing the survey. The ethical benefit of this model is that no data linked to participants was saved with any associated protected information. The ethical cost is that distressing themes may be triggered, and reaching the participants who offer responses indicating a higher level of emotional abuse was not possible. To mitigate this, all participants were made aware of the same resources for emotional support, regardless of their responses. It should also be noted that while the survey does

ask questions about emotionally distressing experiences that participants have had, it does not inquire about any mental health effects of those emotional experiences.

Once the data were extracted from the surveys, any source of that data was properly destroyed in five years as per the Walden University IRB standards. This data was all collected anonymously through participants unknown to the researcher, and national hotline crisis resources was given to participants. To avoid any conflict of interest, no resources that the researcher is directly affiliated with per employment as a psychotherapist was offered as an agency that would be able provide support. Additionally, if at any time, a current or future patient of the researcher by coincidence indicated any participation in this study, this participant would be immediately transferred to another clinician.

### **Summary**

In summary, this study was a quantitative study of the relationship between adult willingness to self-censor and shared family identity with their childhood primary caregiver, as well as the relationship between adult willingness to self-censor and their experience with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from their childhood primary caregiver. The study was a cross-sectional study using survey research methods. The population of adults living in the United States with access to the internet was solicited through the support of a population sourcing agency, and the surveys were issued with an elaborate informed consent and exit page that honors all participants' experience with the survey through offering free or low-cost therapeutic resources. Results of this research were given in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between an adult having a high degree of emotional abuse behaviors from their primary childhood caregiver and WSC their political and social opinions. The second purpose of this study was to determine whether having a SFI with the parent who engaged in a high degree of emotional abuse would subsequently increase the adult's likelihood of self-censoring their political and social opinions. The first research question was the following: Does frequency of childhood emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caretaker, as measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire Overcontrol Subscale, predict a higher degree of willingness to self-censor when discussing their social or political opinions with others, as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale? The hypothesis associated with this research question was that an adult's frequency of experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caretaker, as measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire Overcontrol Subscale, positively correlates with their degree of willingness to self-censor when discussing their social and political opinions with others as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale.

The second research question was the following: Does an adult with frequency of experiences in childhood with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caretaker, as measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire Overcontrol Subscale, predict willingness to self-censor when discussing their social or political opinions with others, as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale, when

they also have a high degree of shared family identity with their childhood primary caretaker? The hypothesis associated with this second research question was that an adult with frequency of experiences in childhood with emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors from a childhood primary caretaker, as measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire Overcontrol Subscale, predicts likelihood of their degree of willingness to self-censor when discussing their social or political opinions with others, as measured by the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale, when they also have a high degree of shared family identity with their childhood primary caretaker.

Chapter 4 outlines the collection of data for this study and provides the results of data analysis. The process for data collection is discussed, including how data were collected and within what parameters. This chapter also discusses the fidelity and treatment of data when collecting and analyzing. The chapter concludes with summary of findings for the study.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place between January 6, 2025, and March 28, 2025, over a period of 81 days. This duration was expected based on the plan outlined in Chapter 3. There were 180 participants recruited, consistent with the expectations for the study identified in Chapter 3. I used a nonprobability sampling method; however, the sample obtained was considered adequate in representing the population of interest, considering the preliminary nature of the study. This is so in that this study was an initial exploration into the variables studied, and the method is aligned with the target population characteristics (Purna & Vadakedath, 2023). For this study, the sampling procedure was

carefully designed to try to best represent the larger population of interest to promote the most generalizability of the study as was possible. Participants were recruited through SurveyMonkey Audience, which offers a wide and diverse respondent pool. This method allowed the sample to better reflect the target population, supporting greater generalizability of the study results

The regression analyses conducted in this study did not incorporate covariates. This decision was based on the literature, which did not indicate a need for identifying any extraneous variables. By excluding covariates, the model focused on the direct predictive relationships between the independent and dependent variables and simplified interpretation.

### **Study Results**

Relevant statistics, including correlation coefficients ( $R$  values),  $F$  statistics, unstandardized regression coefficients ( $b$ ) and standard errors ( $SE$ ), were calculated and interpreted according to established guidelines (Marzjarani, 2020). For instance,  $R$  values were interpreted with references to standard thresholds for small (.1), medium (.3) and large effect sizes (.5) (George & Mallery, 2010), acknowledging the complexities that are inherent to behavioral data. Effect sizes were reported through  $R^2$  values, which quantify the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the predictors. Reporting  $R^2$  aligns with APA recommendations and provides a meaningful gauge of the explanatory power of a model (Rights & Sterba, 2021). Post-hoc analyses were deemed unnecessary for this study. Post-hoc testing is often for exploratory research following unexpected findings or interactions (Rubin & Donkin, 2022). Given the current study's

designs, no post-hoc analyses were necessary since the central questions were accounted for within the model being tested.

## **Preliminary Analyses**

### ***Assumption Testing***

Evaluation of regression assumptions was performed using multiple diagnostic tools. All variables of interest were tested for normality through visual histogram inspection and reviewing skewness and kurtosis values. The WSC scale appeared normal in its histogram and had a skewness value of  $-0.06$  with kurtosis of  $1.94$ . The EAQ scale appeared to have some negative skew visually but still showed acceptable skewness ( $0.86$ ) and kurtosis ( $-0.40$ ). The SFI also appeared normally distributed visually and had a skewness of  $-0.59$  and kurtosis of  $1.93$ . All values fell within acceptable ranges (skewness  $< |2|$  and kurtosis  $< |7|$ ; George & Mallery, 2010). In addition, regression standardized residuals were normally distributed with a mean of  $0$  and SD of  $1$ . This gives confidence that the assumption of normality was met.

Linearity was tested through correlations among the variables of interest. There were weak linear relationships among WSC and EAQ,  $r(179) = .18, p = .007$ , as well as between WSC and SFI,  $r(179) = .18, p = .010$ . Also, scatterplots of all variables did not reveal any other curvilinear or quadratic trends. Therefore, the assumption of linearity was met (George & Mallery, 2010). Observations were independent of each other. Each person who participated in the study was selected from a varied participant pool and no individual could participate more than once. Independence of observations was therefore achieved (George & Mallery, 2010). Homoscedasticity was tested through visual

inspection of the scatterplot of residuals vs. predicted values for the model. Residuals were scattered evenly around 0 and showed no discernible patterns or trends. This meets the final assumption and confirms that the residuals in the model showed a constant variance across all levels of the variables (George & Mallery, 2010).

### ***Descriptive Analyses***

Relevant statistics, including correlation coefficients ( $r$  values),  $F$  statistics, unstandardized regression coefficients ( $b$ ), and standard errors ( $SE$ ), were calculated and interpreted according to established guidelines (Marzjarani, 2020). For instance,  $r$  values were interpreted with references to standard thresholds for small (.10), medium (.30), and large effect sizes (.50) (George & Mallery, 2010), acknowledging the complexities inherent to behavioral data. Effect sizes were reported through  $R^2$  values, which quantify the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the predictors. Reporting  $R^2$  aligns with APA recommendations and provides a meaningful gauge of the explanatory power of a model (Rights & Sterba, 2021). Post-hoc analyses were deemed unnecessary for this study. Post-hoc testing is often used for exploratory research following unexpected findings or interactions (Rubin & Donkin, 2022). Given the current study's design, no post-hoc analyses were necessary since the central questions were accounted for within the model being tested.

### **Primary Analyses**

When asked about gender identity, participants selected options across a diverse gender spectrum as shown in Table 1. Women made up the majority at 52.08%, followed by men at 46.07%. Non-binary individuals comprised 0.00% of the sample. Transgender

identities were also represented with 0.06% identifying as transgender men and 0% identifying as transgender women.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Interest: Gender*

Gender identity	Percentage	Number
Women	52.08%	95
Men	46.07%	84
Nonbinary	0.00%	0
Transgender man	0.06%	1
Transgender woman	0.00%	0

Displayed in Table 2, the age distribution of participants showed the largest representation in the 36-45 age range (26.1%). Other age groups included age 66 and older (19.4%), 26-35 (17.8%), 46-55 (16.7%), 56-65 (10.6%) and 18-25 (9.4%). This suggests a relatively even distribution across middle-aged and older adult populations.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Characteristics of Interest: Age*

Age	Percentage	Number
18–25	9.4%	17
26–35	17.8%	32
36–45	26.1%	47
46–55	16.7%	30
56–65	10.6%	19
66+	19.4%	35

As shown in Table 3, the cultural composition of the participant population was predominantly White/Caucasian at 67.8%. Hispanic or Latino individuals made up 11.7%, followed by South Asian (8.3%) and East Asian (7.2%) participants. Black,

Caribbean or African American respondents represented 4.4% of the sample. American Indian or Native Alaskan (1.7%) and Pacific Islander or Hawaiian Native (1.7%) were both represented. Middle Eastern or North African participants accounted for 0.6%.

**Table 3**

*Demographic Characteristics of Interest: Cultural Identity*

Cultural Identity	Percentage (number)
American Indian or Native Alaskan	1.7% (3)
Black, Caribbean, or African American	4.4% (8)
Hispanic or Latino	11.7% (21)
Pacific Islander or Hawaiian Native	1.7% (3)
Middle Eastern or North African	0.6% (1)
South Asian	8.3% (15)
East Asian	7.2% (13)
White	67.8% (122)

The internal consistency of the psychometric scales was assessed via Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC) scale yielded a relatively low alpha of .50, indicating questionable reliability within this sample. The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) demonstrated excellent reliability with an alpha of .91, reflecting strong internal consistency. The Shared Family Identity Scale showed a low alpha of .36, which raises concerns about the scale's performance in this context. The generalizability of the findings must be considered cautiously considering the low reliability observed for two of the scales, the Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC) and Shared Family Identity (SFI) scales.

Despite these limitations, power analyses indicated that the sample size was adequate for detecting meaningful effects. Specifically, the sample achieved a power of

.99 for a linear regression model with three predictors, surpassing conventional thresholds for sufficient statistical power (Jobst & Moshagen, 2023), strengthening confidence in the findings. Any residual issues related to power or measurement error are likely able to be attributed to scale-specific factors, such as item quality or participant response patterns, rather than sample size, per se. Further refinement of the measurement instruments and replication with larger samples are recommended to enhance reliability and validity.

To answer the research questions, correlational and regression analyses were used. A hierarchical linear regression was used to test the research questions: how does EAQ relate to WSC, and does SFI interact with EAQ to predict WSC? The results of these models are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Regression Models Summary*

Model	Predictor	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SE</i>	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	<i>df</i> <sub>1</sub>	<i>df</i> <sub>2</sub>	<i>p</i>
1	EAQ, SFI	.275	.076	.065	.504	.076	7.268	2	177	.001
2	EAQ, SFI, EAQ × SFI	.317	.100	.085	.499	.024	4.774	1	176	.030

Scale scores were computed by averaging each scale's responses. The interaction term was computed by multiplying the total EAQ score by the total SFI score. Correlations between variables indicated that both the EAQ,  $r(179) = .18$ , and SFI,  $r(179) = .18$ , were strongly and positively related to WSC. This supports hypothesis one that higher EAQ is related to higher WSC.

The first block of the regression (see Table 5) included both scale scores for the EAQ and SFI. This block was significant,  $df(2, 177)$ ,  $F = 7.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with an adjusted  $R^2 = .07$ . Both EAQ ( $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t = 2.95$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and SFI ( $b = .13$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 2.87$ ,  $p = .005$ ) positively affected WSC.

**Table 5**

*Summary of Regression Main Effects: Step 1*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>
Constant	2.364	0.228		10.350	<.001	[1.913, 2.815]
EAQ	0.122	0.041	.216	2.950	.004	[0.040, 0.204]
SFI	0.129	0.045	.210	2.869	.005	[0.040, 0.218]

The second regression block (see Table 6) added the interaction term of EAQ x SFI. The addition of this second block resulted in a significant model improvement from the first block,  $F$  change (1, 176) = 4.88,  $p = .03$  with an adjusted  $R^2 = .09$ . Most notably, the interaction term was significant and large enough to render both individual predictors non-significant and reverse their slopes (interaction term  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 2.19$ ,  $p = .03$ , EAQ  $b = -.40$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t = -1.65$ ,  $p = .10$ , SFI  $b = -.03$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t = -.33$ ,  $p = .74$ ). This suggests that although EAQ and SFI positively relate to higher WSC, they interact in a way that goes above and beyond their individual contributions. These results support hypothesis two in that EAQ and SFI interact in an additive way in how they influence WSC.

**Table 6**

*Summary of Regression Interaction – Step 2*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>
Constant	3.141	0.421		7.457	<.001	[2.309, 3.972]

EAQ	-0.403	0.244	-.714	-1.653	.100	[-0.885, 0.078]
SFI	-0.028	0.085	-.046	-0.332	.740	[-0.195, 0.139]
EAQ × SFI	0.108	0.049	.936	2.185	.030	[0.010, 0.205]

Figure 1 shows the interaction highlighted in the regression model (the graph was obtained using an ANOVA with a median-split to categorize high/low scores for each scale) for Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC) across levels of Shared Family Identity (SFI) and emotional abuse measured by the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) overcontrol subscale. Estimated marginal means represent predicted group averages based on combinations of independent variables (Garofalo et al., 2022). The figure illustrates an additive relationship between SFI and WSC, with individuals reporting higher SFI showing greater willingness to self-censor. This effect is compounded by emotional abuse as measured by the overcontrol subscale of the EAQ. In other words, among participants with high emotional abuse scores, those with high SFI exhibit the highest WSC, whereas differences between high and low SFI are less pronounced at low EAQ levels. These findings suggest that family identity's influence on self-censorship of social and political opinions is amplified in the context of emotional abuse, highlighting the complex interplay between familial bonds and emotional abuse in shaping self-censorship behaviors, as hypothesized in the research questions.

**Figure 1**

*Interaction Graph –EAQ and SFI's Combined Effect on WSC*

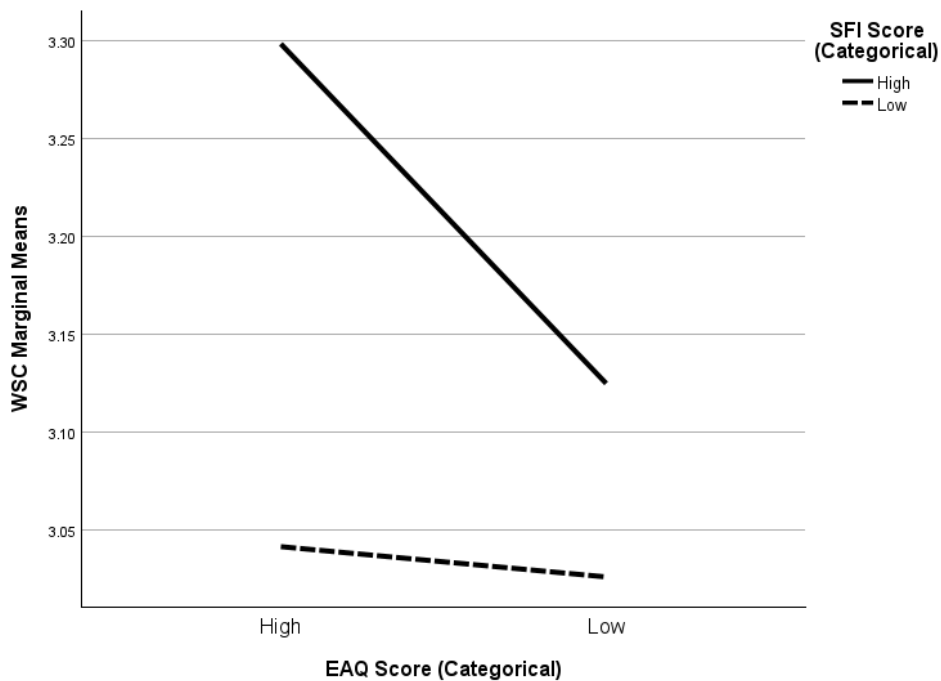


Figure 2 illustrates a positive association between Shared Family Identity (SFI) and Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC), indicating that individuals with higher SFI scores tend to report greater WSC. The effect size is small to medium, typical in social science research (Marzjarani, 2020). emphasizing a meaningful but not overwhelming influence of family identity on self-censorship of social and political opinions. These findings highlight the importance of considering family identity as a key contextual factor in self-censorship of social and political opinions.

**Figure 2**

*Correlation Between SFI and WSC*

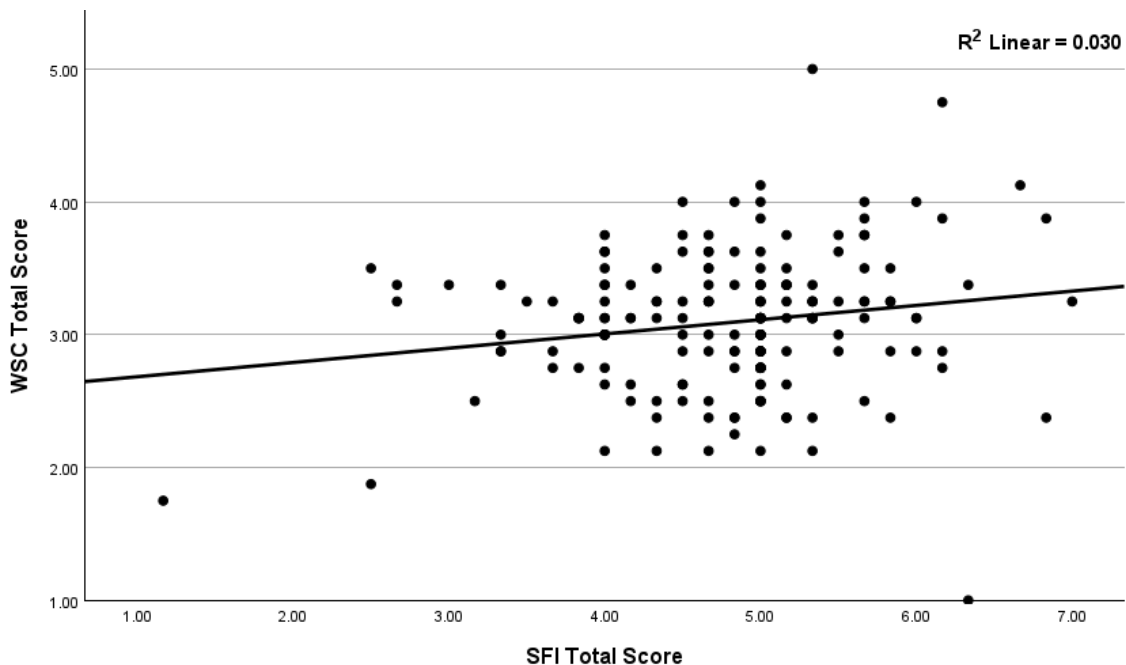
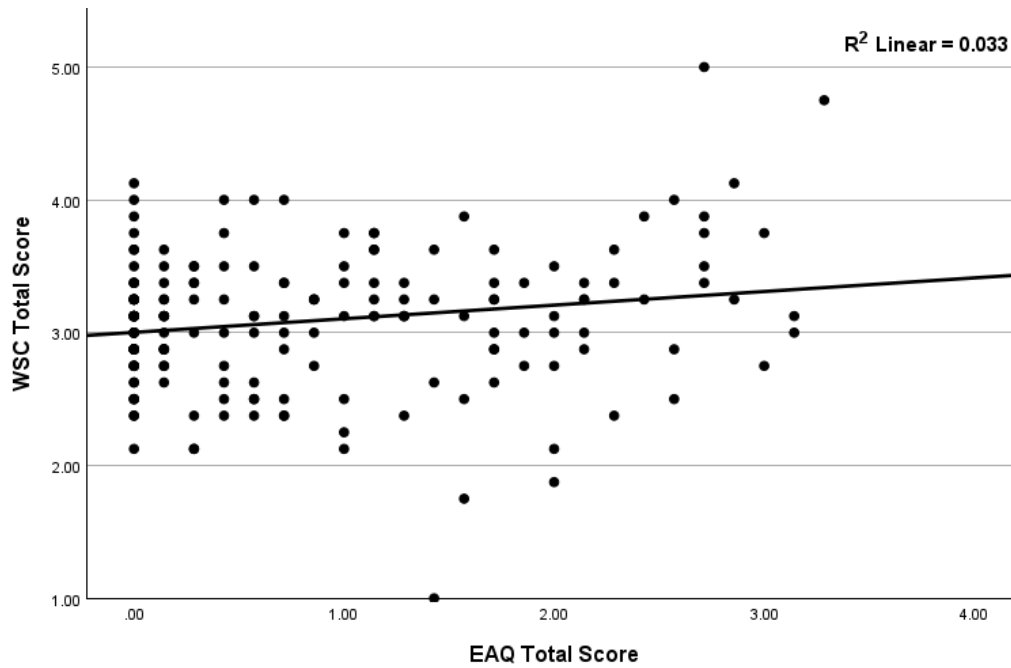


Figure 3 illustrates a positive relationship between Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) overcontrol scale scores and Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC), indicating that individuals reporting higher levels of emotional abuse tend to exhibit greater self-censorship when discussing their social or political opinions. This association reflects a small-to-medium effect size typical in social psychological studies (Marzjarani, 2020), and it is statistically significant, suggesting reliability. Overall, this positive association highlights emotional abuse as a critical factor influencing self-censorship of social and political opinions, consistent with the hypotheses of the research questions.

**Figure 3***Correlation Between EAQ and WSC*

### Summary

The study investigated the relationship between childhood experiences with emotional abuse (specifically overcontrol) from a primary caretaker and adults' willingness to self-censor their social or political opinions. The first research question examined whether the frequency of childhood experiences with emotionally abusive overcontrol, as measured by the Overcontrol subscale of the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, predicted an individual's degree of Willingness to Self-Censor (WSC). The corresponding hypothesis was that there would be a positive association between emotionally abusive overcontrol in greater childhood and an increased tendency to self-censor political and social opinions in adulthood. The results supported this hypothesis,

indicating that greater exposure to emotionally abusive overcontrol behaviors in childhood significantly predicted higher levels of willingness to self-censor.

The second research question explored whether the relationship between childhood emotionally abusive overcontrol and willingness to self-censor is further influenced by the level of Shared Family Identity (SFI) with the childhood primary caretaker. It was hypothesized that individuals with both high levels of childhood emotional abuse as measured by the overcontrol subscale of the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) and high SFI would exhibit a greater degree of self-censorship when discussing their social or political opinions as opposed to those without a high SFI. This hypothesis was also supported. Findings suggest that SFI also plays a role in the predictive relationship between childhood overcontrol and adult self-censorship, indicating a significant interaction effect.

Chapter 5 will present an interpretation of the study's findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature to extend current knowledge. Limitations of the study's generalizability, validity and reliability, and trustworthiness will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will explore the implications and possible contributions to social change revealed by these results.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this quantitative study, I investigated the relationship between childhood experiences of emotionally abusive overcontrol from a primary caregiver and adults' WSC their social or political opinions. Specifically, I examined whether the frequency of such emotionally abusive experiences, as measured by the Overcontrol Subscale of the EAQ, predicted an individual's degree of WSC, as assessed by the primary caregiver. A hierarchical linear regression design was used to answer the two research questions, with emotionally abusive overcontrol and SFI serving as the independent variables and WSC serving as the dependent variable.

Findings supported both hypotheses. Results indicated a significant positive association between the frequency of emotionally abusive overcontrol in childhood and higher degree of WSC social and political opinions in adulthood. Furthermore, SFI was found to influence this relationship: Participants who reported high levels of childhood emotional overcontrol and a strong sense of family identity with their primary caregiver demonstrated a significantly greater likelihood of self-censorship. These results suggest that childhood emotional abuse and perceived family closeness jointly influence adult communication behaviors, particularly in contexts involving personal expression of social and political opinions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Self-censorship, particularly when discussing origins rooted in familial contexts, remains a complex phenomenon influenced by interpersonal, psychological, and communication factors. The current study's investigation of the relationship between SFI,

emotional abuse (as measured by the Overcontrol Subscale of the EAQ), and WSC extends the previous literature discussed in Chapter 2. The findings indicated that individuals with higher EAQ scores showed greater WSC, especially when SFI was also high. These results are situated within the frameworks of the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Nowelle-Neumann, 1974) and CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021). The data in this study revealed that emotional abuse amplifies self-censorship in highly affiliative family environments, and the study contributes to the literature on internalized communication behavior and family conformity.

The findings align with Barnwell's (2019) study on familial secret keeping and slow violence. Barnwell posited that the roles individuals feel obligated to maintain within their families enforce long-term silence and internalized repression. The current results showed some evidence that this could be happening, demonstrating that when confronted with discussing social and political opinions, those with high SFI showed high WSC. This implies that individuals may choose silence (self-censorship) to maintain perceived harmony, especially if they maintain an SFI with their original in-group, including their primary childhood caretakers. This is also consistent with the premise of CAT, which states that often people will augment or accommodate the way they speak in certain contexts to protect relationships they want to keep peaceful (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021).

Similarly, Zong et al. (2019) found that parenting behaviors affect adult identity formation and internalizing behaviors. The current findings build on this premise by suggesting that emotional abuse in childhood not only affects identity, but also leads to

behavioral outcomes such as self-censorship. The interaction found between emotional abuse and SFI in this study extended Zong et al.'s conclusion, showing that high SFI may exacerbate internalizing behaviors (such as self-censorship). The research also supports findings by Schrodtt and Scruggs (2021), who showed that high-quality parent-child communication is associated with strong SFI. However, this study added nuance by illustrating that a strong SFI can become a double-edged sword, in that while it indicates relationship closeness, it may also result in heightened self-censorship, particularly when there is a history of emotional abuse in an individual's history. Thus, this suggests that SFI may not be inherently protective or harmful; rather, its influence depends on the emotional quality of the relationship.

The combined effect of SFI on the emotional abuse-WSC relationship offers a novel contribution to the field. Previous work has not fully examined how emotional overcontrol may change the implications of strong family bonds. This study presented evidence that emotional abuse can intensify the pressure to self-censor among those who are highly identified with their family. These results suggest that relational closeness, when combined with overcontrolling dynamics, may create a psychological dilemma that encourages the dynamics seen in the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974) more than either variable alone. In other words, the family unit and dynamics within it may be the first aspect to examine when determining how individuals first learn when to speak up about their political and social opinions (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Chia's (2014) findings help contextualize this extension. This research showed how, consistent with the CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021), accommodative communication practices promote shared identity and relational satisfaction while nonaccommodative practices do the opposite. The present study revealed that nonaccommodative emotional dynamics from caregivers to children in childhood, such as overcontrol, can override the typical benefits of SFI and instead produce negative behavioral outcomes like self-censorship. This is an important extension of CAT, indicating that shared family identity without communicative safety may have unexpected effects such as an increase in nonaccommodative behaviors.

This study confirmed and extended existing knowledge on familial communication, self-censorship, and identity. It showed that the effects of emotional abuse, especially overcontrol, on WSC are affected by SFI. These findings align with and contribute to a deeper understanding of the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021). Ultimately, the study revealed that familial bonds, when embedded in emotionally abusive contexts, can reinforce silence rather than foster open dialogue.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The internal consistency of the scales used in this study was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The EAQ demonstrated excellent reliability with an alpha of .91, indicating strong internal consistency among its items. The published Cronbach's alpha test results indicated Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 and concurrent reliability of 0.87 (Momtaz et al., 2020). In contrast, the WSC scale showed a low reliability estimate with

an alpha of .50, suggesting that the scale items may not be consistently measuring the underlying construct within this sample. The published Cronbach's alpha score was 0.82, with cross-validation used to determine single-factor reliability (Hayes et al, 2005). The SFI scale exhibited an even lower reliability coefficient of .36, raising further concerns about measurement precision. The published Cronbach's alpha test results indicate .90–.96 (Soliz & Harwood, 2006).

Due to these low reliability coefficients, a thorough review was conducted to verify the accuracy of reverse-coded items across data files, as errors in reverse scoring can substantially affect scale reliability and subsequent analysis. Several factors may explain the discrepancies between the reliability coefficients found in this study and those reported in previous literature. One possible reason is the influence of sample characteristics (Antoniou & Alghamdi, 2024). The current sample may differ demographically or culturally from those in prior studies, affecting how participants interpret and respond to items. For instance, Antoniou and Alghamdi (2024) found that reverse-coded items in a Saudi Arabian student sample introduced measurement error and lowered internal consistency, underscoring how respondent characteristics affect psychometric properties. Additionally, the context in which the scales were administered, such as survey format, environment, or participant engagement, may have impacted the consistency of responses (Clauss & Bardeen, 202). Clauss and Bardeen (2020) showed that reverse-coded items frequently form separate factors, not due to construct multidimensionality, but due to method effects stemming from wording, resulting in inconsistent responses. Lastly, it is also possible that individuals in the United States are

currently more inclined to self-censor due to heightened political tensions and social polarization, which could influence how they respond to items on the WSC scale. Recent U.S.-based research illustrates heightened self-censorship in political contexts, likely driven by increased polarization. For example, Gibson and Sutherland (2023) found that roughly 40% of Americans admit self-censoring due to fear of social backlash amid divisive politics.

Despite the low reliability of the WSC and SFI scales, the sample size provided sufficient statistical power for the regression analyses. Power analysis showed a power level of .99 for detecting an increase in *R*-squared in a linear regression model with three predictors. Typically, a sample size of 80 participants is adequate to achieve a power of approximately .80 for such analyses (Rubin & Donkin, 2022), and the current sample exceeded this requirement. Therefore, the study was well-powered to detect meaningful effects. However, limitations related to measurement reliability should be acknowledged when interpreting the generalizability of the results. These reliability issues may stem from scale properties, participant responses, or data coding and should be addressed in future research through further examination and potential refinement of the scales.

### **Recommendations**

These findings carry significant implications for both scholars and practitioners. Family therapists, counselors, and communication researchers should recognize that high SFI is not always indicative of healthy family dynamics. When combined with emotional abuse, it may signal an environment where self-expression is suppressed in favor of conformity. Future research should explore how other forms of emotional abuse, such as

invalidation, interact with SFI and WSC. Longitudinal studies could help determine whether WSC persists into adulthood and how it influences interpersonal and civic management. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest a need to update models like spiral of the silence theory and the CAT to account for family-based power dynamics and abuse. Further research is needed to analyze how emotional abuse may alter the perceived risk of dissent and the adaptive function of accommodation, thereby changing the individual's communication behavior in nuanced ways.

Given the relationship between self-censorship, emotional abuse, and distorted perceptions of public opinion, future research should also examine voting behavior as a downstream consequence of these social and psychological dynamics. While prior studies highlight the mechanisms through which individuals self-censor political opinions due to fear of social isolation (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and how emotionally abusive family dynamics exacerbate this suppression (Pines et al., 2021), what remains yet to be explored is how these specific internalized patterns of silence ultimately shape political participation, particularly the act of voting.

Voting behavior is not merely a matter of rational policy preference, but a deeply social act influenced by perceived norms, identity, and expressive motivations. If individuals routinely suppress authentic opinions in both the public and private domains, especially when those opinions are more prosocial or compassionate, they may disengage from political processes altogether or vote in ways misaligned with their true beliefs. For example, someone who perceives their views as minority opinions due to widespread self-censorship may conform to what they assume is the majority stance, especially if

emotionally abusive or controlling relationships have trained them to equate silence with safety or acceptance (Giles et al., 1991).

This raises significant questions for democratic legitimacy. If a substantial number of individuals are voting in ways that do not reflect their authentic values, whether due to psychological coercion in childhood, social pressures, or misperceived norms, the outcomes of democratic processes may not truly represent the authentic will of the people. Voting, like opinion expression, becomes subject to the same mechanisms of distortion such as when silence is coerced or habitual, authentic choice is compromised. Therefore, voting behavior may not only reflect policy preference, but also serve as a behavioral extension of long-standing self-censorship patterns.

Moreover, the connection between SFI and WSC suggests that family systems may play an underexamined role in political decision-making. In emotionally abusive family environments where high SFI intensifies self-censorship, individuals may carry over relational dynamics into their civic behaviors. For example, voting in alignment with social expectations, even when those views conflict with personal beliefs, may be another manifestation of coerced silence, mirroring dynamics of accommodation and overcontrol identified in CAT research (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021). This implies that the emotional safety of an individual's immediate social environment has measurable effects on political agency.

Additionally, political scientists often assume that nonvoting or political apathy stems from a lack of education, access, or interest. However, the framework described here suggests an alternative explanation whereby psychosocial silencing, especially

within the family unit in childhood, may reduce political engagement or distort electoral behavior. Future studies could explore correlations between histories of emotional abuse, levels of SFI, and voter turnout, vote choice, or political efficacy. Qualitative interviews could also be used to assess whether individuals who report high self-censorship describe voting experiences marked by ambivalence, obligation, or emotional conflict.

Such research would have practical implications for civic education and voter engagement campaigns. Current efforts often focus on logistical barriers or political literacy but do not consider the psychological and relational barriers that shape voting behavior. If emotional abuse and familial dynamics in childhood play a role in political disengagement or misrepresentation in adulthood, interventions should focus not only on access and knowledge, but also on empowerment, identity development, and emotional safety, particularly for these populations.

### **Implications**

At the individual level, this study identified a risk factor for a willingness to self-censor social and political opinions. Positive social change may emerge from raising awareness about the often-unseen psychological toll of maintaining peace in relationships in abusive familial settings. Individuals experiencing high SFI in adulthood and overcontrol-based emotional abuse in childhood may normalize their silence, perceiving it as a sign of loyalty or respect. The findings of this study encourage clinicians, educators, and individuals to reframe such behaviors as coping mechanisms under emotional coercion rather than healthy adaptive traits. With this intervention, a step can

be taken toward meaningful social-psychological change in self-censorship behaviors when communicating with eagerly listening members.

In terms of the individual within the environment, who is examined through the lens of social psychology, organizations such as schools, universities, youth programs, and community mental health centers may find value in these findings when trying to make group change. Educators and counselors often serve as the first line of support for individuals from emotionally complex family environments. For example, peer-led discussion groups or university counseling programs may be tailored to help emerging adults process conflicting feelings about family loyalty and self-expression. Staff training in trauma-informed care and communication theory could improve interactions with students who are navigating such situations or have navigated those situations when in childhood. This is particularly relevant in contexts where family-related pressures influence decision-making, such as career choices, gender identity disclosure, or voting preferences, all of which would relate to social and political opinions.

Although statements of societal and policy implications should remain conservative due to the study's limited scope, the findings offer some contributions. For example, policymakers and advocacy groups concerned with emotional abuse may use this study to bolster the argument for including psychological forms of abuse, such as overcontrol, in definitions of domestic and family violence. As awareness grows regarding nonphysical forms of abuse, findings like these can reinforce the importance of including emotional abuse in prevention and intervention efforts.

In public health and social service messaging, this research supports campaigns that emphasize the value of emotional autonomy within family systems. Community outreach and public education can address the cultural narratives that equate family loyalty with silence, potentially reducing the stigma around speaking up in emotionally harmful environments. While this study did not provide enough empirical evidence to recommend specific policy changes, there are many areas of focus within politics to which the findings of this study may contribute.

Theoretically, the study contributes to both the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021). It offers a nuanced interpretation of how fear of social exclusion, which is central to the spiral of silence theory, operates within familial settings, especially when emotional abuse is present in an individual's history. High SFI increases the salience of the group opinion, therefore intensifying the individual's fear of dissent. Simultaneously, the findings refine CAT by illustrating that communication accommodation behaviors may not always be voluntary or positive. For individuals with emotional abuse in their history, accommodation may reflect coercion rather than cooperation or intimacy-building, like other communication accommodations might. This expands the theory to account for power dynamics in close relationships, particularly where emotional abuse distorts communication expectations.

The findings from this study have meaningful implications for positive social change. At the individual and family levels, the research encourages greater awareness of the role emotional abuse plays in suppressing an individual's voice within strongly loyal

family systems. Organizationally, it provides direction for support services, while societally, it contributes to growing recognition of emotional overcontrol as a form of abuse worth investigating further. Theoretical and empirical contributions further enrich the understanding of communication behaviors within family dynamics. These implications, while positive, must be considered with appropriate caution, respective of this study's current exploratory scope.

### **Conclusions**

Self-censorship is neither inherently negative nor inherently positive. However, when individuals self-censor political opinions specifically, the collective understanding of public sentiment on social or political issues becomes skewed. In cases where someone's authentic opinion, perhaps more prosocial, constructive, or compassionate, is withheld, this silence can result in the tacit endorsement of more oppressive, destructive, or uncompassionate views. Over time, such views may perpetuate and even come to be mistaken for the majority opinion. This misperception can pave the way for misguided policymaking, rooted in a false sense of consensus, and can leave individuals with more constructive or compassionate perspectives without adequate societal or governmental representation of their values or interests.

This study revealed that an individual's WSC is significantly shaped by the interplay between SFI and emotional abuse, particularly overcontrol. Although SFI is often seen as a marker of familial cohesion and closeness, the presence of emotional abuse complicates this relationship. When individuals have experienced emotional abuse, high SFI may intensify their inclination to self-censor, especially within the family unit.

Viewed through the lens of the spiral of silence theory (Hong & Li, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), individuals may fear not only social isolation in broader society, but also relational isolation within their families, leading them to suppress dissenting views.

At the same time, CAT (Giles et al., 1991; Pines et al., 2021) helped explain how emotional abuse distorts communicative behavior: Silence, in these contexts, is not a voluntary act of accommodation, but a coerced strategy for emotional survival. These findings emphasize that not all silence equates to consent or mutual understanding, and not all expressions of family unity reflect emotional safety. Taken together, these insights demonstrate that patterns of self-censorship, whether in familial or societal contexts, carry serious implications for the visibility of authentic perspectives, the health of democratic discourse, and the development of truly representative policies.

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## Appendix A: Permissions for Surveys

Jordan Soliz <XXX@XXX>

Wed, Jan  
31, 9:24 AM

to Jillian

Of course! Feel free to use and please share the final manuscript if you don't mind as it sounds like a wonderful study. Please let me know how, if at all, I can assist.

Jordan

---

From: Jillian Theryon <XXX@XXX>  
Sent: Sunday, January 28, 2024 4:57:23 PM  
To: Jordan Soliz <XXX@XXX>  
Subject: Jan 2024- Permission for Use of the Shared Family Identity Scale

Hello Dr. Soliz,

My name is Jillian Theryon, and I am a social psychology doctoral student at Walden University. I am writing to seek permission to use the *Shared Family Identity scale* for my dissertation research. The purpose of my study is to examine if there is any connection between an adult experiencing emotional abuse in childhood and any willingness they may have to self-censor their opinions in adulthood. The study will also examine if there is any change in willingness to self-censor if the adult does or does not presently identify the former childhood caregiver(s) as "part their family". Please let me know your thoughts on this use of the scale.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Jillian Theryon  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University  
United States of America

Thu, Feb 8,  
11:34 AM

Andrew Hayes <XXX@XXX>

to Jillian

Hi Jillian. Sorry for the delay. I actually thought I had responded, but I can't find evidence of this.

As the Willingness to Self-Censor scale is in the public domain, you don't need my permission to use it.

Sounds like an interesting study.

I am attaching an unpublished paper that very few people have ever seen that documents a lot of my work (published and unpublished) on this topic as of about 2010. Some of the results I report here may be relevant to your work. I published a number of things since then that you can find using a standard academic literature search. I don't do research in this area anymore, but I am still interested in how the WTSC scale is being used by others.

Andrew F. Hayes, PhD (he/his/him)  
Distinguished Research Professor  
Haskayne School of Business  
Adjunct Professor  
Department of Psychology  
Director, Canadian Centre for Research Analysis and Methods

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From: Jillian Theryon <XXX@XXX>

Sent: Sunday, January 28, 2024 3:47 PM

To: Andrew Hayes <XXX@XXX>

Subject: Jan 2024- Permission to use the Willingness to Self-Censor scale

Hello Dr. Hayes,

My name is Jillian Theryon, and I am a social psychology doctoral student at Walden University. I am writing to seek permission to use the *Willingness to Self-Censor scale* for my dissertation research. The purpose of my study is to examine if there is any connection between an adult experiencing emotional abuse in childhood and any willingness they may have to self-censor their opinions in adulthood. The study will also examine if there is any change in willingness to self-censor if the adult does or does not presently identify the former childhood caregiver(s) as "part their family". Please let me know your thoughts on this use of the scale.

I look forward to hearing from you,  
Jillian Theryon  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University

United States of America

Vahid Momtaz <XXX@XXX>

Thu, Feb 8,  
2:40 PM

to Jillian

Hi Jilluan

Very interesting subject.

You are welcome to use the questionnaire in your research project. The questionnaire is attached to this email. Scoring system is Likert as it discussed in the article while 0 mean never and 4 means always. There is no cut point for the scales as it was used for the research purposes only. Best wishes with your research journey.

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On Mon, 29 Jan 2024, 11:51 am Jillian Theryon, <XXX@XXX>> wrote:

Hello Dr. Momtaz,

My name is Jillian Theryon, and I am a social psychology doctoral student at Walden University. I am writing to seek permission to use the *Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (specifically the Overcontrol subscale)* for my dissertation research. The purpose of my study is to examine if there is any connection between an adult experiencing emotional abuse in childhood and any willingness they may have to self-censor their opinions in adulthood. The study will also examine if there is any change in willingness to self-censor if the adult does or does not presently identify the former childhood caregiver(s) as “part their family”. Please let me know your thoughts on this use of the scale.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Jillian Theryon  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University  
United States of America

## Appendix B: Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to take part in a research study about **how childhood relationships relate to how opinions are expressed in adulthood**. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks **119** volunteers who are:

- **18 years of age or older**
- **Presently living in the United States of America**
- **Have present access to the internet**
- **Have the ability to independently read and respond to a 21-question online questionnaire.**

This study is being conducted by a researcher named **Jillian Theyron** who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

**Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore more about how adults express opinions and whether that relates to their childhood relationships.

**Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

1. **Complete an anonymous online survey consisting of 21 questions. This should take between 10-20 minutes.**

Here are some sample questions:

**SAMPLE: (When considering life as an adult): It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say. 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree**

**SAMPLE: (When considering your childhood experience with a primary childhood caregiver) Those around me did not or do not allow me to choose my personal things based on my own taste and style. 0- never to 4- always**

**SAMPLE: 3. (When considering your childhood experience with the same primary childhood caregiver) Above all else, I think of this [family member] as a member of my family. 1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree**

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. Everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing. Should you find that you are in need of resources to support your wellbeing, **please dial 988 to urgently access crisis care, or visit [www.openpathcollective.org](http://www.openpathcollective.org) to access low-cost psychotherapy services in your area.**

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by contributing to the body of knowledge regarding the potential larger societal impact on an individual of experiences with childhood caregivers. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results should the participant E-mail and request results at <XXX@XXX>.

**Payment:**

The program Survey Monkey Audience will issue payment for your participation in this study per their industry standards.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept anonymous within the limits of the law. The researcher will not ask for your name at any time or link your responses to your contact info. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by **the use of codes instead of names with the code names key stored separately from contact information.** Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You can ask questions of the researcher by reaching out via phone at [**Phone Number**] or via E-mail at <XXX@XXX>]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at [**Phone Number**]. Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-20-24-1006213. It expires on November 9, 2025.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, **please indicate your consent by completing the following and then clicking “continue” below.**

## Appendix C: Ad

**Subject line:**

2025 Opinion Expression and Family Relationships Online Questionnaire

**Email message:**

There is a new study about the *connection between expression of opinions and relationships in families*.

For this study, you are invited to *complete a brief online questionnaire*.

**About the study:**

- Complete a 21-question online questionnaire (duration: 10-20 minutes)
- Survey Monkey: Audience will issue a payment for completion of this survey per their industry standards
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Age 18 or older
- Currently residing in the United States of America

This questionnaire is part of the doctoral study for Jillian Theryon, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Questionnaires will be distributed during **March 2025**.

Please email <XXX@XXX> to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.