The Honeymoon is Over: Maintaining a Strong Marriage After the First Year

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Introduction

Marital satisfaction is typically high in newlywed couples but studies have shown that as the relationship progresses, marital satisfaction tends to decline (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, Occhipinti, 2007). In fact, three to four percent of couples separate annually across the first 10 years of marriage (Glenn, 1998). The purpose of this study is to determine how newlywed couples can maintain marital quality and satisfaction after the first year of marriage. This study will analyze the "honeymoon-then-blandness" pattern (Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002), what constitutes a "satisfied" marital dyad, communication differences between sexes, and how recently-wed couples adapt to the challenges and changes that occur within the first year of marriage.

I am interested in relational communication, particularly marital relationships, which is what motivated me to become more knowledgeable about the variables that are likely to influence marital satisfaction. Using Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics theory, Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory, and Tannen's genderlect theory, this study will examine how communication plays an integral role in the relational maintenance and satisfaction among spouses beyond the first year of marriage.

The study includes detailed explanations of the identified theories, an application regarding how each theory relates to a marital dyad relationship, and an evaluation discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each theory. The synthesis section explains how the three theories relate and intertwine with one another, and finally, the conclusion discusses how the theories impact the human communication process, specifically within the marital context.

Theoretical Explanations and Analyses

Explanation of Relational Dialectics Theory

Interpersonal relationships are very complex due to opposing desires and needs. To better understand and explain this oppositional pull within close relationships, Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery created relational dialectics theory. Relational dialectics is based on dialogism theory, which was created by Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. First, the term dialectics refers to Bakhtin's notion of the competing discourses, or systems of meaning, within a personal relationship. The occurrence of these competing discourses, which

Bakhtin referred to as "centripetal centrifugal struggle," contradict and create tensions with one another. A contradiction occurs when two forces are interdependent yet simultaneously counteract one another. As relationships evolve, relational partners must negotiate these contradictory desires (Baxter, 2009).

According to the theory, every intimate relationship faces inevitable conflicting tension and that individuals need both interdependence and independence for the relationship to thrive. Relational dialectics claims individuals are drawn to both autonomy and contrasting forces. As a result, the theory identifies three dialects that influence relationships: integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression (Baxter, 2009). These contrasting forces can be experienced in two different contexts, which are referred to as internal dialectics and external dialectics. Internal dialectics are the existing tensions within a relationship, and external dialectics are the existing tensions outside of a relationship.

Internal dialectics include connectedness-separateness, certainty-uncertainty, and openness-closedness. External dialectics include inclusion-seclusion, conventionality-uniqueness, and revelation-concealment (Baxter, 2009). The integration-separation dialectic explains that individuals within a relationship must have both autonomy and connectedness. The stability-change dialectic recognizes the tension between predictability and novelty. Lastly, the expression-nonexpression dialectic involves disclosure and the tension between openness and closedness with one's relational partner (Baxter, 2009).

Relational dialectics theory also focuses on Bakhtin's notion of dialogue concentrating on five dialogic components. The first, constitutive dialogue, argues that conversation creates, changes, and maintains relationships. Baxter also believes in dialectical flux, which explains the unpredictable nature of communication. Next, dialogue as an aesthetic moment, is known as a defining moment within a relationship that occurs when relational partners achieve a sense of unity (Baxter, 2009). Baxter also uses Bakhtin's concept of the "utterance chain." The utterance chain is the idea that communication messages link to other messages, and that these messages are affected by all who are involved in a particular conversation (Baxter, 2009). Lastly, Baxter identifies dialogue as a critical sensibility or "an obligation to critique dominant voices, especially those that suppress opposing viewpoints; a responsibility to advocate for those who are muted" (Griffin, 2009, p. 164).

Although dialectic tensions within intimate relationships are inevitable, there are effective and ineffective ways in which individuals attempt to manage them. Baxter (1988) identifies four primary coping responses that are used to handle dialectical tensions. The first, cyclic alternation, occurs when individuals attempt to respond to each end of the contradiction at different times (Baxter, 1988). For example, a couple may spend a majority of their time together for a few weeks, and then spend several weeks apart. The second strategy is segmentation, which involves choosing a dialectic based on the particular context (Baxter, 1988). This is exemplified when a couple chooses to try something new on the weekends, but maintains a routine during the rest of the week.

Selection is the third strategy used to manage dialectical tension. This occurs when partners satisfy only one need, ignoring the contradictory one (Baxter, 1988). For example, a couple may choose to spend all of their time together, ignoring the simultaneous need for independence. The final primary strategy identified by Baxter (1988) is referred to as integration. Integration is composed of three forms, and is an attempt to respond simultaneously to both opposing tendencies in a contradiction. The first form, neutralizing, involves compromise between oppositions. When one partner prefers autonomy over connectedness while the other prefers the opposite, the couple may meet in the middle to satisfy both needs. Reframing, the second, is the transformation of a dialectic so that it is no longer experienced as a contradiction (Baxter, 1988). An example of reframing is when couples appreciate and embrace their personal differences. The final form of integration is referred to as disqualifying. Disqualifying includes exempting certain topics from usual patterns of communication (Baxter, 1988). Partners may generally engage in open communication, but may not discuss taboo topics such as finances.

Application of Relational Dialectics Theory

According to Gottman (1994), "the foundation of a lasting marriage rests on two kinds of bedrock: agreeing with your spouse on which style for handling disagreements you can both live with, and a large dose of positivity" (p. 202). Gottman (1994) claims one factor that leads to relational satisfaction is negotiating a marital style for dealing with conflict. One of the principles for doing this is for couples to determine "togetherness vs. separateness" (Gottman, 1994). This principle is directly related to relational dialectics theory,

particularly the connectedness-separateness internal dialectic. According to Gottman (1994), couples who value "we-ness" may use a validating style of handling conflict, which involves empathizing with one another. Marital partners who value autonomy and separateness may prefer using a volatile or avoider style for handling disagreements (Gottman, 1994).

Gottman (1999) also describes marriage as "something of a dance" (p. 92). In other words, marital partners need both dependence and a sense of autonomy. This may depend on the needs of both individuals. For example, some people have a greater need for connection, while others value independence (Gottman, 1999). According to Gottman (1999), marriages can succeed regardless of these individual needs as long as the couple understands and respects one another's differences. If these differences become overwhelming, Gottman (1999) suggests talking them out to gain greater insight into needs of one another.

Although couples need both dependence and autonomy, couples often claim to grow apart after the early years of marriage. To increase or maintain levels of dependence, couples should engage in "connecting behaviors," or "daily, somewhat ritualistic behaviors activities that communicate love, affection, and a desire to be together" (Phillips, Bischoff, Abbott, Xia, 2009, p. 255). These behaviors include holding hands, kissing, and saying affectionate words to one another. In addition, connecting behaviors include leisure and task-oriented activities such as running errands together, conversing about the day, and eating with one another (Phillips et al., 2009).

Relational dialectics theory also relates to the "honeymoon-then-blandness" pattern (Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002). Specifically, this relates to certainty-uncertainty, the internal dialectic within relational dialectics. According to this phenomenon, levels of marital satisfaction decline as the marriage progresses. New romantic relationships are characterized by intense emotions, optimism, energy, and fixation with one another. As couples get to know one another better, there are higher levels of predictability. This often leads to a sense of apathy or boredom, and a loss of interest (Aron et al., 2002). Couples can reverse this phenomenon, or prevent it from occurring, by participating in "self-expanding activities," or challenging, arousing, and new activities with one another (Aron et al., 2002).

Evaluation of Relational Dialectics Theory

There are several criteria that can be applied and used to evaluate relational dialectics theory. First, the theory can be used to explain why these contrasting tensions often occur within relationships. It allows individuals to fully realize that the tensions recognized within relational dialectics theory are often inevitable and according to Baxter and Montgomery, can actually strengthen relationships. The theory informs individuals within a dyadic partnership that balance will never be achieved. Instead, the theory suggests that individuals must learn to become accustomed to existing chaos as it will not always be resolved. One way to go about this is to use communication as a way to deal with the flux by engaging in one or several of the coping responses identified by Baxter (1988).

The theory also has utility, or practical value. Relational dialectics theory is both useful and relevant because relationships, and the tensions experienced within relationships, are to be expected. Therefore, the theory helps clarify that these tensions are not a sign that an intimate relationship is in trouble, but that these contradictory forces are a normal occurrence.

Finally, relational dialectics theory is communicative. Because it is rather complex and offers a new perspective on intimate relationships, it has the potential to inspire discussion. The theory is intriguing because it allows individuals to better understand the different contradictions that occur within their relationships.

Explanation of Social Exchange Theory

According to John Thibaut and Harold Kelley's social exchange theory, individuals initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships based on real or perceived costs and rewards. The theory claims that some relationships or interactions within a relationship are more satisfactory than others. Whether satisfactory or not, these interactions have consequences, or outcomes. The outcomes that are incurred as a relationship evolves are referred to as costs and rewards (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), costs are "any factors that operate or inhibit or deter the performance of a sequence of behavior" (p. 12). The greater the obstacle that the individual is forced to overcome, the greater the extent of the cost. High costs include great mental or physical effort, embarrassment or anxiety, and conflicting forces (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Rewards are referred to as the "pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications a person enjoys" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959,

p.12). A reward is often classified as a fulfilled need or source of gratification. Within relational development, individuals tend to seek outcomes that will minimize costs and maximize benefits, known as the "minimax principle" (Griffin, 2009).

As relationships evolve, individuals evaluate whether they are receiving benefits, or whether the costs are outweighing the rewards. In order to evaluate interpersonal outcomes, individuals have two standards of comparison (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). These are referred to as the *comparison level* (CL), and the *comparison level for alternatives* (CL alt). The CL relates closely to relational satisfaction, and represents an individual's evaluation of how satisfactory a current relationship is by comparing it with past relationships and experiences. In addition, the CL is the standard by which a person perceives he/she should receive in the way of costs and rewards by comparing current relationships with past experiences. The CL alt relates to relational stability, representing the best available outcome outside a current relationship. This is the standard by which an individual determines whether or not to remain in or leave a current relationship. If a relationship is determined to fall above the CL, the relationship is likely to be considered satisfying. If a relationship is considered to fall below the CL, the relationship is relatively unsatisfying (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Application of Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory can easily be applied to the marital context. Marital dissatisfaction and conflict are closely related to social exchange theory. According to Gottman (1994), although conflict is prevalent within a marriage, couples may remain in the relationship because the rewards outweigh the sacrifices. In addition, couples who remain emotionally engaged are more likely to stay married. Gottman (1999) differentiates couples who turn to one another with those who don't by referring to what he calls the couple's "emotional bank account" (p.80). According to Gottman (1999), couples who are emotionally engaged put money into the bank, therefore accumulating "emotional savings" which is used during difficult times (p. 80). When conflict or stress arise within a marriage, couples make allowances for one another based on the amount of emotional savings (Gottman, 1999). Gottman (1999) believes, however, that long-lasting relationships are those in which the couple turns to one another also in minute ways such as providing everyday support, not just during turbulent times.

Prior to marriage, couples are typically very happy with their relationship and expect this satisfaction to remain after marriage. Research, however, supports the claim that newlywed couples often endure unexpected challenges and changes in the early years of marriage. Lavner and Bradbury (2010) claim couples often encounter stressful events once they are married such as stress at work, the transition into parenthood, and health. Spouses must also adjust to one another's communication skills and emotions. This may include demonstrations of aggression and anger, as well as expressions of affection. Lavner and Bradbury (2010) assert that relational satisfaction can be influenced by these factors which are brought into marriage by each spouse. The study found that the traits that spouses bring into the marriage and the quality of problem solving are influential in determining relationship quality and longevity (Lavner and Bradbury, 2010). In order for newlyweds to maintain a high level of marital satisfaction in relation to social exchange theory, real or perceived rewards that are brought into a marriage must continue to outweigh the costs. This finding also relates to Gottman's (1999) claim that marriages can prevail as long as spouses respect one another's differences by talking them through.

Evaluation of Social Exchange Theory

First and foremost, Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory has the ability to predict relational outcomes. Using the CL and the CL alt, individuals evaluate whether or not they wish to remain in, or leave a current relationship. As relationships develop, individuals decipher the amount of rewards they are obtaining, and whether the costs are outweighing the rewards. If costs begin to outweigh rewards, the relationship is determined to be unsatisfying and the relationship is more likely to dissolve. Individuals also compare current relationships to past relationships (CL). If he/she perceives to have had more attractive or satisfying relationships, the relationship is also more likely to be suspended. On the other hand, if an individual has experienced less satisfying relationships, it is probable that he/she will remain in the relationship.

Social exchange theory also has utility, or practical value. The theory is both relevant and useful because relationship development and social interaction are both something that occur throughout life. Therefore, the theory can be applied to daily interactions and relationship evolution. Through evaluation using the CL and the CL alt, individuals are able to determine whether a relationship is worth pursuing or prolonging.

Finally, the theory is relatively parsimonious. Although the theory uses a number of technical terms, they are all easy to understand and relate to. Relationships are often complex, and social exchange theory provides a simple explanation of relational outcomes. The theory offers clarification as to why individuals remain in, or leave relationships even if outside spectators perceive the relationship differently.

Explanation of Genderlect Theory

Deborah Tannen's genderlect styles theory investigates the different communication styles of men and women. According to the theory, the differences in masculine and feminine communication styles are a cross-cultural phenomenon. These styles are different sets of linguistic features used by males and females that are developed socially (Tannen, 1990). Tannen (1990) claims boys and girls are taught distinct differences in how to talk and interact through social norms at a young age.

One of the distinct communicative differences between women and men according to genderlect theory is rapport-talk versus report-talk (Tannen, 1990). Women tend to engage more in rapport-talk, or private communication. This type of communication focuses on establishing connections and relationships. Men are generally more comfortable speaking in public, which is referred to as report-talk. Report-talk primarily focuses on independence and maintaining hierarchical status. This type of communication generally involves exhibiting skill and knowledge often through storytelling and joking (Tannen, 1990).

According to genderlect theory, men and women also listen much differently. Women tend to provide more verbal and nonverbal feedback by asking questions and providing listening responses while in conversation. Women also provide enthusiasm and support often through agreeing and laughing. This is another example of rapport-talk because it creates connection and encourages more talk between the communication partners (Tannen, 1990). Women often assume men are not listening, when Tannen (1990) claims men simply listen differently than women. Men generally provide fewer listener responses, challenge the other rather than agree, and give statements rather than ask questions while conversing. According to Tannen (1990), "men's style is more literally focused on the message level of talk, while the women's is focused on the relationship or metamessage level" (p.143). This communication difference between men and women can often lead to misunderstandings (Tannen, 1990).

Finally, another distinct communicative difference between women and men is dealing with conflict. According to genderlect theory, men generally initiate conflict because they are more comfortable within the context. Women, on the other hand, may use avoidance as a tactic to handle conflict because they view conflict as a threat to connection (Tannen, 1990).

Application of Genderlect Theory

According to genderlect theory, men place importance on independence and being respected, while women feel that it is more important to be liked and continually seek human connection (Tannen, 1990). Several studies have shown biological sex to play a role in communication perceptions and relational satisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, 1999; Laver & Bradbury, 2010; Weger, 2005).

Gottman's research regarding marital processes (1994) identified that males are more likely to participate in "stonewalling" by withdrawing from conflict. In fact, Gottman (1999) found that in 85 percent of all marriages, the husband acts as the "stonewaller." Gottman's 1994 study also reported that women are more likely to complain and criticize than men when in conflict. Men and women did not, however, differ in the use of contempt and defensiveness. According to Gottman (1994), when couples use negative communication tactics such as contempt and defensiveness, there is the potential for producing the following cycle. The more husbands withdraw from conflict, the more wives criticize and complain; the more wives criticize and complain, the more likely men are to stonewall or withdraw from conflict (Gottman, 1994).

In a 2005 study, Weger researched the effects of the demand/withdrawal conflict pattern within a marital dyad. According to Weger (2005), demand/withdrawal is a "complimentary pattern of interaction in which one partner attempts to avoid a conflict, while the other partner attempts to avoid the discussion" (p. 22). By studying the effects of this conflict pattern, Weger (2005) found that marital partners have the need to believe that their partner accepts and understands them. The study concluded that both husbands and wives feel less understood as a result of the demand/withdrawal conflict pattern, but that wives may be more directly influenced by it than husbands (Weger, 2005). Genderlect theory can help explain why women are more affected by the demand/withdrawal conflict pattern because of the theory's claim that women have a greater need for connection.

After studying newlywed marital satisfaction, Lavner and Bradbury (2010) found that "having a less satisfying marriage than one's spouse may be more distressing for women than men; to the extent to which women are more oriented than men toward dyadic partnerships" (p. 1186). In addition, Lavner and Bradbury (2010) found that men have a more difficult time transitioning into marriage by claiming men are less satisfied within the early years of marriage due to a loss of "sexual and personal freedom" (p. 1185). These findings correlate closely with the communication differences between men and women according to genderlect theory. Women tend to concentrate more on establishing and maintaining relationships and connections, while men generally focus more on autonomy (Tannen, 1990).

Although conflict within marriages is inevitable, there are ways to effectively manage conflict despite gender differences. Conflict approaches are highly significant determinants in whether or not marital satisfaction is achieved. According to Crohan's (1996) study, marital happiness typically decreases when conflicts are avoided all together. This avoidance of conflict often leads to unresolved problems that continue to reoccur. For couples who value autonomy in their marriage (which relates to relational dialectics theory), however, conflict avoidance is not always negative (Crohan, 1996). Segrin, Hanzal, and Domschke (2009) examined the role of conflict styles and couples' perceptions of one another's conflict styles. The study found that the more spouses display negativity and anger in conflict situations, the more unsatisfied they were, and the more positively the individuals viewed their spouse's conflict styles, the happier they were within their marriage (Segrin et al., 2009).

Other research has focused on the importance of educating couples about their conflict approaches. According to Schneewind and Gerhard (2002), conflict resolution styles become "more strongly associated as the marriage progresses" (p. 70). This finding suggests spouses should enhance constructive conflict resolution skills early in the marriage (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). Mahaffey (2010) argues that couples should initially become informed about how to identify communication that is ineffective before working on ways to improve conflict styles. As a result, the "miscommunication model" was developed to help couples disclose and understand relationship problems prior to attempting to repair them (Mahaffey, 2010). Again, the formation of

this model demonstrates the need for couples to become better educated with effective communication methods in order to achieve relational satisfaction.

Evaluation of Genderlect Theory

Above all, genderlect theory has practical value or utility. The theory is very useful because it can be applied to daily interactions with the opposite sex. It is important to understand the communication tendencies of both males and females so that effective communication is achieved. If individuals were more informed about the communication practices of the opposite sex, perhaps there would be less inequality, tension, and misunderstanding between males and females in a variety of contexts.

Genderlect theory also has the ability to predict future interactions and outcomes between males and females. According to Tannen (1990), communication between sexes can be improved if individuals better understand why the other communicates in the way that they do. If both sexes could better understand the other, future interactions would have the potential to be more productive and more satisfactory.

Finally, Tannen's genderlect theory is reasonably parsimonious because it is simple to understand. Throughout the explanation of the theory, Tanner applies several examples and real-life situations so that both men and women can relate to and understand the theory's implications. Although the theory is relatively lengthy, the applications allow it to be enjoyable and interesting. It could also be argued, however, that the theory lacks depth and explanation. While Tannen provides numerous examples to facilitate understanding of the theory, she fails to go into depth regarding why communication differences between sexes occur. Overall, however, genderlect theory is effective and indisputably applicable to marital relations.

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Synthesis

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According to Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics theory, every intimate relationship faces inevitable conflicting tension, and individuals need dependence as well as a sense of autonomy in order for the relationship to thrive (Baxter, 2009). This notion relates to Tannen's genderlect theory. Genderlect theory claims women value connection and intimacy while men generally value status. Therefore, this implies women are more likely to seek dependence or "togetherness," whereas men are more likely to value autonomy or "connectedness" within a marital dyad. The overlap of these two theories and the combined implications can

cause marital problems, but as long as the couple tries to understand one another's individual needs and differences and realizes that tension is a normal occurrence and that balance will never be achieved, the marriage can actually be strengthened.

Social exchange theory also relates to relational dialectics theory. According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), conflicting tensions experienced within a relationship may be considered costs. If spouses stop assuming balance must be achieved and realize tension is acceptable and inevitable, marital satisfaction can increase.

Relational dialectics theory and social exchange theory also intertwine in other ways. Within social exchange theory, couples accumulate an emotional savings bank (Gottman, 1994). Aesthetic moments, or defining moments within a relationship that occur when relational partners achieve a sense of unity, are a recognized component within relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2009). It can be assumed that these aesthetic moments are added to emotional savings and used as allowances when conflict arises within a marriage.

Genderlect theory and social exchange theory also intersect. According to genderlect theory, one of the distinct communicative differences between women and men is dealing with conflict. Men tend to initiate conflict, while women generally avoid conflict (Tannen, 1990). If spouses cannot effectively resolve conflict, the couple may perceive this to be a cost to the relationship. In contrast, if couples engage in healthy conflict resolution, or accept one another's communicative differences, emotional savings accounts can accrue due to real or perceived rewards. Other communication differences between sexes may also be perceived as costs or as rewards depending on individual needs.

Conclusion

Using Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics theory, Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory, and Tannen's genderlect theory, this study examined how communication plays an integral role in relational satisfaction, and the ways in which newlywed couples can maintain marital quality and satisfaction beyond the first year of marriage.

Specifically, the study looked at ways in which couples deal with the inevitable contradictory tensions that are experienced within all intimate relationships, and what they can do to maintain both interdependence

and independence in order for the relationship to thrive. Spouses must come to understand and embrace one another's differences by realizing that tension is normal and that balance will never be achieved.

The study also examined the effect of real or perceived costs and rewards within a marital dyad. Rewards must continue to outweigh costs in order for relational quality and satisfaction to sustain. To do this, couples accumulate an "emotional savings account" that can be used during difficult or turbulent times.

Finally, the study analyzed how gender differences influence marital relations. Men and women tend to communicate much differently, but if couples learn to understand these distinct differences, marriage can be strengthened.

There are many ways in which newlyweds can maintain marital quality and satisfaction after the first year of marriage. The "honeymoon" period that is only associated with the early years of marriage does not have to end. Instead, newlywed couples can preserve marital quality and satisfaction long after the first year.

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