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**Romantic Reconciliation as Influenced by Implicit Theories of Relationships
and Information Seeking Style**

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Abstract

This investigation examined the associations among implicit theories about the nature of relationships, information-seeking style, and the desire to reconcile. Participants included 217 individuals who were asked to recall a romantic relationship breakup that had occurred within 4 months of their participation in the study, and then complete a survey assessing implicit theories, information-seeking style, and desire for reconciliation. Findings revealed that implicit theories influence information seeking style. Furthermore, information seeking style was shown to impact desire for reconciliation. These results illustrate the importance of investigating factors that impact romantic relationship reconciliation, a currently under-researched component of relational development.

Key words: reconciliation, implicit theories, information seeking, romantic relationships

Although close relationships are necessary for individuals to meet basic needs (cf. Schutz, 1958), they often deteriorate (e.g., Duck, 1982). Given the needs-based investment put into these relationships, it is odd that little research attention has been devoted to understanding what happens between former partners after relational termination. Not surprisingly, the termination of a romantic relationship has negative cognitive and emotional consequences for previous partners (Simpson, 1987). As such, former romantic partners may see reconciliation, defined as “former partners reverting back to the previous romantic relational state,” as a way to eliminate this negative condition (Bevan, Cameron, & Dillow, 2003, p. 121).

Little is currently known about romantic reconciliation, and further research is necessary to identify those characteristics that may lead individuals to desire reconciliation. The few scholars who have examined reconciliation provide evidence for its value as a line of inquiry (e.g., Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2007). For instance, Conville (1988) proposed relational reconciliation as one of several relational phases, and others have identified a number of reconciliation strategies that vary on use and effectiveness (Patterson & O’Hair, 1992). As relationship reconciliation has been identified as a viable option for former romantic partners, it is important to explicate the factors that may contribute to or hinder the likelihood of its occurrence. The following section explores two such factors that may influence the reconciliation process: implicit theories of relationships and information seeking style.

Implicit Theories and Information Seeking Style

Scholars such as Dweck and Leggett (1988) suggest that individuals hold one of two implicit theories about human behavior: (1) an entity theory which maintains that certain traits are fixed and cannot be changed, or (2) an incremental theory which suggests that such traits merely require some effort to change. Knee (1998) extended Dweck and Leggett’s (1988) work by suggesting that these implicit theories could be applied to romantic relationships. Implicit theories in this context focus on beliefs about the origins of relationships, and whether relational partners are “meant to be” (i.e., destiny beliefs, akin to entity theories) or if the relationship must be nurtured and cultivated (i.e., growth beliefs, akin to incremental theories). Although individuals may score high or low on both beliefs, most tend to gravitate towards one (Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001).

Destiny Theorists

Individuals who hold destiny beliefs base the success of their romantic relationships on whether the partner was the person with whom they were “meant to be” (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). Due to this “all or nothing” mentality, and because transgressions often occur in relationships (Jones & Burdette, 1994), a destiny theorist’s relational experience is potentially fraught with either high disillusionment or false glee. One way in which this overly rosy assessment may materialize is through the adoption of positive illusions - downplaying or reframing a partner’s negative actions as positive ones (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Murray et al. (1996) found that relationships were more likely to continue when participants idealized each other despite the existence of conflict or doubts. Relatedly, Knee (1998) showed that destiny theorists’ relational satisfaction depends upon their ability to perceive their partner as the ideal partner. Franiuk, Cohen, and Pomerantz (2002) suggest that destiny theorists might be less satisfied than growth theorists because their heightened relational expectations provide greater opportunity for disappointment.

When negative events can no longer be ignored or reframed, destiny theorists often adopt strategies that focus on avoidance and/or separation, as opposed to repair. Knee (1998) found that, following a negative event in the relationship (i.e., a relational transgression), destiny

theorists tended to use disengagement rather than maintenance strategies. Once a relational partner is no longer considered to be “ideal,” destiny theorists often terminate the relationship.

Growth Theorists

In contrast to destiny theorists, growth theorists believe that relational challenges can be overcome. In fact, they consider such difficulties as the impetus for positive change and growth in the relationship (Knee et al., 2003). Growth theorists feel that any relationship has the potential for success, as long as partners are willing to engage in the emotional “work” necessary for maintenance. When faced with a negative relational event, growth theorists prefer to work on the problem in order to continue the relationship, while destiny theorists typically terminate it (Knee, 1998). These differences in the reaction to a negative relational event seem likely to extend to other relational processes. Recent work suggests that one such process with important implications for relational maintenance is information-seeking (Afifi, Dillow, & Morse, 2004).

Information-Seeking Styles

Research conducted by Miller and colleagues (e.g., Miller 1980, 1987) suggests that individuals adopt one of two coping styles when confronted by a negative event: monitoring or blunting. Monitors crave information, whether positive or negative, and report reduced levels of anxiety when high levels of information are communicated to them (Miller & Mangan, 1983). When faced with potentially negative events, monitors are motivated to seek information, thereby reducing uncertainty. Conversely, blunters do not want information to be communicated to them, and prefer high uncertainty to the discovery of negative information (Miller & Mangan, 1983). As a result, blunters tend to ignore negative information and/or focus on the positive. Avoiding information about the negative event allows blunters to deny the occurrence of the event or to change cues about the event in order to reframe it.

Although not previously linked, the findings concerning monitors and blunters correspond with what is known about growth and destiny theorists. Growth theorists believe that focusing on the issue, analyzing its antecedents, and engaging in relationship work can conquer relational problems. Thus, growth theorists are likely to behave in a fashion consistent with the monitor information-seeking style (i.e., to search for information, regardless of valence). In contrast, destiny theorists view negative events as signs for relational termination, and therefore may desire a strategy that allows avoidance in these instances (i.e., blunting). Formally:

H1a: Individuals who hold growth theories of romantic relationships are more likely to use “monitor” information seeking strategies than are destiny theorists.

H1b: Individuals who hold destiny theories of romantic relationships are more likely to use “blunter” information seeking strategies than are growth theorists.

When applied to the context of reconciliation, growth theorists (expected to adopt a monitor information seeking style) seem likely to maintain some form of post-dissolutional relationship as a mode of continued information-seeking and uncertainty reduction about the cause of the breakup. Conversely, destiny theorists with a blunter information seeking style may avoid seeking information about the causes of the relationship dissolution and/or the former partner, rendering reconciliation unlikely. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Individuals who hold growth theories of romantic relationships will be more likely to desire reconciliation with a former partner than will destiny theorists.

H3: Individuals who display a “monitor” information seeking style will be more likely to desire reconciliation with a former romantic partner than will individuals who display a “blunter” information seeking style.

Method

Data were collected from 217 individuals recruited from general education courses at a large northeastern university. Extra credit was offered for participation. Individuals who were previously involved in a romantic relationship but had recently terminated that involvement were targeted for this investigation. Specifically, an individual's romantic relationship must have lasted a minimum of four weeks, and the termination of that relationship must have occurred within four months prior to their participation. These time frames were chosen to ensure adequate sample size as well as accurate recall of the event. The sample averaged approximately 20 years of age ($SD = 1.40$), with 54% male and 46% female. The vast majority of the sample was Caucasian (88%) and heterosexual (97.2%).

Upon arrival, participants were given a consent form and a questionnaire. Initially, participants were asked to think about their most recent romantic relationship breakup, and then asked to describe the breakup in detail. All participants were able to recall and report on a recent breakup. The majority of participants reported on a serious dating relationship (66.4%), followed by a casual (30.4%) dating relationship. The average length of the relationship (before the breakup) was roughly thirteen months ($Mdn = 7.00$, $M = 13.42$, $SD = 13.54$), and participants reported on a breakup that happened two months prior, on average ($Mdn = 2.00$, $M = 2.20$, $SD = .99$).

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was comprised of three measures, all of which were adapted from prior attempts to measure similar constructs and used 7-point scales with end-point labels appropriate to the item.

Implicit theories of relationships. An eight item scale consistent with Knee (1998) was used to assess the degree to which a participant holds a particular implicit theory about his/her relationship. The scale was designed such that half of the items measured growth theory beliefs (e.g. "A successful relationship evolves through hard work and resolution of incompatibilities."), while the other half measured destiny theory beliefs (e.g., "Potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not."). Participants rated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Reliabilities for the four item growth scale and the four item destiny scale were acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .59$ and $.63$, respectively).

Information seeking style. An adapted version of the Monitoring Blunting Scale created by Muris, van Zuuren, de Jong, de Beurs, and Hanewald (1994) was used to assess information seeking style as influenced by implicit theories. Individuals were asked to imagine a stress-invoking scenario ("You are going to participate in a psychological experiment. During this experiment you will receive a series of harmless electric shocks."). Six items, which required the participant to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement, followed the scenario. Three items served as a measure of monitoring (e.g. "I would perform research about this situation by looking in books, magazines, or on the Internet."), while three items served as a measure of blunting (e.g. "I would try and do something that I found pleasant in order to distract myself."). Reliability analyses indicated that removal of one item from the blunting scale improved the overall reliability score, resulting in a three item monitoring scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$) and a two item blunting scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$).

Desire for reconciliation. An eight item Likelihood of Reconciliation scale was used to assess participants' desire for reconciliation (Dillow & Hale, 2001). Sample items from this scale include: "It is likely that I will try to get back together with my ex-partner in an exclusive romantic relationship." This scale evidenced high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Results

Hypotheses one through three predicted differences in the relative associations between variables. As such, Z-score transformations were followed by a significant test of differences between independent correlations (Edwards, 1984, p. 72-74). For all analyses, time elapsed since the breakup and relationship length before termination were controlled due to the range of possible responses to these variables. All statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Tests of Significance for Hypotheses 1-3: Transformed Partial Correlation Coefficients

| | r_1 | r_2 | Z Score |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|---------|
| H1a: Growth/Monitors | .32 | .00 | 4.70* |
| H1b: Destiny/Blunters | -.14 | .07 | -3.09* |
| H2: Growth/Reconciliation | .05 | -.03 | 1.17 |
| H3: Monitors/Reconciliation | -.02 | -.17 | 2.22* |

Note: Z scores were obtained via calculations using transformed partial correlation coefficients divided by standard errors (Edwards, 1984). Time elapsed since the breakup and length of the relationship before termination were controlled for in all analyses. * denotes significance at the .05 level.

Implicit Theories and Information Seeking

Hypothesis 1a postulated that growth theorists would be more likely to exhibit a monitor information seeking style, while hypothesis 1b proposed that destiny theorists would be more likely to exhibit a blunter information seeking style. Hypothesis 1a was supported, indicating that growth theorists were more likely to use a monitor information seeking style than were destiny theorists. Results for hypothesis 1b showed that destiny theory beliefs were significantly correlated with the blunter information seeking style. Contrary to the prediction, however, destiny theorists and blunter information seeking strategies were negatively correlated, such that individuals holding stronger destiny theory beliefs were less likely to use an avoidant information seeking style.

Implicit Theories and Reconciliation

It was expected that growth theorists and destiny theorists would differ in the extent to which they wanted to reconcile with a former romantic partner. Specifically, the second hypothesis posited that growth theorists would be more likely to desire reconciliation with a former partner than would destiny theorists. Contrary to the hypothesized relationship, results reveal that growth theorists and destiny theorists did not differ in the degree to which they wanted to reconcile with a former partner.

Information Seeking and Reconciliation

It was also thought that individuals with different information seeking styles would vary in the extent to which they wished to reconcile with a former partner. Thus, the third hypothesis proposed that individuals with a monitor information seeking style (as opposed to those with a blunter information seeking style) would be more likely to want reconciliation with a former

partner. Providing support for this hypothesis, findings indicate that individuals with a monitor information seeking style were more likely to desire reconciliation with a former romantic partner than were individuals with a blunter information seeking style.

Discussion

This investigation was motivated by the belief that reconciliation, an as yet under-researched aspect of relational development, can be better understood by examining its association with variables such as implicit theories and information seeking styles. Results from this study show that beliefs about the nature of relationships impact information seeking style. Furthermore, findings reveal that an individual's information seeking style serves as one communicative factor that accompanies the desire to reconcile.

Implicit Theories and Information Seeking

As hypothesized, results from this investigation demonstrated that growth theorists are more likely than destiny theorists to adopt a monitor information seeking style in the case of dissolution. In other words, growth theorists tend to actively engage the causes surrounding the breakup and prefer being privy to more information. This previously unknown association has important implications for our understanding of cognitive and behavioral processes following relational termination.

While the association between implicit theories and information-seeking style went according to expectations for growth theorists, it did not in the case of destiny theorists. Contrary to the predicted relationship, results revealed that destiny theorists are *less* likely to avoid information about the dissolution. One potential explanation for this counter-intuitive finding is that destiny theorists framed the breakup as a positive event, thus not adhering to the expected patterns for negative-event situations. Recall that destiny theorists either believe that their partner is "the one," or they do not. If the breakup was caused by a transgression on their partner's part, for example, this may trigger the destiny theorist to re-think his/her notions about the ideal nature of the partner. That is, they may move from thinking that their partner is "the one" to knowing that s/he is not. If this line of thinking is accurate, then destiny theorists would indeed see the breakup more positively. In this case, the opposite pattern regarding information seeking would be expected. Further research is required to illuminate this possibility.

Information Seeking and Reconciliation

Our test of the association between information-seeking style and desire for reconciliation was consistent with expectations. Specifically, the data show that monitors are more likely than blunters to desire reconciliation. Again, important new knowledge is gained about dissolution and reconciliation processes through these findings. It appears that individuals are potentially predisposed to pursue or abandon reconciliation efforts based in part upon communicative behaviors that are impacted by their personality characteristics. Since blunters are likely to avoid the former partner (as a way of avoiding additional negative information about the event, and thus, any increased negative arousal), there is little chance for reconciliation to occur. On the other hand, monitors seek additional information about the breakup, and this information is likely to be provided by the former partner. As a result, for monitors, this increased interaction has the potential to "set the stage" for reconciliation.

Considerations and Conclusion

The results of this investigation should be interpreted with an awareness of the limitations of the methodological decisions and implications. The low reliability scores obtained for the two factors of the implicit theories of relationships scale were unexpected, given the high reliability that each of these scales has exhibited in past research with similar samples (Knee, 1998). This

result suggests the need for additional measurement refinement by implicit theory scholars, and introduces the possibility that the added variance from low reliability concealed key differences between growth and destiny theorists. A relatively low reliability score was also obtained for the monitor information seeking style, but in this case, the added variance did not mask important differences between monitors and blunters.

Beyond these measurement concerns, it is important that we explicitly note the correlational nature of these findings. Although explication of the relationships among variables related to reconciliation is a necessary first step to better understanding these processes, it is also vital to extend such work into the realm of causality to fully understand reconciliation. Finally, data for this investigation were obtained exclusively through the use of retrospective self-report measures. While covarying the length of time since the dissolution allowed us to remove its effects on these results, future investigations that are able to gather real-time data from participants would more accurately reflect their experiences.

In sum, the goal of this investigation was to examine the relationships among implicit theories, information seeking styles, and desire for reconciliation. Taken together, the findings suggest that implicit theories are related to information seeking styles, and that information seeking styles are associated with the desire for reconciliation. These results indicate that an individual's basic beliefs about the nature of relationships impact the information seeking style that s/he displays. Furthermore, the information seeking style of an individual appears to serve as one of the communicative elements that accompany the desire to reconcile. Continued investigation of these and other factors will allow scholars to build upon and extend in important ways the little that is currently known about the process of relational reconciliation.

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