Dissolution of Relationships, Breakup Strategies

The dissolution of a relationship can be considered one of the most painful and stressful events in the life of an individual, with psychological and emotional effects that may extend to the family and social network. With current divorce rates at approximately 50 percent, there is a clear need to learn more about both marital and premarital relationship breakdowns. This entry describes one specific part of the dissolution process—the strategies that are used to disengage from intimate relationships.

Relationship researchers do not characterize the breakup as a single event but rather as a process that may lead to a change in or the eventual termination of a relationship. Behavioral or communication strategies are considered in most stage models of relationship dissolution. There are several stage models of the process that have been proposed that include the common patterns that a couple may go through. The process typically begins with the realization that one or both partners are dissatisfied with the relationship. Once the decision has been made to act on or to discuss this dissatisfaction, a number of breakup strategies may be used.

Breakup strategies include both verbal and nonverbal methods to disengage from or terminate a relationship. These strategies are considered goal-directed and proactive and are typically examined from the perspective of the initiator. Most breakups are not mutual—in most cases, one partner unilaterally wants to end the relationship more than the other. It is the initiator who engages in the behavioral and communication strategies that are instrumental in changing or ending the relationship. There are, however, some strategies that have been identified that partners may use when the decision is mutual.

Research focused on understanding more about these strategies and their role in the breakup process has had two primary goals. The first goal has been to identify and classify the particular strategies that individuals use during the dissolution of relationships. A second goal has been to investigate whether the selection of breakup strategies depends on particular factors, including individual attributes (e.g., age, gender), relationship attributes (e.g., the level of intimacy), or situational factors (e.g., marital vs. premarital, amount of overlap in shared social networks).

Classification of Strategies

Researchers have identified numerous breakup strategies by asking individuals to generate or recall methods that they have used to end relationships. Example strategies that have been identified include “openly express the desire to end the relationship”; “avoid contact with my partner”; “reduce displays of affection”; “ask someone else to break the news” and “act unpleasant so that my partner initiates a breakup.” Statistical techniques (e.g., factor analysis, cluster analysis) have been used to determine the commonalities among the various strategies. Research by Michael Cody and colleagues supports the classification of strategies into five general categories: (1) behavioral de-escalation, (2) de-escalation, (3) justification, (4) positive tone, and (5) negative identity management. Research by Leslie Baxter has identified four categories: (1) avoidance/withdrawal, (2) manipulatory, (3) positive tone, and (4) open confrontation.

Baxter suggested that both unilateral (i.e., nonmutual) and bilateral (i.e., mutual) breakup strategies can be described by two underlying dimensions. The first is the directness (or indirectness) of the strategy. This dimension describes whether or not the initiator is explicit or unambiguous in stating that the goal is to terminate the relationship. Less direct strategies may not require
such an explicit statement. The second dimension is the degree of other-orientation. Other-oriented strategies show concern and attempt to reduce hurting one’s partner. In contrast, self-orientation strategies are done with less consideration for protecting the feelings of one’s partner. Examples of strategies will be illustrated with respect to these two dimensions.

Direct strategies include fait accompli in which there is a direct, unilateral ending of the relationship by the initiator. Such a strategy can also clearly be classified as more self-than other-oriented because the initiator pronounces the relationship ended with no opportunity for the partner to engage in discussion or negotiation. Another direct strategy has been called the state-of-the-relationship talk. The initiator clearly is concerned about his or her partner, and this strategy has the appearance of being more mutual than it is, allowing the partner to save face.

There are two main strategies that are used when both partners desire a breakup. Attributional conflict, as the name implies, involves each partner blaming the other for causing the end of the relationship. In contrast, a negotiated farewell is direct but far more other-oriented. The discussion may focus on shared blame or external causes and may occur in the context of desired or anticipated future contact (e.g., because of a shared social networks or children).

Less direct strategies include those described as withdrawal-avoidance (e.g., reducing contact, disclosure, or intimacy). Such actions are considered both self-oriented and unilateral, as they may leave the partner feeling confused and hurt. Given the proliferation of new communication technologies, a subcategory of avoidant strategies has emerged that involves avoidance via distant communication (e.g., e-mail, text messaging). Pseudo-de-escalation (i.e., “let’s just be friends”) is a unilateral decision that hides the intention of exiting the relationship through the desire to redefine it or to reduce the level of intimacy. Because the true intention is not made known, this is a relatively indirect strategy. A manipulatory strategy such as cost-escalation (i.e., acting inconsiderate or unpleasant in the hopes that the partner will initiate the breakup) is also considered an indirect and self-oriented strategy.

Factors Influencing the Choice of Breakup Strategy

A number of studies have identified some of the factors that may influence the choice of particular strategies. Direct strategies are more likely to be selected when a high level of closeness or intimacy existed in the relationship. Moreover, direct strategies are likely to be used if the cause of the dissatisfaction can be characterized as external or if there is the desire to maintain contact. Recent research has shown that different strategies vary in how compassionate they are to the partner being left with certain types of direct, other-oriented strategies that are rated as very compassionate, even though the intent is to end a relationship. External factors (e.g., the need to relocate for school or employment) are associated with the selection of very compassionate strategies, whereas the special case of partner betrayal or infidelity is associated with the least compassionate or other-oriented breakup strategies.

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See also Compassionate Love; Dissolution of Relationships, Processes; Extradyadic Sex; Facework

Further Readings


