Theoretical Frameworks for Relationship Transitions and the Predictors of Successful Transitions

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Abstract

Increasing rates of divorce and a decline in the traditional marriage for life is seen particularly in the X-generation (1961-1976). Yet a return to traditional marriage values has also been found in the younger Y-generation (1976-1991). Both X and Y – generation have high hopes for the future of their relationships. Despite the various trends towards and away from long term relationships, there is an increasing incidence of transitions, both within relationships and between relationships. Individuals must become increasingly sophisticated in relationship knowledge, skills and attitudes if they are to negotiate these changes successfully. Transitions are considered from four theoretical bases: social constructionism, attribution theory, attachment theory and theories of loss and renewal. A review of the literature reveals the main factors required for the success of long term relationships as well as successful transitions between relationships. Communication training is perhaps the one skill found universally in marital therapies, yet requires ongoing qualitative research to identify the factors that couples find improves their communication. Finally, suggestions are made for future research and approaches to relationship counselling.

Globalisation, and an accelerating pace of technological and social change has brought with it increasing rates of divorce and a decline in the traditional marriage for life. This is particularly seen in the X-generation (1961-1976) (Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Glick, 1989; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Yet a return to traditional marriage values has also been found in the younger Y-generation (1976-1991). Both generations have high hopes of relationships and marriage as the foundation of their future happiness. Yet the expectations of these generations do not match actual experiences. Research shows that these relationships will probably not last and provide a future foundation (Arnett, 2000; Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg & Verma, 2002). The divorce rate of first marriages in the USA has increased to 52% and for second marriages is 10% higher (Goldberg, 2003), making relationship transitions a major social issue.

Despite the various trends towards and away from long term relationships, there is an increasing incidence of transitions, both within relationships and between relationships. Yet there continues to be a lack of research on the process that adults traverse when making transitions between significant relationships, particularly when re-establishing intimate relationships after divorce (Schneller, 2003). Longitudinal research has shown how marriages also change over time (Goldberg, 2003). 'Success' in long term relationships is here defined as one in which a couple is highly satisfied over longitudinal time, (Lerner, 2003). 'Success' in transitions between relationships, is here defined as leading to personal growth (Schneller, 2003). Thus transitions within and between relationships require individuals to become increasingly competent if they are to negotiate these changes successfully.

Romantic relationships have a significant impact on adult development and adaptation; 'developmental trajectories are enmeshed with relationship trajectories' (Laursen, 1997, p. 641). Following Freud (1905/1962, cited in Schneller, 2003), both Erikson (1950, cited in Schneller, 2003) and Sullivan (1953, cited in Schneller, 2003) created elaborate theoretical frameworks where psychological competencies were organised according to social tasks and interpersonal relationships. Erikson's influential theory of life tasks over the life time found the pursuit of intimacy and identity especially important during later adolescence. The task to achieve intimacy is particularly important to young women yet the task to achieve identity goals such as tertiary qualifications and career, can present a conflict. Facing a new life task involves making a transition into a new life period and anxiety and conflict is associated with this (Cantor, Acker, & Cook-Flannagan, 1992). Hence relationship transitions have a significant impact on individuals.

Theoretical Frameworks

Recent literature has begun to discuss the complex transition through divorce and the establishment of

post-divorce relationships. Much of the research on adjustment to divorce operationalises a stress and coping framework and focuses on the distressing aspects, such as loss of social and financial structures, which applies mostly to initial stages of divorce. Recent findings show that individuals eventually adjust better to divorce depending on their personal perceptions and formation of new relationships (Ross, 1995; Wang & Amato, 2000). Yet research still neglects to explore the process by which individuals move from martial breakdown to new relationships (Schneller, 2003). Schneller (2003) conceptualised divorce as an emotional and cognitive process that can potentially promote individual development and renewal. Research that does extend analysis beyond the initial stages of stress focuses on the structures of new marriages and families. Notable exceptions include Furstenberg & Spanier (1987) who found that divorced individuals perceived relationships less romantically and more practically than those in their first marriages. Attachment theorists have found tentative evidence for some changes in attachment representations (Schneller, 2003). Divorced people have been found to make diverse choices that may reflect a newfound sense of freedom, such as dating, cohabitation as well as commitment (Weiss, 1975). Yet there has remained a lack of theoretical framework to explain the transitional process and why some people reinvest in close relationships and others do not (Schneller, 2003).

Scheneller (2003) has drawn together four theoretical frameworks to explain findings. Firstly, social constructionism provides an explanation for how the reaction to divorce may be impacted by language, as seen by the 'explanations an individual makes, by social interchange with others, and by the cultural meanings of marriage and divorce that have influenced a person's thoughts and perceptions'. Social constructionism emphasises how people create knowledge and meaning through 'languaged interaction' (Schneller, 2003, p.6). This is highly relevant to research on relationship transitions and possible changes in regard for and meaning found in intimate relationships. Social constructionism helps us to understand how reaction to a divorce can be influenced by explanations given, communication with others and cultural influences in the meanings of marriage and divorce.

Secondly, attribution theory may explain why individuals make different choices about post-divorce intimacy. Attribution theory contributes a systematic approach to understanding how people explain the causes of life events (Bensen, Arditti, Reguero de Atiles, & Smith, 1992, cited in Schneller, 2003). Individuals may construe their divorce in ways that are positive or negative: either damaging trust, promoting a sense of mastery and optimism regarding future relationships, or encouraging personal change. The

attributions that individuals develop about the breakdown of relationships have been found to influence their cognitions, affect and behaviour about future relationships (Grych & Fincham, 1992, cited in Scnheller, 2003). Research has found that individuals who make interactive attributions such as a lack of communication, lifestyle differences or values were associated with better post-divorce adaptation than those who blamed themselves or their ex-partners (Newman & Langer, 1981, cited in Schneller, 2003; Ty & Frazier, 2003). These individual attribution patterns are about the cause of marital failure and are related to decisions about whether to engage in new intimate relationships. Thus, attribution theory shows how an optimistic or pessimistic attitude to new relationships is linked to attributions, conceptions and relationship transitions.

Thirdly, attachment theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding interactions between security and change in relationship transitions. Attachment theory emphasises that our earliest experiences with caretakers teaches us what to expect in intimate relationships, from which we form mental representations or working models of relationships (Van IJzendoorn, 1995, cited in Schneller, 2003). While these mental representations are consistent and stable components for daily functioning, they are also flexible structures open to change. Relationship break-ups are among the experiences frequently cited as being able to cause fundamental changes in attachment styles (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Feenney, 1999, cited in Schneller, 2003). One four-year study found that break-ups consistently predicted change from secure to insecure attachment (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). However researchers have not examined how these changes to attachment styles occur or the change to individuals' feelings, opinions and desires for future intimate relationships.

Finally, loss and renewal theories offer a conceptual basis for understanding how our experiences of loss evolve and transfer to post-divorce relationships. Theorists have focused on the processes of recovering from the loss of a primary relationship, applying Bowlby's (1961, cited in Schneller, 2003) theory of mourning. Three phases of mourning must be negotiated: (1) the urge to recover the lost object, (2) disorganisation, and (3) reorganisation (Gray & Shields, 1992 cited in Schneller, 2003). This shows how cognitions and feelings change over the mourning period, or the transitions that an individual makes. Recent findings extend this stage theory to a more interpretive process of how the individual finds meaning from loss (Riessman, 1990, cited in Schneller, 2003), and possibly growth and renewal as well, as divorce is an opportunity to change negative patterns. Traditional mourning theories implied a necessity of

relinquishing the lost loved one in order to begin a new relationship. However, individuals are now thought to experience a continuity of relationship with the lost one as an integrated internal phenomenon (Baker, 2001, cited in Schneller, 2003). The lost relationship may continue to be re-interpreted and inform new experiences as part of positive adjustment (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999, cited in Schneller, 2003). Thus, it is the interpretation of relationships rather than the loss itself that is critical to transitions (Schneller, 2003).

Scheneller's studies contribute to understandings about the connection between divorce experiences and post-divorce intimacy. Scheneller (2003) draws three conclusions from her study. First, divorce serves consistently as a catalyst for self-analysis, or 'interpretation and personal growth' (Schneller, 2003, p.iii), and many authors are now focusing on how people can reconstruct a higher quality of life following break-ups (Robbins, Caspi & Moffitt, 2002; Schneller, 2003; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). These sources have helped people to understand divorce responses and differences such as gender and age. The social context within which divorce occurs is an important influence on the interpretative process, and the stigma that divorce still carries in our society makes this process more of a challenge. Second, the interpretive process shapes 'adult's post-divorce perceptions and experiences in intimate relationships' in positive ways (Schneller, 2003, p,iii). Deliberate changes are made in communication patterns, interactions, attitudes and expectations in relationships. Third, fundamental changes in mental representations occur. These changes are linked to gender: women come to view themselves as more assertive and men as more egalitarian and responsible for relationship maintenance (Schneller, 2003).

Predictors of transitions

Transitions within and between relationships have been considered in terms of changes in levels of intimacy. Changes in intimacy have effects on passion such that increases in intimacy produces stronger passion, whereas stable intimacy (high or low) produces low passion (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). Romantic beliefs have been found not to be linked to longevity of relationships, yet scores on the romanticism scale tend to decrease over time. Couples who break up have been found to experience a substantial decrease in their romantic beliefs from before to after the break-up (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Some researchers argue that degree of dependence within the relationship is the primary issue in understanding break-up decisions. Dependency is found to increase 'when important outcomes in the current relationship are not available

elsewhere', and to predict those who stay in relationships, no matter how dissatisfying the relationship might be (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992, p.1).

Pre-marital relationship break-ups have been attributed to sources within the individual, the relationship and the social network environment (Felmlee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990). Significant predictors included the level of comparison for alternatives, the amount of time spent together, racial differences, support from partner's social network, and duration of the relationship(Felmlee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990). Social exchange, similarity and social network theories all contribute towards an explanation of pre-marital break-ups (Felmlee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990). Other factors include self-control, partner's control, control external to the relationship, partner's lack of caring, instability and lack of ability to commit (Hortacsu & Karanci, 1987), unequal involvement in the relationship and discrepant age, educational aspirations, intelligence and physical attractiveness. The desire to break-up was seldom mutual. Women are more likely to find problems in these relationships and are somewhat more likely to end them (Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976).

People who break-up because of affairs have reported higher dissatisfaction, attribute their own and their partners' extradyadic relationships more to motives of aggression and deprivation, and cite a higher level of conflict generated by these relationships. These people tend to overlook their own extradyadic involvements as contributing significantly to the break-ups. Men, much more often than women, tend to blame their break-ups on their partners' extradyadic relationships. Some evidence has been found that partners' extradyadic involvement had a stronger influence on the decision to break-up (Buunk, 1987).

Findings show that the very 'qualities that are disliked in a partner, and that are implicated in a break-up are often very similar to those that were found to be initially attractive' (Felmlee, 1998). This phenomenon has been termed 'fatal attraction', where the relationships are doomed from the beginning. These 'disenchanting attractions' occur because of contradictory dilemmas faced by those in intimate relationships, for instance, a desire for intimacy combined with a need for independence (Felmlee, 1998). Brickman (1987) suggested that the integration of negativity is the greatest challenge of intimacy (cited in Thompson, 1995). Ambivalence is the presence of at least moderate amounts of positive and negative attitudes regarding partner attributes and has been found to be a predictor of break-ups, over and above feelings of love for a partner, or the incidence of conflict in the relationship. Its effect has been found to be moderated by individuals' commitment to their relationships. Ambivalence acts as a catalyst either facilitating or

impeding the growth of intimacy (Thompson, 1995). Other theorists concur on the need for couples to learn to live with negativity and ambivalence, and even to see virtue in faults (Harvey & Weber, 2001).

Predictors of success

Little research has been conducted on factors that determine the development and maintenance of long-term relationships. For instance, there has been relatively little research into commitment compared to other relationship constructs such as love and attachment, trust and satisfaction. Research into the predictors of sustained intimacy in marriage shows that the partners must each have attained an adequate degree of individuality and can also allow them selves to become physically and emotionally close. Changes by one must be accommodated by the other. Hence changes should be of a complimentary nature for which both partners are carefully prepared (Birtchnell, 1986).

Findings have shown that positive couple agreement in marriages significantly decreases over time in five aspects: personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, leisure activities and sexual expectations. However, agreement increases significantly in financial management, marriage expectations, children and parenting, and spiritual beliefs. Projections of satisfaction levels are linked with degree of functionality of the relationship (Goldberg, 2003). While marital satisfaction tends to lessen over time, skills and insights can be gained to prevent the erosion of satisfaction (Clements, Cordova, Markman & Laurenceau, 1997; Dunn, 2002). Thus the need for ongoing skilling of couples is critical.

Communication training is perhaps the one skill found universally in marital therapies. Components that couples endorse in their communication include: identifying factors that improve communication over the course of the marriage; recognising that the timing of communication is important; a cooling off separation period before resolving arguments when they escalate. Difficulties that have been identified include lack of understanding of what is being communicated, lack of time together and time spent on improving communication. (Lerner, 2003). Conflict is often avoided in relationships, yet conflict resolution is associated with romantic satisfaction (Cantor, Acker & Cook-Flannagan, 1992). Some theorists base their assessments of marriages on the style of conflict employed (Gottman, 1998). Thus, ongoing research is required to identify the factors that couples find improves their communication.

Individual differences have been linked to relationship outcomes. These are factors such as personality differences: some people tend to be happy across relationships while others are not (Robins, Caspi & Moffitt, 2002); and birth-order, with first-borns showing the most irrational beliefs about relationships and last-borns the least (Sullivan & Schwebel, 1996). Social influences include network approval (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Helpful attitudes include seeing relationships as a process (Weigel & Murray, 2000), and viewing individual performance differences from a 'team' point of view (Beach, Whitaker, Jones & Tesser, 2001). Resilience appears in recent literature as determining relationship happiness and longevity. Skills can be learnt to develop and maintain resilience (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

Empathy has been found to be critical to the harmony in relationships, promoting positive social interactions and inhibiting antisocial behaviour (Sezov, 2002). Many marital intervention programs have been based on building empathy-based skills (Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence & Bradbury, 2002). Increased empathy has been positively related to relationship satisfaction (Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto & Kalso, 1999). Existential dilemmas must importantly be faced and addressed in couple transformation (Dunn, 2002). Mortality salience, or death reminders, of one's partner has been found to lead to more willingness to work on the relationship (Miller, 2003; Taubman, Findler & Mikulincer, 2002).

Therapeutic implications and future research

The implications of these findings for therapeutic interventions are significant. The experience of marital dissolution is a common reason for individuals to seek therapy. Marital life is more complex today and represents a significant challenge for couples and therapists. Couples need ongoing education and therapists must provide this dual role (Goldberg, 1985). The findings discussed here show how important it is that individuals interpret their divorce in terms of themselves as well as post-divorce relationships, where the promotion of a more objective assessment of the relationship rather than blaming individuals can promote optimism about future relationships. Many divorced individuals have difficulties in redefining themselves and their close relationships after divorce. Therapists can formulate better intervention processes the more they understand the complexities of the process that divorced people undergo in making the transition from marital dissolution to other relationships. Educational systems can also be informed by these findings, and in particular, Schneller's (2003) constructive approach to post-divorce experiences as developmental processes. In this way, eventually the increase in major transitions might attract less stigmatism.

Further research is needed to support the usefulness of the theoretical frameworks posed here and to more fully examine the interpretive processes that individuals undergo as part of transitions between significant relationships. Future research would be well directed as to the more flexible and inventive approaches people take to relationships after divorce (Weiss, 1975) and to the pros and cons of this trend for the breakdown of traditional family units, and the psychological and social effects on individuals, couples and children. Finally, ongoing research is required to develop the understanding of how to help adults traverse relationships and to develop better social resources and competencies for adult relationships.

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