I know I have to earn your love: how the family environment shapes feelings of worthiness of love

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Parental conditional regard is a parenting practice which may lead to negative outcomes for the child. Yet, no research has examined whether feelings of love worthiness may be dependent upon conditional parental regard. Furthermore, certain conditions within the family environment may exacerbate this effect. Across two studies, undergraduate students were asked to report on perceptions of parental conditional regard, aspects of the family life growing up and how often they felt worthy of love (WOL). In Study 1, 91 individuals were asked to respond to open-ended questions about their feelings of parental conditional regard, as well as complete Likert-type questions about their family environment and feelings of love worthiness. In Study 2, 211 individuals completed Likert-type scales assessing their perceptions of parental conditional regard, family environment and feelings of love worthiness. Overall, perceptions of parental conditional regard were associated with feeling WOL less often, and this association was due to the lack of a positive family environment and the presence of negative conditions. These results highlight the importance of parenting practices, specifically a positive family environment, for the development of schemas of the self as WOL from others.

Keywords: parental conditional regard; family environment; feeling worthy of love

In their seminal paper, Baumeister and Leary (1995) contended that all humans possess a strong need to belong. In other words, people innately crave and require frequent positive interactions and enduring positive attachments with significant others. Moreover, the need to form positive attachments to caregivers may be a driving force from birth because it serves as an adaptive mechanism aiding in the child’s cognitive and emotional development (Bowlby, 1969/1982). That is, throughout life (Bowlby, 1973), humans desire to be loved for who they are by their caregivers. Yet, some individuals grow up feeling that love from their caregivers is conditional upon living up to certain expectations, and thus gaining love from their parents may come at a steep price. These perceptions of the conditionality of love may lead to feelings of unworthiness of love even later in life (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973). Yet, such perceptions may not be the only contributing factor to feeling less worthy of love (WOL). That is, certain conditions in the family may exacerbate feelings associated with the conditionality of love, and thus may have profound implications on the working model of the self. For instance, feeling unsupported by one’s family or that one does not have a family member to turn to in times of distress may contribute to feelings of being unworthy of love. Therefore, it may be important to consider aspects of the family environment and parenting that may be associated with these negative feelings about the self. The current study explores the possibility that
feeling that love from the family is conditional may be related to feeling less WOL. In addition, aspects of family life which may explain this association are considered.

**Feeling WOL**

Feelings of love worthiness and the desire for connection with a caregiver are fundamental tenets of child and adolescent development towards becoming a well-functioning adult. Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973) theorised that positive attachments with caregivers early in childhood set the stage for later psychosocial well-being. Specifically, he argued that positive interactions with available and supportive caregivers enable children to develop a working model of the self as WOL and care from others. Similar sentiments can be found in the work of Fromm (1956), who argued that mothers, through caring for the child from infancy, teach the child that he or she is lovable simply by being alive. Conversely, when caregivers are perceived as unresponsive or unavailable, children develop self-schemas that they are unworthy of love (also Symons, 2004). It is thought that such cognitions remain rather stable throughout life, guiding future feelings and behaviours, as well as attention, memory and cognition (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Thus, cognitions formed in childhood about the self as being unworthy of love may carry through to adolescence and adulthood, and may even lay the foundation for potential emotional instability in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

Attachment-related cognitions (i.e. perceiving oneself as WOL) have been related to various psychological and social outcomes. Insecurely attached individuals may develop depression and anxiety (Burge et al., 1997; Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999; Jinyao et al., 2012), and have problems with substance use, eating disorders and general emotional problems including low self-worth and heightened neuroticism (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Furthermore, individuals with negative attachment-related cognitions tend to have poorer interpersonal problem-solving skills (Davila, Hammen, Burge, Daley, & Paley, 1996) and may be more sensitive to interpersonal stressors (Hammen et al., 1995). Conversely, securely attached individuals hold more positive self-views (e.g. Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Clark & Symons, 2000), which promote positive interpersonal relationships later in life (Easterbrooks & Abeles, 2000; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Hinde, Finkenauer, & Auhagen, 2001).

**Conditional regard and family environment**

Attachment theorists suggest that characteristics of the child-caretaker relationship are influential in determining whether that child will develop a sense of love worthiness (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973). However, exactly which characteristics are most important is still uncertain. One potential factor may be perceptions of parental standards or expectations, and the extent to which love from the parents is viewed as contingent on meeting these expectations. Previously suggested by Fromm (1956), such conditional love was theorised to originate in one’s interactions with the father (as opposed to the mother, whose love was unconditional), with whom one does not have a ‘natural’ connection and whose affection must be earned. Past research has linked parental expectations with children’s feelings of worry and anxiety (Saw, Berenbaum, & Okazaki, 2013; Stöber & Joormann, 2001) and feeling that others have perfectionistic expectations of oneself that one must fulfill (Damian, Stoebber, Negru, & Băban, 2013). However, other work suggests that parental expectations may be related to positive outcomes, such as higher grades (Ferry, Fouad, & Smith, 2000).
While perceptions of parental expectations are known to vary depending on ethnic and cultural backgrounds (e.g. Bardone-Cone, Harney, & Boyd, 2012; Naumann, Guillaume, & Funder, 2012; Saw et al., 2013), one potential explanation for both the positive and negative correlates of high parental expectations could be whether love from parents is viewed by the child as conditional upon meeting these expectations (e.g. Bardone-Cone et al., 2012). If love from parents is not perceived as conditional, high expectations may be perceived as reflecting caring and investment and may provide the child with a sense of acceptance and emotional security; thus, these expectations may be related to positive outcomes. For example, work has shown that while parental expectations were positively associated with bulimic tendencies for young women, the perceived meaning of these expectations moderated that relationship for Black women (but not White women), such that if high parental expectations were viewed positively, they were not associated with higher bulimic tendencies (Bardone-Cone et al., 2012). In other words, it may not be the presence of parental expectations per se that influence how children feel about themselves and others, but rather whether children perceive the love they receive from their parents is contingent upon meeting those expectations.

If perceiving parental expectations either negatively or positively is indicative of perceptions of love and support from the parents, then other factors in the family environment may also be related to perceptions of parental expectations and feelings of love worthiness. Past work has established that the family environment can have a substantial impact on children (e.g. Luecken, Roubinov, & Tanaka, 2013). Positive family environments, where parents are supportive, warm and involved, have been associated with positive social and emotional development (Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006), whereas negative family environments, where parents are harsh, neglectful and uncommunicative, have been associated with social and emotional developmental difficulties (Brody & Ge, 2001; Luecken et al., 2013). That is, the often tumultuous nature of negative family environments may lead children to feel uncertain about their parents’ love for them. Thus, feeling neglected or experiencing high levels of conflict in the family environment may be associated with the perception that love from the parents is conditional, and thus may be related to feeling less WOL. However, feeling supported, feeling that one has a family confidant and feeling free to make one’s own decisions may decrease the likelihood that love from the parents is perceived as conditional upon meeting certain expectations, and thus may be related to one’s self is WOL.

The present study

The present study builds upon the aforementioned literature by examining the associations between perceived parental conditional regard, feeling WOL more or less often, and other mitigating or exacerbating factors in the family environment. Specifically, we sought to examine whether perceiving love from parents as conditional predicted feelings of love worthiness and whether the family environment served as a mediator of this association. Our hypotheses were as follows:

H1: We expected a negative association between perceiving parental regard as conditional and feeling WOL more often. In other words, we expected that participants who report that regard from their parents is conditional would feel WOL from their parents less often.

H2: We expected an indirect effect of parental conditional regard on feelings of love worthiness through certain family conditions. Specifically, we anticipated that the
lack of positive conditions and the presence of negative conditions would act as mediators.

H2a: With regards to the lack of positive conditions, we anticipated that perceiving parents as being unsupportive, the inability to confide in parents and perceptions that one is largely unable to make decisions for oneself would partly explain the negative association between perceived conditional parental regard and feeling WOL more often.

H2b: With regards to the presence of negative conditions, we expected that experiencing conflict with parents and feeling neglected by them would explain the association between perceived parental conditional regard and feeling WOL more often.

Study 1
Study 1 was an exploratory study aimed at examining what it means to feel WOL. Additionally, we were interested in various family conditions that may influence whether a person feels WOL and how often. As such, we did not have specific hypotheses aside from expecting that the lack of positive conditions (i.e. support, a confidant and freedom) and the presence of negative conditions (conflict and neglect) would partly explain the association between perceiving regard from parents as conditional and feeling WOL more often.

Participants
The sample consisted of 91 individuals (80 females and 11 males). Mean age of the participants was 23.21 years (SD = 6.11). The sample was ethnically diverse, with 20% African Americans, 19% Asians, 16% Hispanic, 34% Caucasians, 6% Middle Eastern, 4% reporting being multi-racial and 1% Native American.

Procedure and measures
Participants were recruited from psychology classes and through an online research management system. Upon signing up for the study, they were provided with the link to a short survey asking primarily open-ended questions, yes/no questions and some Likert-type questions. Upon completion of the study, students were provided with extra credit for psychology courses in exchange for their participation.

Conditional regard. To assess whether participants perceived that regard from their parents was conditional, we asked them to respond in writing to the following question: Do you feel that you have to do anything to deserve that love from your parents? Participants were provided with a text box in which they could write the conditions they had to fulfill in order to receive positive regard their parents. The primary investigator coded the written responses into Yes/No formats; most participants (73% of the respondents) stated directly whether they felt that they had to do something to deserve love from their parents (by writing either yes or no), and in the 25 cases where no Yes/No response was provided, the researcher inferred based on the written text. The written answers were also coded for themes of conditions.

Family conditions. Questions designed by the researchers were used to assess a variety of family conditions: support (During your childhood and adolescence, did you feel that
|   | 1 Feeling WOL often | 2 Conditional regard | 3 Support | 4 Confidant | 5 Freedom | 6 Neglect | 7 Conflict | Mean (SD) |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | Feeling WOL often | –                   | –         | –          | –         | –        | –         | –         |
| 2 | Conditional regard| 0.37***             | –         | –          | –         | –        | –         | –         |
| 3 | Support            | 0.33**              | 0.07      | –          | –         | –        | –         | –         |
| 4 | Confidant          | 0.34**              | 0.40***   | 0.41***    | –         | 0.44***  | –         | –         |
| 5 | Freedom            | 0.26*               | 0.33**    | 0.17       | 0.44***   | –        | –         | –         |
| 6 | Neglect            | –0.06               | –0.35***  | –0.23*     | –0.31**   | –0.20†   | –         | –         |
| 7 | Conflict           | 0.07                | –0.27**   | –0.12      | –0.25*    | –0.10    | 0.59***   | –         |
|   | Mean (SD)          | 5.81 (1.31)         | 0.78 (0.42)| 0.80 (0.40)| 0.57 (0.50)| 0.56 (0.50)| 0.34 (0.48)| 0.49 (0.50)|

Note: †p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. N = 91.
Table 2. Mediational analyses for Study 1.

| Mediation pathway | Mediator  | Outcome               | a-path | b-path  | c-path | c'-path | Indirect effect | 95% CI      |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| Conditional regard| Support   | Feeling WOL often     | 0.228  | 0.492***| 1.170***| 1.058** | 0.112          | -0.248; 0.523|
| Conditional regard| Confidant | Feeling WOL often     | 1.297***| 0.382*  | 1.170***| 0.675†  | 0.496          | **0.109; 1.146**|
| Conditional regard| Freedom   | Feeling WOL often     | 1.053**| 0.262   | 1.170***| 0.894*  | 0.276          | -0.027; 0.934 |
| Conditional regard| Neglect   | Feeling WOL often     | -1.048**| 0.133   | 1.170***| 1.310** | -0.140         | -0.648; 0.171 |
| Conditional regard| Conflict  | Feeling WOL often     | -0.869*| 0.311*  | 1.170***| 1.440***| -0.270         | **0.788; 0.025**|

Notes: Coefficients represent unstandardised estimates. Significant confidence intervals have been bolded.

* † p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
you were supported by other individuals in your household?), having a confidant (During your childhood and adolescence, did you feel that you were able to openly confide in others in your household?), feeling freedom (During your adolescence, did you feel that you had freedom to make your own choices?), feeling neglect (During your childhood and adolescence, did you feel neglected in any way?) and experiencing conflict (During your childhood and adolescence, did you have conflict with your mother and father or any of the individuals who raised you?). Participants responded in the Yes/No format and were then asked to indicate with whom they experienced these conditions.

Feeling WOL. We asked participants to indicate on a 7-point Likert-type scale how often they currently felt WOL. The question was posed in general terms, without a reference to a specific relationship. The scale ranged from 1 (never feel WOL) to 7 (always feel WOL).

Results and discussion

Analysis approach. To test our hypotheses, we conducted mediational analyses, examining each of the family conditions as a potential mediator. As the mediators were categorical (Yes/No), analyses were conducted in Mplus version 6.12. Because of the categorical nature of the mediators, maximum likelihood estimation cannot be used; for this reason, we employed WLSMV estimation (a robust form of weighted least squares with mean and variance adjustment). Mediation was tested using the ab product term approach (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002) and bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals were obtained for the indirect effect.

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 provides correlations along with means and standard deviations for all study variables. Contrary to expectations, feeling WOL more often was positively associated with conditional regard, support, having a confidant and freedom. Conditional regard was positively associated with having a confidant in the family and having felt free to make one’s own choices, and negatively associated with neglect and conflict.

Of the 91 participants in the study, 22% indicated that during childhood they had to do something to deserve love. Eighty per cent indicated that they felt supported during their adolescence, and 57% reported they had had someone to confide in. Fifty-six per cent of all individuals felt free to make their own choices. Thirty-four per cent reported having felt neglected, and 49% reported having experienced conflict.

Mediational analyses. The results of the mediational analyses are shown in Table 2. There was a significant association between conditional regard and feeling WOL more often (c-path). Conditional regard was positively associated with having had a confidant in the family and having felt free to make one’s own choices, and negatively associated with having felt neglected and having experienced conflict (a-path). Of the five potential mediators, three were significantly associated with feeling WOL more often; there was a positive association for having felt supported and having had a confidant, and a negative association for having experienced conflict (b-paths). There was a significant indirect effect for two of these (having had a confidant and having experienced conflict), as indicated by the bootstrapped confidence intervals. In four cases, the direct effects remained significant after controlling for the mediators; one direct path became marginally significant (c'-path).

It should be noted, however, that with regards to the potential indirect effect through conflict, this appears to be the result of a suppression effect (Thompson & Levine, 1997). That is, conflict, in this sample, was not associated with feeling more WOL (see Table 1), and when adding conflict into the regression equation, the association between conditional
regard and feeling WOL more often increased in magnitude (see Table 2). Thus, this effect does not represent an indirect effect.

Participants were asked to report to whom they felt they could confide within the family (not all participants mentioned any persons). With regards to family confidants, 24% indicated their mother, 3% indicated their father, 25% wrote parents, 11% said siblings, 7% said specifically brother and 13% said their sister, while 16% people indicated other family relationships (including grandparents, aunts and uncles).

In sum, we found an unexpected positive association between conditional regard and feeling WOL more often. As predicted in Hypothesis 2a, this association was partly explained by reports that participants felt they could confide in someone within their family. While we did expect that conditional regard from parents would be associated with feeling WOL, we did not expect to find a positive relationship between these variables, as indicated in Hypothesis 1. Study 2 was designed in part to further explore this finding.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted for several reasons. First, we wanted to replicate and extend the findings from Study 1; as part of this goal, we used improved measurement of parental conditional regard and the conditions in the family (i.e. support, confidants, freedom, neglect, conflict). This was accomplished by using a validated scale for perceptions of parental conditional regard (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004), as well as developing Likert-type questions for the family conditions. Second, in Study 1, participants were asked about family in general. However, based on open-ended responses in Study 1 concerning with whom participants had experienced each of the family conditions, we decided to examine the associations for mother and father separately, as these relationships were mentioned the most and we suspected that associations may not be equal across parental figures.

Participants

A total of 211 individuals (88 men and 123 women) participated in the study. The sample was ethnically diverse and consisted of 30% Hispanic, 28% Caucasian, 17% Asian, 12% African-American, 9% Multi-racial and 4% Middle Eastern. Again, the mean age was 23.81 years (SD = 5.83).

Procedure and measures

Participants were invited to complete the study via an online research management system. Upon sign up, participants were given a survey link to complete an online survey. Upon finishing the survey, they were provided with extra credit to be used towards class credit.

Conditional regard from mother and father. The Perceptions of Parental Conditional Regard questionnaire (Assor et al., 2004) was used to measure perceptions of parental conditional regard during childhood and adolescence. The scale measures four domains of conditional regard: pro-social behaviour, sports, emotional control and academics. Each domain was assessed by three items; the scale consisted of a total of 12 items. Participants completed the scale twice, once for their mother (or mother figure) and once for their father (or father figure). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha_{\text{mother}} = 0.90$ and $\alpha_{\text{father}} = 0.92$).
Table 3. Correlations among study variables (Study 2).

|       | 1          | 2          | 3          | 4          | 5          | 6          | 7          |
|-------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1 Feeling WOL (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 2 Feeling WOL (father) | 0.41***     |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 3 Conditional regard (mother) | -0.28***    | -0.13†     |            |            |            |            |            |
| 4 Conditional regard (father) | -0.25***    | -0.21**    | 0.63***    |            |            |            |            |
| 5 Support (mother) | 0.44***     | 0.06       | -0.20*     | -0.16†     |            |            |            |
| 6 Support (father) | 0.13        | 0.54***    | -0.14†     | -0.23**    | 0.17*      |            |            |
| 7 Confidant (mother) | 0.30***     | -0.07      | -0.37***   | -0.12      | 0.63***    | 0.07       |            |
| 8 Confidant (father) | 0.04        | 0.40***    | -0.03      | -0.24**    | 0.11       | 0.73***    | 0.17*      |
| 9 Freedom (mother) | 0.17†       | -0.08      | -0.09      | -0.07      | 0.33***    | -0.21*     | 0.36***    |
| 10 Freedom (father) | 0.00        | 0.31***    | -0.02      | -0.07      | -0.01      | 0.42***    | 0.08       |
| 11 Neglect (mother) | -0.30*      | 0.07       | 0.22†      | 0.12       | -0.71***   | 0.33†      | -0.69***   |
| 12 Neglect (father) | 0.08        | -0.22†     | 0.10       | 0.24†      | 0.56***    | -0.60***   | 0.29       |
| 13 Conflict (mother) | -0.18†      | 0.03       | 0.32***    | 0.14       | -0.52***   | 0.24*      | -0.45***   |
| 14 Conflict (father) | 0.11        | -0.24*     | 0.00       | 0.40***    | 0.26*      | -0.53***   | 0.11       |
| Mean (SD) | 6.01 (1.44) | 5.70 (1.57)| 2.58 (1.25)| 2.96 (1.50)| 5.87 (1.59)| 5.11 (2.08)| 5.53 (1.68)|

|       | 8          | 9          | 10         | 11         | 12         | 13         | 14         |
|-------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1 Feeling WOL (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 2 Feeling WOL (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 3 Conditional regard (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 4 Conditional regard (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 5 Support (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 6 Support (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 7 Confidant (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 8 Confidant (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 9 Freedom (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 10 Freedom (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 11 Neglect (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 12 Neglect (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 13 Conflict (mother) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| 14 Conflict (father) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Mean (SD) |              |            |            |            |            |            |            |

Note: Feeling WOL, how often do you feel WOL.

†p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. N = 26–211.
**Family conditions.** Participants completed questions assessing five family conditions (support, having a confidant, feeling freedom, feeling neglect and experiencing conflict); the questions assessing these domains were taken verbatim from Study 1. Participants responded in a Yes/No format to these questions.

If the participants responded yes to any of these questions, they were taken to a section that asked them the extent to which they experienced the respective condition from their mother and from their father, separately. They responded to these questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very little to not at all) to 7 (a lot).

**Feeling WOL.** We asked participants how often they currently felt WOL from their mother and father, separately. They responded to these questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never feel WOL) to 7 (always feel WOL).

**Results and discussion**

**Analysis approach.** Our analyses aimed at replicating and extending the findings from Study 1. For this reason, we conducted mediational analyses, testing each of the family conditions (i.e. support, confidant, freedom, neglect and conflict) as a potential mediator separately for each parent. We used the PROCESS macro for SAS, model 4 (Hayes, 2013). The macro estimates all effects simultaneously, and thus only the observations that have values for all variables are included in the analyses. This macro tests mediation by computing the indirect path following the ab product term approach (MacKinnon et al., 2002), as well as bootstrapped 95% asymmetric confidence intervals around the indirect effect of ab (Hayes, 2013; MacKinnon et al., 2002). In all analyses, we controlled for age and gender.

**Descriptive statistics.** Table 3 displays the correlations among the study variables, as well as means and standard deviations. Feeling WOL more often from the mother was positively associated with feeling WOL from the father more often, maternal support, perceiving the mother as a confidant and (marginally) with freedom given by the mother; it was negatively associated with maternal conditional regard, paternal conditional regard, maternal neglect and (marginally) maternal conflict. Feeling WOL from the father more often was positively associated with paternal support, perceiving the father as a confidant and freedom given by the father; it was negatively associated with paternal conditional regard, paternal conflict and marginally with maternal conditional regard and paternal neglect.

Perceiving the mother’s regard as conditional was positively associated with paternal conditional regard, maternal conflict and maternal neglect; it was negatively associated with maternal support, perceiving the mother as a confidant and (marginally) paternal support. Perceiving the father’s regard as conditional was positively associated with paternal conflict and marginally with paternal neglect; it was negatively associated with paternal support, perceiving the father as a confidant and marginally with maternal support.

Overall, people reported feeling WOL often, and that perceptions of conditional regard from either parent during childhood and adolescence were low. With regards to the initial questions about the five family conditions, 70% responded that they did feel supported, 63% reported they had someone to confide in, 62% responded they had freedom to make their own choices, 29% responded that they had felt neglected as a child and 53% responded they had experienced conflict. Thus, the following mediational analyses were only conducted on those who reported experiencing the five conditions.

**Mediation analyses.** Table 4 displays the results of the individual paths of the mediation models, and Table 5 reveals the results of the mediational tests.
Analyses for mother. In these analyses, we found as originally expected a negative association between perceptions of maternal conditional regard and feeling WOL more often by mother (c-path). Perceptions of conditional regard from the mother were negatively associated with maternal support and with perceiving the mother as a confidant; they were positively associated with maternal conflict and marginally associated with maternal neglect (a-paths) and maternal conditional regard was not associated with maternal freedom. Of the five mediators, maternal support, perceiving the mother as a confidant and maternal neglect were significantly associated with feeling WOL more often (b-path).

The indirect effect was tested through the ab product term approach (MacKinnon et al., 2002) and through the construction of a 95% bootstrapped asymmetric confidence interval. Only maternal support and perceiving the mother as a confidant were found to be significant mediators (Table 5). In three of the models, the direct effect remained significant after controlling for the mediator (c'-path), while in one model (support from the mother), the direct effect became marginally significant.

Analyses for father. Again, we found the expected negative association between perceptions of paternal conditional regard and feeling WOL more often by father (c-path). Perceptions of paternal conditional regard were negatively associated with paternal support and with perceiving the father as a confidant; they were positively associated with paternal conflict (a-paths); paternal conditional regard was not associated with feeling the father gave freedom to make one’s own choices, or paternal neglect. Of the five mediators, paternal support, perceiving the father as a confidant, paternal freedom and paternal conflict were significantly associated with feeling WOL more often (b-path).

In terms of indirect effects, paternal support, perceiving the father as a confidant and experiencing paternal conflict were found to be significant mediators (Table 5). In two of the models (confidant and freedom), the direct effect remained significant after controlling for the mediator (c'-path), while in one model (paternal support), the direct effect became marginally significant.

Ancillary analyses. Although we did not have specific hypotheses regarding gender differences in the associations, we decided to explore whether gender of the participant was a potential moderator of the mediation. We examined both the a-path moderation as well as b-path moderation. Again, we used the PROCESS macro, model 7 (a-path moderation) and model 14 (b-path moderation) (Hayes, 2013); PROCESS produces separate bootstrapped confidence intervals for the genders.

As can be seen in Table 5, all significant indirect effects were qualified by a gender moderation on the a-path, such that the indirect effects were significant for women but not for men. There were only two significant moderations of the b-path: the indirect effect through perceived maternal support was only significant for women (Cl_men: −0.239; 0.017, and Cl_women: −0.278; −0.019) and the indirect effect through paternal conflict was only significant for women (Cl_men: −0.141; 0.168, and Cl_women: −0.324; −0.060). Thus, there was a consistent pattern of significant results for the a-path moderation but not for the b-path moderation.

Discussion. Contrary to Study 1 but in line with our initial expectations (Hypothesis 1), we found a negative association between perceptions of conditional regard and feeling WOL more often from both mother and father. Also, in line with Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we found an indirect effect of conditional regard through both maternal and paternal support, paternal conflict and through having a confidant in both mother and father. This lends support for our hypotheses that the lack of positive conditions in the family partly explains the negative effects of conditional regard. Similarly, experiencing negative conditions
Table 4. Path coefficients for mediational analyses (Study 2).

| Mediation pathway | Mediator | Outcome                  | a-path  | b-path  | c-path  | c'-path |
|-------------------|----------|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| **Mother**        |          |                          |         |         |         |         |
| Conditional regard | Support  | Feeling WOL often         | -0.285* | 0.322***| -0.247* | -0.155† |
| Conditional regard | Confidant | Feeling WOL often         | -0.586***| 0.157*  | -0.325***| -0.233* |
| Conditional regard | Freedom  | Feeling WOL often         | -0.112  | 0.175   | -0.252* | -0.232* |
| Conditional regard | Neglect  | Feeling WOL often         | 0.318†  | -0.249* | -0.280  | -0.201  |
| Conditional regard | Conflict | Feeling WOL often         | 0.493***| -0.057  | -0.409***| -0.380***|
| **Father**        |          |                          |         |         |         |         |
| Conditional regard | Support  | Feeling WOL often         | -0.351**| 0.380***| -0.284**| -0.150† |
| Conditional regard | Confidant | Feeling WOL often         | -0.359**| 0.251***| -0.307**| -0.217* |
| Conditional regard | Freedom  | Feeling WOL often         | -0.099  | 0.251***| -0.203* | -0.178* |
| Conditional regard | Neglect  | Feeling WOL often         | 0.303   | -0.186  | -0.114  | -0.058  |
| Conditional regard | Conflict | Feeling WOL often         | 0.570***| -0.160* | -0.175† | -0.084  |

Note: Coefficients represent unstandardised estimates.

†p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Table 5. Tests for mediated paths with boot-strapped confidence intervals (Study 2).

| Predictor | Mediator | Outcome       | Simple mediation | Moderated mediation |
|-----------|----------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|
|           |          |               | a*b   | SE a*b | 95% CI (lower) | 95% CI (upper) | Men’s 95% CI | Women’s 95% CI |
| Mother    |          |               |       |        |              |                |               |                |
| Conditional regard | Support | Feeling WOL often | -0.092 | 0.053 | **-0.235** | -0.014 | -0.164; 0.199 | -0.329; -0.038 |
| Conditional regard | Confidant | Feeling WOL often | -0.092 | 0.050 | **-0.210** | -0.013 | -0.175; 0.005 | -0.243; -0.006 |
| Conditional regard | Freedom | Feeling WOL often | -0.020 | 0.025 | -0.104 | 0.010 | -0.008; 0.250 | -0.201; 0.004 |
| Conditional regard | Neglect | Feeling WOL often | -0.079 | 0.072 | -0.320 | 0.006 | -0.365; 0.062 | -0.411; 0.019 |
| Conditional regard | Conflict | Feeling WOL often | -0.028 | 0.046 | -0.136 | 0.050 | -0.172; 0.038 | -0.159; 0.043 |
| Father    |          |               |       |        |              |                |               |                |
| Conditional regard | Support | Feeling WOL often | -0.133 | 0.056 | **-0.265** | -0.041 | -0.173; 0.205 | -0.396; -0.125 |
| Conditional regard | Confidant | Feeling WOL often | -0.090 | 0.038 | **-0.189** | -0.033 | -0.206; 0.058 | -0.220; -0.031 |
| Conditional regard | Freedom | Feeling WOL often | -0.178 | 0.033 | -0.102 | 0.031 | -0.094; 0.128 | -0.158; 0.020 |
| Conditional regard | Neglect | Feeling WOL often | -0.056 | 0.059 | -0.241 | 0.015 | -0.301; 0.061 | -0.306; 0.013 |
| Conditional regard | Conflict | Feeling WOL often | -0.091 | 0.051 | **-0.213** | -0.010 | -0.237; -0.006 | -0.217; -0.006 |

Notes: Bold indicates significant effects. Moderated mediation results are for moderation of the a-path.
(in this case, conflict) also partly explains the negative effect of conditional regard on feeling WOL.

**General discussion**

The current study explored the association between perceptions of parental conditional regard and feeling WOL more often, as well as some potentially mediating family conditions. Very little research has examined feelings of love worthiness, and only as of late has perceptions of parental conditional regard received attention (e.g. Assor & Roth, 2005b; Assor et al., 2004). Thus, this study adds to a growing body of literature examining the provision of love, family relationships and the implications for later cognitions about the self as WOL.

In Study 1, we found an unexpected positive association between perceptions of conditional regard on feeling WOL more often. We also found an indirect effect of perceptions of conditional regard on feeling WOL more often through perceptions of having a confidant in the family (this confidant most often being a mother, or parents in general; H2a). These results indicated that perceptions of conditional regard had positive effects on feelings of worthiness of love, partly because participants had a confidant to whom they could go.

The unexpected positive association between perceptions of conditional regard on feeling WOL more often may stem from the format of the conditional regard measure (measured via a Yes/No question). The association may have reversed had we used a continuous measure (as in Study 2); we suspect that individuals who would endorse on the lower end of scale on continuous items may have felt, when faced with a Yes/No question, that the ‘Yes’ response option better reflected how they felt than did the ‘No’ response (because they may have felt some degree of conditional regard, just not a lot). To examine this possibility, we coded the open-ended answers into themes; overall, we found that people reported perceiving that their parents’ regard was conditional upon doing well in school, respecting and obeying their parents, and loving and supporting their family in return. Thus, the conditions for receiving regard were not very severe, supporting our proposition that they would have endorsed lower levels of conditional regard on a continuous scale.

Indeed, in Study 2, we found, as originally expected, a negative association between perceptions of conditional regard and feeling WOL more often (H1). Furthermore, we found indirect effects for maternal/paternal support, maternal/paternal confidants and paternal conflict; that is, perceptions of conditional regard was negatively associated with feeling WOL more often, both because participants were less likely to report perceiving having a confidant and receiving support, and because they were more likely to report experiencing conflict (H2a and H2b).

These results highlight the fact that parenting style may have important, long-term implications for the future well-being of the child. Previous research on conditionality of parental regard has found that it was associated with a host of negative outcomes for the child, including behavioural enactment, poor emotional and general well-being (such as greater anxiety and pressure, as well as fluctuation in self-esteem), and resentment of parents (Assor & Roth, 2005b; Assor et al., 2004). The current study extends these findings to include the negative impact of conditional regard on perceptions of the self as WOL (see also Assor & Roth, 2005b). That is, conditional parental regard may lead the child to believe that love from the parents is unstable and unreliable, which may then form the foundation for a view of the self as unworthy of love. Furthermore, the current study
presents potential explanatory intervening variables. The results suggest that the negative effect of parental conditional regard on feelings about the love worthiness of the self may also stem from lack of support within the family, having no one to turn to, and experiencing conflict with a parental figure.

Conditionality of regard is often used as a parenting practice with the goal to teach children valued behaviours (Assor & Roth, 2005b; Fromm, 1956). Yet, research has found that it is not an optimal practice, as children tend to perform poorly in the domains of behaviour on which love is conditional (Assor & Roth, 2005b). Interestingly, popular belief suggests that the focus of parenting should be on making children feel unconditionally good about themselves through the provision of unconditional positive regard (e.g. Rogers, 1951), teaching children that they are lovable regardless of their actions and that raising children’s self-esteem would help many personal and societal problems. To this end, many parents focus on boosting self-esteem fearing that if their children do not feel good about themselves, they will be at risk for emotional and psychological problems (Mruk, 2013; Roland & Foxx, 2003). In fact, some research has found that when experiencing unconditional acceptance, children perform better in school and have increased self-esteem (Makri-Botsari, 2001), and even have increased creativity (Harrington, Block, & Block, 1987). However, research also suggests that this is also not a viable parenting strategy, as it carries other potential problems (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996); instead what may be more important is boosting a child’s self-control and self-respect (Baumeister et al., 1996; Roland & Foxx, 2003). Such a focus may lead to individuals who are better able to interact with others and deal more effectively with problems and disappointments (Roland & Foxx, 2003).

However, conditional regard may not be uniformly negative, if implemented with other parenting practices (Assor & Roth, 2005a). It may be an avenue through which to teach the child positive values and behaviours that promote self-respect and self-control, in a family environment that is warm and represents a secure base (i.e. the child receives support and has people to turn to in times of distress). That is, regard that is contingent on good performance in certain domains or on expecting the child to be someone who he or she is not (e.g. more like a sibling) may be detrimental, whereas regard that is contingent upon the child showing that he or she is in control of the self and behaves in ways that fosters respect for the self and for others may be less so. In such respects, love may be shown unconditionally, such that children know that they are loved for who they are, even if their actions warrant punishment or disapproval. Children may learn that such disapprovals do not necessarily reflect a lessening of their worthiness of love. Establishing from the beginning a home environment that is accepting of the child, that allows for the provision of support and has as a rule that the child can confide in the parents may also create an environment in which a focus on self-control and self-respect may come more natural. Such an environment may help to develop children who feel confident in their home base, feel worthy of regard from others and foster positive interactions with others through internalised values of self-control and respect for both the self and others. These positive interactions may in turn foster a type of unconditional love which centre on respect and care for all parties involved (O’Leary, 1989).

Exploratory analyses found moderation by gender of the a-path. Although we did not anticipate gender effects, some literature do suggest that gender differences exist in associations with perceived parental conditional regard. Assor and Roth (2005b) have argued that women may be more susceptible to the negative effects of love withdrawal, as they may base their sense of self-worth and well-being on satisfaction of the need for relatedness. Women may also carry more resentment towards parents as a consequence of
perceived parental conditional regard (Shavit-Miller & Assor, 2003). This study adds to the current literature by finding that women who perceived love from their parents as conditional were more likely to perceive less support, report less confidence with their parents and report more conflict with the father. In addition, because of these perceptions of the family environment, these women felt WOL less often.

Limitations and future directions

Although the present study provides interesting findings that have both theoretical and applied importance, there are several limitations. For one, both Studies 1 and 2 were cross-sectional, and therefore prohibit proper tests of causality. Longitudinal studies that assess family life during childhood and then re-evaluate individuals in young adulthood would be better equipped to make causal inferences. In a related vein, we merely asked participants to retrospectively answer questions about their family life during childhood. Such perceptions may change over time; however, regardless of any change, these perceptions are still valuable to the extent that they reflect current feelings and cognitions.

Another limitation concerns the measurement of the conditions. These were assessed only with a single question for each parent; it would be better to use scales consisting of more items to increase measurement precision. We do feel, however, that our questions were worded such that they directly assessed the five family conditions. Similarly, measurement of our outcome variable consisted also only of a single item per parent. Again, improved measurement would be desirable in future studies. Appropriate and readily available measurement of the family conditions and of feelings of love worthiness is scarce. In addition, we wished to keep measurement in Study 2 concise and consistent in wording with that of Study 1. Future research should be aimed at developing such scales for better measurement. For instance, perceptions of love worthiness may have very pivotal direct associations with risk behaviours and health and well-being outcomes that may not be well-captured by current measurement.

There are several interesting avenues for future research. As mentioned earlier, longitudinal studies would provide deep insight into long-term effects of childhood family life on future feelings and cognitions about the self. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine parent and child reports of family conditions, as children may construe experiences within the family life differently than parents. For instance, what may be intended to foster independence in the child from the parents’ viewpoint may be construed as lack of support by the child. To add to this, the communication patterns used by parents to express expectations may play an important role in whether the child perceives that the parents’ love is conditional upon fulfilling those expectations. For instance, parents may dictate rather than recommend behaviours and values, and such ways of communicating expectations may influence whether the expectations are construed negatively or positively. Thus, communication styles may moderate the extent to which parental conditional regard leads to feeling WOL more or less often.

Although we did not hypothesise any gender differences, we found that gender of the participant consistently moderated the significant indirect effects. Future work could further explore how and why gender may relate to feelings of love worthiness and conditions in the family. Finally, future work could also examine the specific expectations that parents have for their children, in order to further explore the idea that conditional love based on certain expectations may be less detrimental to feelings of love worthiness than conditional love based on other expectations. It may be that conditions that address the child behaving in ways fostering internal values of being a good person are less
detrimental than conditions that concern public performance and appearances (e.g. doing well in sports or in school, looking a certain way according to norms).

Conclusion
In line with previous research, the current study suggests that conditionality of regard is detrimental to individuals’ feelings about themselves, and suggests that this is partly because the home environment lacks positive conditions (i.e. support and someone in whom to confide), and negative conditions (e.g. conflict) are present. Previous theorising has proposed unconditional love as a beneficial parenting practice, although some research suggests positive outcomes and other research suggests that unforeseen negative consequences may ensue. Thus, parents may benefit from using a mixture of both conditional and unconditional love, with the main focus of teaching respect and concern for all. Children may then learn that they are WOL, but that certain actions may warrant disapproval without the loss of love. Furthermore, in contrast to theorising by Fromm (1956), conditions for love were found for both mothers and fathers, and associations with feelings of love worthiness did not differ between parents. This suggests that, unlike Fromm’s contentions, both parents may be equally important in shaping the child’s future behaviour, and that both mothers and fathers play active roles in teaching discipline and proper behaviour.

Research examining parenting as it relates to the child’s later development is important, as it may help inform parents on how to best interact with the child, perhaps through readily available books on parenting practices for new parents or through interventions designed for distressed families. Additionally, work looking specifically at feelings of love worthiness is essential, as such feelings may be associated with greater risk taking and risky health behaviours, as well as emotional and psychological distress. For instance, gaining a greater understanding of feelings of love worthiness may aid in designing interventions aimed at reducing risky sexual behaviours as well as changing cognitions of depressed and anxious individuals to minimise ruminations. In sum, this work has important implications for parenting practices which may have important and long-term effects on children.

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