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Disengagement Resistance Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigated communication strategies used by divorced individuals who did not wish their marriages to end (non-initiators). Participants were 270 divorced persons drawn from divorce recovery and support groups and network sampling. An adaptation of Buss's (1988) taxonomy of partner retention tactics served to capture communication strategies of non-initiators during marital dissolution. A factor analysis revealed that four disengagement resistance strategies, in descending order of reported use—Commitment, Alignment, Negativity, and Harm—are used by non-initiators during the process of marital dissolution.

Although resistance to relational break-ups is enacted by many on the receiving end of termination maneuvers (Baxter, 1985), empirical research has yet to sketch a discernable profile of how marital partners implement disengagement resistance strategies as they attempt to keep their unions intact. Communication models of relationship formation and dissolution tend to represent the perspective of the person who desires termination. Moreover, studies of relationship dissolution do not always reflect the perspectives and practices of people in established marriages. Consequently, the precise nature of how resistance to marital relationship disengagement is practiced has eluded description. The study of disengagement is significant because over half of all first marriages terminate with divorce and 60% of second marriages disunite (Gottman, 1994). The present study is an attempt to shed more light on strategies used to resist marital relationship disengagement.

Review of Related Research

While much of the relationship dissolution literature focuses on strategies used by initiators to accomplish termination of the relationship, comparably less research addresses strategies directed toward the avoidance of such termination. Disengagement from a relationship and resistance of such disengagement require strategic communicative behaviors, as both reflect attempts to achieve relational goals. However, the nonmutuality factor gives the initiator an advantage in most relationship dissolution processes (Baxter, 1985). As Wilmot (1995) observed, “*It requires two persons to build a relationship but only one to destroy it*” (p. 120, italics original). Moreover, the partner who initiates disengagement usually “calls the shots.” Expanding upon Waller and Hill’s (1951) notion of the “principle of least interest,” Attridge, Berscheid, and Simpson (1995) asserted that the partner least committed to the relationship—the “weak link”—determines the conditions for its continuance. Therefore, the “strong link” partner (i.e., the non-initiator) may utilize

disengagement resistance strategies to attempt to maintain the relationship. Unfortunately, little research has explored how non-initiators resist disengagement of their marital unions, even when their efforts may be futile due to their power-down position. This leaves us wondering how those who are “left” respond to the “leaver.” In other words, what strategies do non-initiators employ in response to initiators’ attempts to disengage?

Buss and Shackelford’s (1997) work is of interest to this question. Guided by evolutionary theory, which suggests that human behavior has evolved to ensure survival of self and offspring, Buss and Shackelford investigated mate retention tactics. They found that partners use specific strategies to keep a partner from straying. Husbands reported using resource display, submission and debasement, and intrasexual threats to retain their partners, whereas wives reported using appearance enhancement and verbal signals of possession. However, husbands who believed that their partners might be unfaithful engaged in greater concealment of partner, punishment of partners’ infidelity threat, and derogation of competitors. Wives’ perceptions of the probability of partner defection were not significantly correlated with the use of retention tactics.

Participants in the Buss and Shackelford (1997) study were married one year or less and were not disengaging from their marriages. Compared to married couples who have more established relationships, newlyweds have limited marital histories. Moreover, compared to couples in a lengthy marriage, newlyweds are more likely to hold strong romantic beliefs (Sprecher & Metts, 1999) and idealize their partner (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Buss and Schackelford’s (1997) newlywed participants surely reported different partner retention strategies than do individuals who are currently engaged in the process of, or actually have gone through disengagement from their marriages. After all, the bonds of marriage render marital relationship disengagement much more complex than dating relationship disengagement (Cupach & Metts, 1986). As a result, strategies

which are prevalent in dating relationships, such as the indirect disengagement strategy (Baxter, 1987), do not generalize to most marital relationships (Metts, 1992).

The present study expands upon investigations in partner retention and provides a fresh perspective using divorced participants who did not initiate termination of their marriage.

Participants had a vested interest in an established marital relationship, as opposed to newlywed, dating, friend, or acquaintance relationships. The goal of the present study is to explore associations among Buss and Shackelford's (1997) 19 partner retention tactics to determine the dimensions of non-initiators' marital disengagement resistance strategies.

Method

Participants

Of the 270 participants, 157 were obtained by purposive sampling of four divorce support or divorce recovery groups. The remaining participants ($n = 113$) were acquired by network sampling. Sixty-two participants were divorced individuals (not members of the divorce groups) who were friends or acquaintances of divorce group members. The other 51 participants were recruited by undergraduate communication students at a small Southwestern university. All participants met three criteria for inclusion; they were at least 18 years old, divorced, and self-identified as the partner least desirous of the marital termination.

In reporting the number of times they have been married, 44.8% of participants reported one marriage, 46.7% reported two marriages, 7.8% reported three marriages, and 0.7% reported four marriages. The majority of participants (60.7%) reported their current marital status as divorced, although 28.9% were remarried and 10.4% were separated. Length of the previous marriage ranged from six months to 37.25 years, with a mean of 7.7 years and a median of 5.0 years. Participants' age at the time of participation ranged from 18 to 65, with an average age of 36.0. Participants' age when

they married ranged from 15 to 47, with an average age of 23.8, and their age at the time of divorce ranged from 18 to 60, with an average age of 31.5. Spouses' age when married ranged from 17 to 47, with an average age of 24.7, and their age when divorced ranged from 18 to 61, with an average age of 32.4. The majority of participants reported that their most recent former marriage produced children (58.5%) and was dual-career (78.1%).

Procedure

Buss and Shackelford's (1997) list of partner retention tactics was adapted to measure to what extent marital disengagement strategies were used (see Table 1 for operationalizations of each tactic). Non-initiators responded as to how often they used each of 19 tactics using a 7-point Likert scale (7 = Always to 1 = Never). The instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

Results

In order to investigate dimensions of marital disengagement resistance strategies, a principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. The goal of this procedure was to assess the dimensionality of an adaptation of Buss' (1988) partner retention taxonomy by summarizing the 19 tactics into a smaller number of higher order strategies. A scree plot was used to select a parsimonious number of factors. Four factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for a total of 66.5% of the variance. Factor loadings are reported in Table 2. Items that correlated higher than .60 with a factor, and not more than .40 with any other factor, were considered to be associated with that factor. Of the 19 tactics, 14 met this criterion and were retained in the final rotated factor solution. Four factors were found: Negativity, Alignment, Commitment, and Harm. All factors were internally consistent and well defined by the variables.

The first factor accounted for 20.8% of the variance and included five tactics: partner derogation, vigilance, jealousy induction, monopolization of time, and emotional manipulation

(composite $M = 15.83$, $SD = 7.4$, $\alpha = .85$). These five items were interpreted to represent *Negativity* as a higher order strategy in the partner retention taxonomy. The second factor, which accounted for 15.9% of the variance, was comprised of four items: verbal possession signals, physical possession signals, punish partner's infidelity threat, and sexual inducement (composite $M = 16.5$, $SD = 5.9$, $\alpha = .78$). This factor was labeled *Alignment* to represent attempts by the non-initiator to be perceived as a bonded couple—not only by the initiator, but by others as well. The third factor, accounting for 13.3% of the variance, was defined by three items: commitment manipulation, submission and debasement, and love and care (composite $M = 14.2$, $SD = 3.9$, $\alpha = .73$). This factor represented *Commitment* as a higher order disengagement resistance strategy. The fourth factor, which included the two items of violence against rivals and intrasexual threats, accounted for 10.0% of the variance (composite $M = 3.4$, $SD = 2.1$, $\alpha = .62$). This final factor was interpreted to represent *Harm* as a disengagement resistance strategy. The five tactics that did not load on a factor were: appearance enhancement, partner concealment, derogation of competitors, possessive ornamentation, and resource display.

The LIMSTAT program was used to subject all four factor indices to confirmatory factor analysis to ensure internal consistency and parallelism. There were no significant differences within the scales. All items were retained due to the flatness of the matrices and insubstantial errors.

Participants reported using these four marital disengagement resistance strategies at varied levels (see Table 3). The most commonly employed overall strategy was Commitment. The Commitment subscale mean was 4.73, indicating that on average, participants used this strategy “often” to “sometimes.” The least commonly employed overall strategy was Harm. The Harm subscale mean was 1.70, indicating that on average, participants used this strategy from “very seldom” to “never.” The Alignment and Negativity subscale means were 4.13 and 3.17 respectively.

On average, participants used the Alignment strategy “sometimes” to “often” and the Negativity strategy “seldom” to “sometimes.”

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine partner retention tactics as indications of overall marital disengagement strategies non-initiators use to attempt to retain their spouse. Results revealed that Buss’s adapted taxonomy is not a unidimensional menu of tactics used by non-initiators. Four overall strategies emerged as salient communication approaches to resist the marital breakup: *Negativity, Alignment, Commitment, and Harm.*

Participants reported using these four marital disengagement resistance strategies with some frequency (see Table 3). The most commonly employed overall strategy, Commitment, was used “often” to “sometimes.” The strategy of Alignment was used “sometimes” to “often,” while the strategy of Negativity was used “seldom” to “sometimes.” The Harm strategy was used “very seldom” to “never.” These results illustrate that non-initiators occasionally employ marital disengagement resistance strategies—particularly the Commitment, Alignment, and Negativity strategies. Because non-initiators use marital disengagement resistance strategies, it is worthwhile to distinguish the dimensions of these strategies.

Negativity

The first strategy, *Negativity*, is made up of five tactics including: emotional manipulation, derogation of partner, jealousy inducement, vigilance, and concealment of partner. Non-initiators who use this strategy attempt to create dissonance about the impending breakup in the mind of their partner. The Negativity strategy includes tactics that are a result of relational inequity. That is, when one partner perceives himself or herself to be the under-benefited partner, the result is an attempt to level the playing field by heightening positive attributes of the non-initiator or accentuating negative

characteristics of the partner.

Negative affect exists in all intimate relationships. The management of negative affect has important implications for the trajectory of a relationship. Gottman's (1994) research on marital relationship patterns is grounded in the belief that couples' management of negative affect ultimately determines the destination of their marriage, with overriding negativity indicative of a divorce outcome. Consequently, marital partners' use of disengagement resistance strategies is critical when considering relational outcomes.

Alignment

The second strategy, *Alignment*, is comprised of four communicative responses: verbal possession signals, physical possession signals, punishment of a partner's infidelity threat, and sexual inducement. Alignment is an attempt by the non-initiator to be perceived as a bonded couple—not only by the initiator, but also by others. Together, the four communicative responses that structure Alignment form a strategy because they signal unity and cohesion between the couple.

Commitment

The third strategy, *Commitment*, is defined by three tactics: submission and debasement, love and care, and commitment manipulation. Future researchers should add additional items to the Commitment subscale, and possibly explore additional facets of commitment as a means for resisting marital disengagement. Tactics encompassed in the Commitment strategy are affective-based forms of communication. Whereas two of the tactics, giving love and care and commitment manipulation, are displayed in a positive manner, submission and debasement is an unhealthy response. As a disconfirming message, submission and debasement conveys a negative evaluation of the partner and the marital relationship.

Harm

Harm is comprised of violence against rivals and intrasexual threats. As with the Commitment subscale, future researchers should add additional items to the Harm subscale, and possibly explore additional facets of harm as a means for resisting marital disengagement. The addition of items may yield a higher reliability coefficient than what was found in the present study.

Non-initiators using the Harm strategy construct antisocial messages designed to punish the initiator of the disengagement process. These messages are often socially unacceptable and serve no constructive purpose for relationship enhancement. The Harm strategy is an extreme retaliation technique, and as such, it is not a strategy that participants often admitted to using.

Implications

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. This is the first communication study to focus solely on the standpoint of the partner who did not want the marriage to end and identify strategies used to attempt to resist marital demise. As such, this study provides a springboard for future research. Forthcoming theoretical work on relationship dissolution is needed to account for non-initiators' perspectives and strategies to resist marital disengagement. Moreover, research should examine the conditions under which the use of marital disengagement resistance strategies is successful in avoiding divorce. Because the nonmutuality factor renders many non-initiators less powerful than their spouses, such research could illuminate the efficacy of strategies in relation to factors beyond the control of the non-initiator.

The current findings have practical value for both premarital and divorce counseling. Because divorce causes a wide variety of problems that affect the couple as well as the extended family, a growing number of marriage counselors and other professionals are helping people deal with the aftermath of divorce (Schwartz & Scott, 2000). Individuals and couples can learn negotiating skills that help them deal with an impending or current divorce situation.

Limitations

This study reflects initial work in an understudied area of relational communication research. As such, findings are descriptive, as opposed to explanatory, in nature. Future research is needed to examine the relationships between disengagement resistance strategy use and variables such as relational transgressions that precipitated divorce and the quality of the post-divorce relationship.

Retrospective data such as self-report questionnaires are appropriate for research questions involving how and why partners enact and accomplish breakups (Cupach & Metts, 1986). However, disadvantages may arise from the use of retrospective self-reports. In this study, participants reported about divorces that had taken place an average of less than 5 years prior to participation. In addition to such memory obscurities, the problem of social desirability may have influenced participants' responses in the current study. One obvious example stems from reported use of the Harm strategy. Because tactics within the Harm strategy are not only destructive, but potentially deplorable, participants were not inclined to readily identify themselves as using this antisocial strategy.

Concluding Remarks

This study makes a meaningful contribution to the bodies of literature on relationship disengagement and partner retention. Using a non-student sample of individuals who were non-initiators of their divorce, this study revealed four strategies for resisting disengagement of a marital relationship. In descending order of reported use, the Commitment, Alignment, Negativity, and Harm strategies were used by individuals in attempts to avert the demise of their marriages. Although there may be "50 ways to leave your lover," there seem to be four primary ways to communicate a desire for a would-be "leaver" to remain committed to a marriage.

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Table 1

Partner Retention Tactics and Operationalizations

1	Appearance Enhancement	I tried to make myself more attractive to my spouse.
2	Commitment Manipulation	I asked my spouse to commit more fully to our relationship.
3	Concealment of Partner	I tried to limit my spouse's contact with other people.
4	Derogation of Competitors	I communicated bad things about someone I thought was competing for my spouse's attention.
5	Derogation of Partner	I called my spouse names and put him/her down.
6	Emotional Manipulation	I tried to make my partner feel guilty.
7	Intrasexual Threats	I threatened to harm others who might come between me and my spouse.
8	Jealousy Induction	I threatened to be unfaithful to my spouse.
9	Love and Care	I tried to be more helpful to my spouse to show that I cared.
10	Monopolization of Time	I insisted that my spouse spend his/her free time with me.
11	Physical Possession Signals	I tried to show others that my partner was taken by holding hands, putting my arm around my spouse.
12	Possessive Ornamentation	I wore clothes or accessories that belonged to my spouse.
13	Punish Partner's Infidelity Threat	I threatened to break up with my spouse if he/she ever cheated on me.
14	Resource Display	I gave gifts to my spouse.

Table 1 (continued)

Partner Retention Tactics and Operationalizations

15	Sexual Inducement	I tried to make my spouse want me sexually.
16	Submission and Debasement	I told my spouse that I would do anything to save our relationship.
17	Verbal Possession Signals	In public, I talked to my spouse so that others would know that he/she belonged to me.
18	Vigilance	I checked on my spouse to find out where he/she was or whom he/she was with.
19	Violence Against Rivals	I physically fought with or vandalized property of someone I thought was interested in my spouse.

Table 2

Rotated Factor Loadings of Marital Disengagement Resistance Strategies

	I	II	III	IV
	Negativity	Alignment	Commitment	Harm
Emotional Manipulation	.82	.01	.28	.01
Derogation of Partner	.81	.11	.01	.16
Jealousy Induction	.73	.35	-.01	.01
Concealment of Partner	.66	.36	.18	.18
Spousal Vigilance	.60	.36	.21	.24
Verbal Possession	.30	.73	.20	.01
Physical Possession	.20	.70	.22	.24
Sexual Inducement	.25	.69	.33	-.13
Infidelity Threat	.12	.66	-.01	.30
Commitment Manipulation	.19	.01	.83	.11
Submission/Debasement	.01	.15	.77	.14
Love and Care	.01	.31	.73	-.14
Rival Violence	.01	.23	-.01	.81
Intraseual Threats	.26	.01	.14	.79

Table 3

Marital Disengagement Resistance Strategy Subscale Means and Scale Equivalencies

Overall Strategy	Mean	Scale Equivalent (7 = Always to 1 = Never)
Negativity	3.17	Seldom → Sometimes
Alignment	4.13	Sometimes → Often
Commitment	4.73	Often → Sometimes
Harm	1.70	Very Seldom → Never