

Close Relationship Loss

Terri L. Orbuch

Editor

Close Relationship Loss

Theoretical Approaches



Springer-Verlag

New York Berlin Heidelberg London Paris

Tokyo Hong Kong Barcelona Budapest

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With four figures.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Close relationship loss: theoretical approaches/Terri L. Orbuch,
editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-387-97727-9.—ISBN 3-540-97727-9

1. Interpersonal relations. 2. Loss (Psychology)

[DNLM: 1. Anxiety. Separation. 2. Divorce. 3. Grief.

4. Interpersonal Relations. 5. Models, Psychological.

BF 575.G7 C645]

HM132.C5346 1992

158'.2—dc20

DNLM/DLC

for Library of Congress

91-5182

Printed on acid-free paper.

© 1992 Springer-Verlag New York, Inc.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1992

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Production managed by Hal Henglein; manufacturing supervised by Jacqui Ashri.
Typeset by Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-9188-3

e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-9186-9

DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4613-9186-9

This book is dedicated to the quest for understanding the experience of close relationship loss; to those loved ones and friends, past and present, who have given me meaning in my life; and more specifically, to my parents.

Preface

Social scientists from various disciplines have been increasingly concerned with the nature, structure, and function of close relationships. Although most of the early work on the topic of close relationships drew attention to the development of close relationships, since the mid-1970s researchers have begun to investigate the many different aspects connected to the loss of close relationships.

Despite the change to a more comprehensive conceptual framework, close relationship research is often criticized for being atheoretical; the research is criticized for being purely descriptive in nature and thus lacking a more theoretical framework. Contrary to this belief, I wish to argue that researchers in the area of close relationship loss employ several critical and prominent theoretical perspectives to describe, explain, and understand the endings of relationships—thus, the fruition of this book. The major aim of this edited book is to present and illuminate, within one volume, some of these major theoretical perspectives.

The volume as a whole has several unique qualities. First, within each chapter, the authors provide a general overview of the theoretical perspective or approach within which they examine close relationship loss. Each author then relates these tenets, concepts, and general perspective to the study of close relationship loss. Second, a pervading theme is the interdisciplinary nature of the collection of chapters. The volume assembles a variety of chapters written by scholars in sociology, social psychology, communication, clinical psychology, and family studies. In doing so, we are able to examine the wide range of theoretical perspectives driven by different disciplines.

Theory and research focusing on relationship loss can be categorized into three overarching viewpoints, and this volume is organized according to these three theoretical general orientations. The first set of theoretical perspectives focuses on the determinants of the loss; the cause or causes of the relationship loss are the main focus of the theory and research. Three chapters examine close relationship loss from this perspective. In Chapter 3, Sprecher examines close relationship loss from a social

exchange perspective. After carefully explaining social exchange theories and models, she presents a complete review of research that uses social exchange variables to predict continuation or dissolution of close relationships, the process of breaking up, and coping with the loss. Then, Sprecher introduces an original model that integrates several social exchange variables. She uses this model as a framework for a discussion of future research in the area of social exchange and close relationship loss.

In Chapter 4, Sweet and Bumpass use a social demographic perspective to examine the disruption of marital and cohabitation relationships. They begin the chapter by examining conceptual and methodological issues that have been evident within the study of marital disruption and recent developments in the area that have improved our understanding of these patterns. Sweet and Bumpass then review extensively some of the major findings from social demographic studies, focusing on the levels, trends, and differentials in marital disruption in the United States and on recent findings and statistics from their own 1987 to 1988 National Survey of Families and Households. Finally, because of the increase in cohabitation, Sweet and Bumpass pay careful attention to these unions in their chapter. They discuss the patterns, trends, and stability of these unions; their association to marital unions and marital disruption; and the implications these unions have for the social demographic perspective.

In Chapter 5, Hazan and Shaver investigate close relationship loss from the perspective of attachment theory. When an individual experiences the loss of a relationship, he or she experiences the loss of an attachment figure. Attachment theory, although explicitly a life-span theory, spent much of its early concentration and formulation at the childhood stage. Hazan and Shaver recognize this focus and examine responses to broken attachments in both childhood and adulthood. The responses to broken attachments are remarkably similar in both age groups. Within the adulthood phase, Hazan and Shaver differentiate between the loss of an attachment figure that is due to death and loss that is due to estrangement; examine individual differences in attachment responses; and point out the consequences of insecure attachment bonds.

The second set of theoretical perspectives in the book examines the process of relationship loss. The stages and phases that an individual or relationship passes through become the main focus within these perspectives. Three chapters examine close relationship loss from this perspective. In Chapter 6, Metts discusses the language of disengagement from a face-management perspective. Metts develops and presents an original face-work model of disengagement by integrating the theory of face and face work proposed originally by Goffman (1967) with previous work and theory on disengagement language and strategies.

In Chapter 7, Cupach uses a dialectical approach to examine the disengagement of interpersonal relationships. He examines these opposit-

ional forces or tensions in relationships, delineates their role in stages of relationship change and disengagement, and provides insight into their relevance during close relationship loss. The final chapter in this section is by Blieszner and Mancini (Chapter 8). They approach relationship loss from a developmental perspective and draw attention to research and theory stemming from three important frameworks: critical life events approach, family development theory, and theory of social provisions. They argue that future research on relationship loss requires the incorporation of knowledge at the individual, family group, and social level.

The third general set of theoretical approaches concerns the consequences of the relationship loss for the individuals and groups involved. Here, attention is specifically given to the effects of the loss and the adjustment and/or coping responses that follow. In Chapter 9, Grych and Fincham espouse an attributional perspective to understanding post-divorce adjustment. They note that little research has examined the functions and consequences of attributions in an individual's postdivorce adjustment and present a typology based on the degree to which post-divorce attributions provide a sense of control and positive self-image. Grych and Fincham also examine attributions of marital disruption for adults, parents, and children and discuss the association of these attributions to family functioning as a whole after divorce.

In Chapter 10, Weber examines relationship loss from a phenomenological perspective. She presents rich, detailed, and naturalistic accounts of relationship loss to illustrate and posit that accounts, as presented, are the essential phenomena of interest in understanding relationship loss. Weber posits that an account may be a strategy for coping with relationship loss but that the account also is an end in itself, with meaning for the individual. She states that relationship researchers must pay careful attention to the account as a whole, as presented, rather than look for what the account symbolizes. Weber discusses poignantly the accounts and account-making literature, the phenomenological perspective, and the futility of using this perspective.

In Chapter 11, I address close relationship loss from a symbolic interactionist perspective. I conceptualize relationship loss as an "identity transformation" and draw on the principles and concepts in social structural symbolic interactionism to explore how social structure may impact on the meaning that individuals assign to their experiences of relationship loss. I postulate that this sociological social psychological perspective offers a new set of variables to consider when examining the experience and consequences of relationship loss. In addition, I illustrate how social institutions and groups differentially validate and support certain relationship losses.

The book also has two introductory chapters. The first is by Duck, who presents a comprehensive discussion regarding the role of theory in the examination of relationship loss. Duck takes a metatheoretical approach

to theory on relationships and relationship loss to illuminate underlying complimentary foci in different theoretical perspectives. Further, Duck advocates a full process approach to the study of close relationship loss. He argues that we must not compartmentalize the study of relationship loss but, instead, must examine the topic within the context and theoretical richness of other relational processes such as relationship development and maintenance, as well as within the context of other forms of relating and human processes in general.

Although the book's major focus is on the importance of theory in the examination of relationship loss, in Chapter 2 Hendrick reminds us that theory is only one part of a larger process or "gestalt" of research. Hendrick discusses the integration of theory, research, and therapy within the context of examining close relationships and close relationship loss. Further, she argues provocatively that a researcher's own personal view on humankind and the world within which humans behave can in fact influence (or bias) both what theoretical approach one focuses on in the examination of relationships and relationship loss and the methodological approach in which one studies these relational processes.

Finally, the book concludes with two provocative commentaries that elucidate major questions and issues in the investigation of close relationship loss in general and, more specifically, that arise given the perspectives presented in the book. Spanier (Chapter 12) takes as his aim research and theory on marital relationship loss. First, using a social demographic approach, Spanier sets the stage for asserting that divorce has been and will continue to be a major social challenge for society and researchers in the social sciences. Although he states that the abundance of research on divorce in the 1970s and 1980s may have answered small questions regarding marital disruption, he is skeptical about whether this research has answered the larger questions surrounding divorce. Given the theoretical perspectives presented in this volume, he discusses their usefulness for both future research and these larger questions. Ultimately, Spanier challenges us, as social scientists, to look beyond the smaller questions and in doing so proposes several future directions of inquiry; questions and directions that may lead us to answer the larger questions at hand.

Levinger (Chapter 13) takes a comprehensive approach and discusses close relationship loss in general. He focuses on five concepts within the volume (which he creatively labels as inkblots) that need clarification and structure: close relationship, loss, determinants of relationship loss, processes of loss, and consequences of a loss. The contributors to this volume were given no requirements regarding the use and definition of the words *loss* and *close relationship*, nor were they given standards on how they construed a determinant, a process, or a consequence of a loss. Levinger astutely identifies that, given this lack of structure, authors in this volume have construed different meanings for these five concepts.

Levinger illuminates the differences and similarities between concepts in chapters and offers suggestions for future clarity and elaboration in the area.

Although these two commentaries tell a somewhat different story regarding plot and characters, the story endings are similar. I believe that the emphasis in both of these commentary chapters is on the pursuit of clarity or of answers to questions that will take us across discipline and theoretical lines. It is hoped that, as readers of this book, we will learn from each other.

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Reference

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Acknowledgments

This is a project that has been in my mind for several years—a project initiated when I was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I wish to express appreciation to several people who facilitated the work presented here. Foremost, I want to thank John H. Harvey, who believed in my work throughout my postdoctoral fellowship and who provided encouragement and advice when thoughts about the book finally turned into action. I wish to thank all the contributors to this book, without whose enthusiasm, commitment, and timely hard work, this volume would not have been possible. I am also grateful to the many students, clients, and friends who graciously shared their loss experiences with me.

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