

MAIN APPROACHES TO MARITAL DISSOLUTION

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1. Introduction

Marriage itself and its dissolution is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a multitude of variables. In order to be able to comprehend this complex phenomenon, a number of theories have been developed (see, for example, **Gottman, 1994; Rusbult 1980; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959**). Regarding this, the main classification can be made according to the embracement of intrapersonality, or of interpersonality variables in the theoretical orientation. Studies that focused on interactional processes are viewed in the interpersonality tradition (social exchange-behavioural based) (see, for example, **Gottman, 1994 and Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003**). On the other hand, studies that focused on marital success and personality characteristic e.g., neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, are considered in the intrapersonality tradition (personality based) (see, for instance, **Kelly and Conley, 1987, and Nemecek & Olson, 1999**). Within all traditions, the main issue is what differentiates the successful marriages from the failures as far as the theories related to marital relationships are concerned.

This study aims at presenting a summary of fundamental approaches to marital dissolution and a brief survey of literature related to these approaches. As it is beyond the scope of this study to cover all aspects of literature in this area, this review is focused on the two main approaches. In section 2, interpersonality based approach is presented followed by a discussion of the intrapersonality approach in marital stability (section 3). The section 4 is the conclusion of the current study.

2. Interpersonality Approach

Studies regarding marital stability in the area of interpersonality approach are mainly focused on interactional patterns or behavioural exchange between the couples. These patterns could be labelled either dysfunctional or functional. While functional interaction patterns provide rewarding satisfactory outcomes to marriage, dysfunctional interaction patterns bring distress and misery, eventually leading to dissolution of the unity. These studies have taken their roots from mainly two theoretical orientations, social exchange and behavioural orientations¹. In this context, we briefly review social exchange theories, the contextual model of marital interaction, and Gottman's balance model of marriage in this section.

2.1. Social Exchange Theories

The most influential current models of break-ups in close relationships have taken their roots mainly from the social exchange theories (see, for example, **Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003**). These theories were based on the work of Homans, Thibaut and Kelley (see **Raschke, 1987**). According to this approach, basically the balance between costs and rewards keeps relationships intact. The partners continuously evaluate their

¹ See Cırak 2001 for review of these studies in more details.

outcomes from the relationship. Consequently, the relationship has to be mutually rewarding and bring maximum benefits for both sides so that it would be attractive and would stay intact.

One of the most influential social exchange approaches is called the interdependence theory of relationships (**Thibaut & Kelley, 1959**). This theory has had a strong impact on more recent social exchange theories concerning close relationships. Two important concepts have been at the centre of this theoretical approach, namely, outcomes and evaluations of outcomes. According to the interdependence theory, the outcomes of a continuing relationship could be explained in terms of rewards received and costs incurred by the partner. A reward could be anything that is considered as beneficial by an actor, and generally associated with pleasure. A cost could be defined as anything non-beneficial to the interest of actor such as embarrassment, anxiety, or pain (**Klein & White, 1996**). Magnitudes of experienced rewards by an individual in a relationship vary depending on the individual's needs and values, and how well these are in congruence with the partner's performance.

As far as evaluations of outcomes are concerned, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) identified two types of evaluation levels of outcomes, namely, 'the personal comparison level of outcomes' and 'the comparison level for alternatives'. The personal comparison level of outcomes referred to the quality of outcomes that a member of the dyad believes she /he should have had. Depending on either his/her own experiences, or observation of others, a person would develop evaluation criteria for his/her relationship over rewards and costs. If the rewards outweighed the costs according to the standard comparison level, the relationship was considered satisfactory or vice versa.

On the other hand, a comparison level for alternatives was the lowest level of outcomes that one could have a chance to obtain from outside of the relationship. It works in a similar way to that of the comparison level. A person in a relationship would take account of the other positions available to himself/herself outside the relationship. These positions were evaluated in terms of rewards and costs. As long as the balance of outcomes was in favour of the ongoing relationship, alternative opportunities would remain unattractive and the given person would stay in an ongoing relationship. Hence, it could be said that a person would leave or stay in a relationship depending upon the balance of outcomes between ongoing relationships and alternative opportunities as far as the interdependence theory was concerned.

In recent years there have been developments in the area of the interdependence theory (see **Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Van Lange 2003**). Rusbult (1980, 1983) was interested in three aspects of relationships, namely, satisfaction, commitment and break up. She paid particular attention to the differentiation of these concepts. She posed three main questions in relation to these concepts:

- What caused partners in romantic involvement to be satisfied with their relationship?
- What caused individuals to be committed to maintaining their involvement?
- Why did some relationships persist over time whereas others ended?

In order to answer these questions, in both of her studies, Rusbult established a model called the "investment model" which simply extended the concepts used in the exchange theories, in particular the interdependence theory. She distinguished between satisfaction and the maintenance of relationships in the same way as the interdependent theory.

Thus, she formulated satisfaction as:

$satisfaction = (rewards - cost) - comparison\ level,$

While maintenance was defined as being equal to commitment, i.e.,

$commitment = (satisfaction - quality\ of\ alternative) + investment.$

According to this theory, commitment is the very essence of maintenance behaviour and satisfaction was one of the components of commitment. Thus, it could be said that the greater the satisfaction was in the relationship, the more commitment was expected to the relationship. However, for an increased commitment, low quality alternatives were essential. In addition, investment was introduced to the interdependence model as a new concept, to work together with 'quality of alternatives' and 'satisfaction' with regard to stay /leave behaviour. However, from the above summary, it could be construed that, other than the concept 'investment', the other concepts of the model were, in a way, the same as the interdependence model.

Regarding the above summary, Rusbult (1983) divided investment into two general categories, namely, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic investments comprised those that were directly put into the relationship, while extrinsic investments were considered initially extraneous and they became a part of relationships, such as, mutual friends, shared memories or material possessions, activity/persons/objects/events uniquely associated with the relationships (Rusbult, 1983). In order to be able to distinguish between 'rewards and costs' and 'investment', she suggested that while rewards and costs could be separable from the relationship itself without being costly at any time, investments were impossible to separate once invested. With separation, individuals lost whatever they had invested in the relationship, such as time-shared and memorable places visited together.

Rusbult has tested the investment model in her studies both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (see Rusbult, 1980, 1983). An experimental study to test the predictions of the investment model (Rusbult, 1980) was carried out with 82 males and 89 females. Different levels of investment (small, medium, large), costs (low, high) and alternative qualities were manipulated using the role-play method. The main dependent variables, satisfaction and commitment, were measured using questionnaire items. Apart from the cost variable, manipulations of the other two variables (investment and alternative qualities) were significantly effective on commitment measures. Low cost levels led to a high level of satisfaction with the relationships as hypothesised. The results obtained from this study were supportive of the model.

In a 7-month's longitudinal study of romantic relationships of college students, Rusbult (1983) found out that increases in rewards led to increases in relationship satisfaction but changes in costs did not create significant changes in satisfaction. Likewise, increases in rewards caused greater degrees of commitment, whereas increases or decreases in costs did not affect commitment. Commitment increased along with increases in satisfaction and investment size, and decreased in alternative values.

2.2. The Contextual Model of Marital Interaction

The contextual model has been introduced by Bradbury and Fincham (1987, 1988, 1991) in order to expand the behavioural model and to embrace the affective and cognitive processes that accompany observable behaviour. The model accepted that marriage was enormously complex and requires many interrelated phenomena to be taken into account (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991). Therefore, it could not be understood by simply relying on the identification of a single class of related variables

and the determination of their relations with marital quality. The model itself identified a small set of components that represents a multitude of variables and processes. All sets of components all together form a comprehensive understanding of how marriages worked or how marriages changed for better or worse.

According to the model, marital interaction followed a sequential order of actions. An example of these sequential actions is shown below.

Spouse behaviour → partner processing → partner behaviour → spouse processing → spouse behaviour.

According to this model, initially a spouse (hypothetically a wife) would engage in the *processing* of some *stimuli*. A stimulus could be an event in the environment or behaviour enacted by the other spouse in the interaction. The processing stage followed a few steps of actions beginning with perception of an event/behaviour. The perception of the event helped to form a representation of the event, which took place in the three dimensional processes. These three dimensions were:

- negative versus positive
- expected versus unexpected
- personally insignificant versus personally significant.

After the evaluation of the event on the grounds of these three dimensions, the spouse (wife) would act. For example, according to the extent the stimulus was judged as being negative, unexpected, and personally significant, the spouse (wife) could produce an extremely negative emotions. At that point, attributional processes would be at work for the hypothetical spouse (wife) who would search for reasons for the stimulus, and would find and assign responsibility for it. According to the results she reached, she would find a few alternative responses and choose one of them. The chosen response would serve as a stimulus for the other partner (hypothetical husband) and then the other partner would start processing for this stimulus, and in the end would shape a behaviour. The whole process continued in this fashion repeatedly.

In the interaction process depicted above, there were two concepts that influenced the processing of responses to partner behaviour that deserve detailed explanation. These were *proximal context* and *distal context*. Proximal context comprised immediate feelings and thoughts. Immediate feelings and thoughts, prior to process any given behaviour, may affect the features of subsequent behaviour of a spouse. For example, the spouse may have held specific memories of, or explanation for, behaviours enacted by the other spouse. Thus, it could be said that proximal context defined the subjective state of an actor just prior to a given partner's behaviour. On the contrary, distal *context* was related to long-term psychological variables that affected a spouse's processing of behaviour. Beliefs towards marriages (such as how a marriage should be), personality variables, memory, chronic mood states (e.g., depression), and information processing biases (e.g., egocentric bias) constructed a distal context that bore a direct relationship to the functioning of a given marital relationship.

According to the contextual model, proximal and distal variables work together in the interpretation and processing of relationship behaviour. However, distal context represented variables with stable characteristics that operated across the many relationship positions and proximal context delineated specific, rapidly changing thoughts and feelings that created by certain stimuli. The network of behaviour/event (environmental stimulus), behaviour processing, and distal and proximal contexts was all connected to another concept appraisal. Appraisals were made by spouses before and

after their interactions. They were influenced by distal and proximal contexts and thus affected the processing of behaviour via those contexts (distal and proximal). Although the model included a wide range of variables to capture a comprehensive scope of marriage, there seemed to be a biased representation in favour of individual difference variables in empirical attempts made to support the model (e.g., **Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Kurdek, 1993**).

Criticising the previous studies that focused on single constructs or denied interrelations among variables and oversimplified close relationships, Bradbury and Fincham (1988) conducted a study with 78 spouses. Bradbury and Fincham aimed to test the relationship between distal (femininity, relationship beliefs, masculinity) and proximal variables (responsibility and causal attributions), and marital satisfaction. They found that higher levels of femininity were related to higher levels of marital satisfaction; higher levels of dysfunctional beliefs were related to lower levels of marital satisfaction, and less benign causal and responsibility attributions were associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. They concluded that no evidence was obtained to assert that proximal elements mediated between distal elements and marital satisfaction. On the other hand, contextual and distal elements both accounted for marital satisfaction.

2.3. Gottman's Balance Model of Marriage

Gottman (1994) developed a theory that aimed to explain the marital interaction process, and the relationships between marital satisfaction and marital stability. The theory embraced behaviour, cognition, and physiological variables at the same time. He stated that his theory was influenced by the studies of a Swiss theoretical physicist, Roland Fivaz. Fivaz defined a set of variables to describe the behaviour of a wide class of systems. He named the set of variables P and Q variables. In Physics, P variables (flow variables) represented the equivalent of kinetic energy whereas Q variables (order variables) represented equivalent of potential energy. Gottman adapted P and Q variables into the marital interaction process. In this new context, P variables were defined "as the cumulative sum over time of positive minus negative behaviours" (p.333), and they were measured by RCISS (Rapid Couples Interaction Coding System) graphs in Gottman's empirical studies. Negativity was balanced by the received positive behaviours. P variables (cumulative variables) carried a threshold point that influenced the way that perception variables play on the scene. Q variables were the perception variables measured by using rating dials, video-recalling procedures, and techniques such as thought listing. Q variables could represent wellbeing, in which cases $Q = +1$, or distress or non-wellbeing, in which case $Q = -1$. According to Gottman, when Q was a negative value it led to flooding variables, this in turn led to an isolation cascade in the relationship, and gradually to separation.

In this theory, P and Q variables were the foundation of the explanation of a couple's trajectory of marriage. P variables can be translated into a daily rate of negative and positive behaviours and Q variables could be translated into perceptions of the marriage such as wellbeing, non-wellbeing, depending on the balance between negativity and positivity of behaviour in the P- space. Interacting with these two variable sets, there existed flooding and negative attributions of marriage, which were considered more stable and global thought. 'Negative attributions' and 'flooding' could have led to a 'distance and isolation cascade' and 'recasting the entire history of the marriage'. At the end of the process, there would be divorce.

According to Gottman's theory (1994), the balance between positive and negative behaviour could be achieved by three different kinds of couples who were able to stay together in their marriages. Gottman classified these couples as volatiles, conflict avoiders, and validating couples. These three groups were named collectively as regulated couples. On the other hand, he classified another two groups of couples, namely, hostile conflict engagers and hostile detached couples, both of whom were not able to continue in successful marriage. These two groups were named non-regulated couples and they could not achieve the required balance between positive and negative behaviour in their interactions.

Gottman organised his theory by relying on self-report, physiological, and interactional observation data resulting in a theory comprised of cognitive, physiological, and behavioural components. In order to collect observational data, laboratory observation methods were used. The couples discussed their salient problems and daily activities (not involving problems) in the laboratory. As well as the discussions, physiological aspects of behaviour were monitored and recorded using special equipment.

Gottman (1994) attached a great deal of importance to physiological variables in his theory of marital dissolution. He and his colleagues (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Levenson & Gottman, 1988) asserted that physiological variables were correlated with marital satisfaction over a period of time and that they predicted processes related to marital dissolution. The aforementioned physiological variables consisted of cardiac interbeat, activity, skin conductance, pulse transit, and pulse amplitude. In this model, physiological variables were thought to be one of the components of the core triad of balance, which comprised P-Space, Q-Space, and physiological responses. P-space was the positivity component (central idea of behavioural balance) of the triad, Q-Space was the perception of the wellbeing balanced against negative feelings, such as hurt, and physiological responses, which had buffering effects against arousal by soothing mechanisms. To summarise, along with the other two components, physiological variables had the potential for balance and worked with them bi-directionally.

The theory asserted that declining marital satisfaction led to considerations of dissolution, eventually separation and divorce. Gottman's model is also called the cascade model of marital dissolution. It is considered that couples who were divorced were more likely to be separated and to have considered divorce before those who were not divorced. This assertion was supported by the empirical analysis of Gottman's data (1994).

3. Intrapersonality Approach

The relationship between personality and marital success has attracted the interests of marriage scholars since the early studies of marriage (e.g., **Terman, 1938**). One group of researchers have invested their interest in similarities of personalities as far as the research related to personality and marriage is concerned (see, for example, **Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981; Bentler & Newcomb, 1978**). According to this group of researchers, people seem to be attracted to others who had similar characteristics, such as intelligence, attitudes and psychopathology. Furthermore, personality similarities have been seen as indices of relationship compatibility. Also, they stated that unstably married couples are less similar in their personality characteristics than stably married ones. Several researches supporting these ideas will be reviewed in the following.

Eysenck and Wakefield (1981) conducted a cross sectional study to test the role of personality variables in marital satisfaction by using 566 married couples. Although the

dependent variable is marital satisfaction rather than marital stability, it is still relevant for our research review to include their study, since there is a link between marital satisfaction and divorce (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In their study, marital satisfaction was measured by the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test along with additional items prepared by the researcher. Personality variables were assessed by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire which provides scores for personality dimensions; extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and lie scales. Extroversion indicates sociability; neuroticism is related to worries and fear; and psychoticism indicates coldness, hostility and egocentricity (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981). Correlational statistical analysis was carried out to reveal the relationship between wives and husbands' marital satisfaction with a result that was somewhat high giving an r value of 0.73. Effects of personality similarities on marital satisfaction were analysed through regression analysis. The results supported the hypothesis that high similarity is related to high marital satisfaction. For psychoticism, similarity between couples' scores at the lower levels produced higher marital satisfaction levels. For neuroticism, similar results were found; in lower levels of neuroticism, spouses with similar levels of neuroticism scores achieved higher levels of marital satisfaction scores.

Another study, carried out by Bentler and Newcomb (1978) considered similarity in relation to marital compatibility. The study followed 77 newlywed couples over four years. At the end of the research, 24 couples had already been separated. The collected data included self-report measures of personality traits and eight demographic features. According to the results obtained, the married couples were more alike than the divorced couples in terms of age, attractiveness, interests in hobbies, and extroversion. As a conclusion, the findings for similarity variables between couples could help marital adjustment by providing a less conflicting and a more rewarding atmosphere.

Another important focus has been on the pathology of personality and marital success. It has been predicted that people with high levels of neuroticism have a high risk of being unsuccessful in marriage. In an early study, Zaleski and Galkowska (1978) compared thirty happily and thirty unhappily married couples in an attempt to test the hypothesis that emotional instability had deleterious effects on marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was measured using the Galkowska Marriage Success Scale and personality factors were assessed through MMPI. The analysis of the data indicated that there were no differences between happy and unhappy couples with respect to extroversion scores. However, happy and unhappy couples differed regarding neuroticism scores. Unhappy couples clearly had higher neuroticism scores than the happy couples. In addition, happily married females had higher neuroticism level than males, on the other hand, unhappily married females and males did not differ in their neuroticism scores.

Eysenck and Wakefield's study (1981), which is reported above, also tested the relationship between personality traits and marital satisfaction. The study indicated that lower levels of psychoticism were associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. High scores of psychoticism affected both scorer and spouse's marital satisfaction in a negative way. In the same fashion, high neuroticism scores of one partner lowered the level of both spouse's marital satisfaction. In conclusion, according to Eysenck and Wakefield's study, neuroticism and psychoticism are both detrimental to marital satisfaction.

A classic longitudinal study was carried out by Kelly and Conley (1987) investigating the relationship between marital stability (divorce or remaining in marriage) and personality variables. The study followed a panel of 300 couples from

the premarital stage into marriage over a period of 50 years. Out of the 300 couples, 22 separated during their engagement and 50 couples divorced during the course of the study. Engaged couples were recruited voluntarily through newspapers and other advertisements for the study sample. The data were obtained from spouses and their acquaintances in three different times (1935-38; 1954-55; 1980-81). Self-report measures of attitudes and social background were obtained and personality measures were gathered premaritally from acquaintance ratings. Of the two major criterion variables, marital satisfaction had been measured on the annual reports for 1936-41 using a 7 point, single item scale (from extremely happy to unhappy), and in both follow-ups (1954-1955; 1980-1981) using a four item scale. The other criterion variable, marital stability, was gathered about marital status and included couples who remained married throughout the period of the study, and those who divorced. For the analysis of the data, the discriminant function was used. Four groups of subjects, still married, early divorced, late divorced, and partners with deceased spouses, were compared in terms of marital satisfaction and personality trait ratings. The analysis of the data revealed that males who divorced early showed higher levels of neuroticism, lower levels of impulse control and conventionalism in their attitudes, and more sexual experience, compared to the males who remained married. The males who divorced late in life were found to have higher levels of neuroticism, social extroversion, premarital sexual experience, ties to their side of family, and lower levels of agreeableness. Females who divorced early differed from the stably married females, having higher levels of neuroticism; being more tense, less close, and having more unstable families of origin; being less puritanical in their attitudes; and having more premarital sexual experience. On the other hand, females who divorced late in life differed from their stably married, same sex counterparts only in neuroticism (having high levels of neuroticism), sexual attitudes and behaviour (showing high levels of premarital sexual experience, being less puritanical in their attitudes).

Recently, Russell and Wells (1994) have explored the three personality attributes of each partner and the marital quality of each partner using a more complicated statistical analysis in order to establish a causal link between two sets of variables, personality and marital quality. They predicted that personality had an impact on marital quality rather than vice versa. The sample consisted of 94 couples, whom a revised version of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, and a research version of a marriage questionnaire were administered. The data were analysed through LISREL VII and PRELIS. From the analysis of the data, they concluded that there were no sex differences in the findings. The husbands' neuroticism level correlated with their level of marital quality in a negative way, as did wives' neuroticism with their marital quality. However, they maintained that the relationship between marital quality and neuroticism was indirect, reasoning that one spouse's neuroticism correlated with their partner's and that a neurotic person affected their partners' marital quality and hence their own marital quality. To explain further, one spouse's neuroticism had a detrimental effect on the other spouse's marital quality by influencing his/her experience of marriage, not because a person's neuroticism depressed their own level of marital quality. Hence, the study contributed to the argument that neuroticism is related to marital outcome.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to give a brief review of the main approaches in understanding the phenomenon of divorce. Among those approaches, social exchange

theories have been widely employed by researchers, because a wide range of variables is embraced by this approach. However, it has a shortcoming in explaining the process of change from satisfactory relation to the dissolution of the relationship (see **Karney & Bradbury, 1995**). It has also been criticised for being tautological in a way that the constructs are similar to the phenomenon being explained (**Cramer, 1996**). On the other hand, personality based research tradition has dated long back but criticized for operating in a narrow band of personality variables and for those variable having a negligible effect on marital relationships (**Gottman, 1994; Gottman and Notarius, 2002**). Although criticism exists more recent studies showed personality proved effective on marital quality as well as interactive processes (**Karney and Bradbury, 1997; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002**). As mentioned previously, since divorce is a rather complex phenomenon, it is difficult to explain divorce by only one group of variables (or approach). Therefore, there has been a tendency towards comprehensive models that cover variables from multiple approaches in recent years (see, for example, **Bradbury & Fincham, 1987, 1988, 1991; Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury, 1997; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002**).

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