1989

A Unit on Relationship Termination for the Basic Course

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> *We can't go on just holding on to ties...now that we're living separate lives.*
>
> P. Collins

"It merely died out ... I'm not really sure how it ended. We just went our separate ways . . . ." This is a common response when an individual is asked how a close relationship with a friend or loved one ended. When it comes to probing about break-up strategies, or more importantly the communication skills displayed during the event, most people shrug their shoulders at such bizarre questions. Yet the concept that our basic communication courses should teach students the communication skills necessary to continue to form relationships throughout their life without regard to terminating any of these relationships is equally bizarre. As Baxter (1979, 215) stated: "To presume that actors go through life 'stockpiling' an unlimited number of relationships without occasional strategic deletion strikes against common sense." Individuals must eventually reach a point in life where each new relationship is offset with the termination or de-escalation of a previous relationship. From an Altman and Taylor (1973) exchange theory perspective, each relationship has its own costs and rewards. Cost may be expenditure of time, psychological energy, and/or restrictions from engaging in other relationships. Rewards may be pleasures derived, aid the accomplishment of a task,

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and/or an opportunity to learn more about oneself from engaging in a relationship. While it would probably be a mistake to assume that an individual is constantly evaluating his or her relationships in terms of costs or rewards, there must be a limit to the number of relationships that an individual is capable of engaging in. According to Knapp (1984), an individual pays special attention to the cost/reward paradigm when he or she feels especially happy or sad to determine how that particular state came about.

Do relationships ever actually terminate? It can be argued that once a relationship has formed, it will always exist. Even though the individuals decide not to interact on a physical level, the psychological impact of the relationship is still present. Rather than termination, the relationship has merely been redefined. For example, if two friends decide to end their physical relationship, that part of the relationship may be over, but the influence of the friend is an ingrained aspect of the other's self-concept. Therefore, any relationship, regardless of its length, has an effect upon both individuals and can never be terminated. Instead, the dissolution of the relationship prompts a redefinition of the situation. Stewart addresses this issue by contending that in any relationship a "spiritual child" is born. This "child" may grow into a beautiful person or may die or worst of all may grow to become an ugly child. But the child is always with us even if the relationship ceases to exist. In redefining a relationship, each party is required to adjust his or her life to compensate for the physical and emotional absence of the other. The notion that some individuals are more adept at adjustment than others may explain why some individuals find ending a relationsip relieving (Wilmot, 1980) while other individuals find it painful (Phillips and Wood, 1983).

The purpose of this essay is to suggest nine units on relationship termination which might be taught in a basic communication course and to suggest exercises which might be used to enhance these units. An instructor might select one or more of the units and add them to a course they presently teach or use all eight units in a special topics course. While the relationship termination units may seem most appropriate for a basic interpersonal or group

communication course, with minor adaptation the units could also be used in a wide variety of courses. The exercises range from projects calling for research papers to experiential activities requiring less than thirty minutes of class time.

Units on Relationship Termination

1. *Definition of Relationship Termination*

A unit on relationship termination will necessitate a discussion on what is the concept of "relationship termination." Students, after reading any one of a number of excellent sources, can discuss the differences among the terms of relationship termination, redefinition, de-escalation, dissolution, disengaging and ending a relationship. What are the connotations of each term? Would you use one term for a friendship and another for a lover?

SOURCES

Duck, S.W. 1980. "Personal Relationships Research in the 1980s: Toward an Understanding of Complex Human Sociality." *Western Journal of Speech Communication,* 44: 114-119.

De Stephen D. 1985. "The Need to Integrate Relational Termination into the Teaching of Interpersonal Communication." Central State Speech Association Convention. Chicago. IL.

2. *An Overview of Relationship Termination*

This unit is designed to discuss differences among social encounters, friendships, divorce and death. Much has been written about divorce and death and it is probably very possible for you to bring in experts from across campus to discuss these topics. I make it very clear that divorce and death are special types of relationship termination and that these types of termination will not be the focus of the unit. It

is interesting to have students discuss the crucial variables
in each of the above four situations. What is it that makes the
termination process different between a social encounter and
a friendship? Between a social encounter and a death?

SOURCES

Cahn, D.D. 1987. *Letting Go: A Practical Theory of Relationship
    Disengagement and Re-engagement.* Albany, NY: State Uni-
    versity of New York Press. Chapters 4, 6 & 7.

Wilmont, W.W., D.A. Carbaugh and L.A. Baxter. 1984. "Communi-
    cative Strategies Used to Terminate Romantic Relationships."
    International Communication Association Convention, San
    Francisco, CA.

3. Models of Relationship Termination

Knapp's Model

    Stage   I. Differentiating
    Stage II. Circumscribing
    Stage III. Stagnating
    Stage IV. Avoiding
    Stage V. Terminating

The ten stages (the first five deal with relationship
development and the second five deal with termination) of
interaction according to Knapp (1984) have been widely
cited. While the stages are not based on any empirical
research, they do form a useful framework from which to
analyze the formation and dissolution of relationships. The
first stage of relationship termination is labeled
differentiating and represents the stage where the "we" in a
relationship is transformed into "I" when the parties are no
longer interpersonally close as a result of separate interests
and activities. The second stage, circumscribing, is
characterized by a decrease in information quality and
quantity, resulting in superficial and restrained
communiction. The third phase of stagnating involves not

broaching some areas of discussion, as each part claims to "know" how the conversation will end. The fourth stage of avoiding is similar to stagnating, but this phase is characterized by physical separation. The final stage is the actual disengagement which may occur rapidly and often labeled "sudden death" or may occur gradually and often labeled "passing away."

Duck's Model of Dissolving Personal Relationships

Threshold I. I can't stand this any more!
(Intrapsychic phase)
Threshold II. I'd be justified in withdrawing.
(Dyadic phase)
Threshold III. I mean it (Social phase)
Threshold IV. It's now inevitable.
(Grave Dressing phase)

Duck's model of relationship termination is similar to Knapp's but appears to place more emphasis on the psychological aspect of termination. Neither model has been tested empirically. Later is this paper, a class exercise will be prosed to test each of these models. DeVito (1989) discusses seven different models of relationship development and/or termination.

SOURCES

Duck, S. 1986. *Human Relationships: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing Co. 90-111.

Knapp, M.L. 1984. *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relation*. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon. 29-58.

DeVito, J. 1986. *The Interpersonal Communication Book*. New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers. 246-251.

4. *Self-Disclosure and Relationship Termination*

Self-disclosure is only one of the many variables which can be discussed in light of relationship termination. Other

variables might be trust, empathy, self-concept, self-esteem, assertiveness, communication apprehension, and perception to name only a few. Concerning self-disclosure, do individuals who self-disclose terminate more relationships? Fewer? Or do they terminate relationships in a different manner?

SOURCES

Baxter, L.A. 1979. "Self-Disclosure as a Relationship Disengagement Strategy." *Human Communication Research*. 5: 215-222.

5. *The Reversal Hypothesis*

The reversal hypothesis has received wide attention in the literature and yet there is very little empirical support for the hypothesis. Do relationships come apart in the reverse manner in which they are formed? While this may seem like an intuitively attractive proposition, there is little support or refutation for the proposition. Students will eagerly engage in a debate on the merits of such a hypothesis.

SOURCES

Baxter, L.A. 1983. "Relationship Disengagement: An Examination of the Reversal Hypothesis." *The Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47: 85-98.

6. *The Beginning Cycle of Termination*

This unit examines the relationship termination process using case study evidence. Students can be asked to write descriptive accounts of same sex or opposite sex relationships terminations which they have participated in and then compare their accounts to the ones listed in the sources below. Does each relationship terminate in such a

unique manner that it is impossible to find any commonality? Often times students will see that their relationships have terminated in a manner very similar to how others have terminated relationships.

SOURCES

Hill, C.T., Z. Rubin and L.A. Peplau. 1979. "Breakups Before Marriage and the End of 103 Affairs." *Divorce and Separation,* 64-82.

Weiss, R.B. 1975. "The Erosion of Love and Persistence of Attachment." *Marital Separation,* 36-46.

Perlman, D. and S. Duck. 1987. *Intimate Relationships: Development, Dynamics, and Deterioration.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing Company, 239-296.

7. *Disengagement Strategies*

I. Positive Tone
II. Negative Identity Management
III. Justification
IV. Behavioral De-escalation
V. De-escalation

What are the strategies people use to terminate relationships? Students can be asked what strategies they use or have had used upon them in terminating relationships in the past. Again, if students are first asked to write an account of one of their relationships which has terminated, they will then have a vehicle to compare their situation to any theoretical paradigm. Students will often offer suggestions for changing the model after comparing their situation to the proposed model.

SOURCES

Baxter, L.A. 1982. "Strategies for Ending Relationships: Two Studies." *Western Journal of Speech Communication,* 46: 223-241.

Baxter, L.A. 1984. "Trajectories of Relationship Disengagement." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 1: 29-48.

Baxter, L.A. and J. Philpott, 1982. "Attribution-Based Strategies for Initiating and Terminating Friendships." *Communication Quarterly,* 30: 217-224.

Cahn, D.D. 1987. *Letting Go: A Practical Theory of Relationship Disengagement and Re-Engagement.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 187-205. (Chapter 10)

8. The Farewell Address

> I. Summarizing the substance of the discourse
> II. Signaling the impending decreased access between the communicators
> III. Signaling supportiveness

How do we signal decreased access between ourself and others? Students will eagerly offer examples of how others signal that they want a change in the relationship — either positive or negative. So often our courses only spend time examining how we signal relationship development. This unit will provide students with an opportunity to examine methods for telling others to change interpersonal relationships.

SOURCES

Baxter, L.A. and J. Philpott. 1980. "Relationship Disengagement: A Process View." Paper presented at Speech Communication Association.

Albert, S. and S. Kessler, 1978. "Ending Social Encounters." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 14: 541-553.

9. Managing Relational Termination

> I. Break the Loneliness-Depression Cycle
> II. Take Time Out
> III. Bolster Self-esteem

IV. Remove or Avoid Uncomfortable Symbols
V. Seek Support
VI. Avoid Extreme Statements
VII. Avoid Repeating Negative Patterns
VIII. Resist Comparisons

Relationship termination is part of relationship formation. Therefore it is important that we know how to manage the termination process. Relationship termination, regardless of whether one is the initiator or not, results in change for both individuals. This change most often comes in the form of redefining one's identity and who one associates with as friends. One's identity or sense of self is primarily a product of the roles and role functions one plays within a particular relationship. How does one avoid negative patterns and resist comparisons with a third party who might have entered the relationship picture? The literature does offer a number of suggestions which students find useful in handling what can be a very traumatic situation.

SOURCES

Duck, W.W. 1982. "A Topography of Relationship Disengagement and Dissolution." In S.W. Duck, ed., *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships* (pp. 1-30). London: Academic Press.

Knapp, M.L. 1984. *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relation.* Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Knapp, M.L., R.P. Hart, G.W. Friedrich, and G.M. Shulman. 1973. "The Rhetoric of Goodbye: Verbal and Nonverbal Correlates of Human Leave-Taking." *Speech Monographs,* 40: 182-198.

Miller, G.R. and M. Parks. 1982. "Communication in Dissolving Relationships." In S.W. Duck, ed., *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships* (pp. 127-154). London: Academic Press.

Exercises on Relationship Termination

1. *Model Exercise*: One of the most useful exercises for teaching relationship termination is to have students write a detailed description of a relationship development/termination situation in which they participated. Students are encouraged to write about a variety of types of relationships: friendships, work relations, same sex relationships, as well as opposite sex dating type relationships. After the description has been written, students are given Knapp's ten stages, DeVito's five stages, and Altman and Taylor's three stages and asked to analyze their relationship according to how they perceived it occurred. Finally, students are asked to rewrite the model based upon their experiences. Almost every relationship will deviate somewhat from the proposed models and students enjoy being able to rewrite the models to reflect how things happen in the "real world."

2. *Analysis of Music Exercise*: Have students select their favorite termination song, make a cassette tape of the song, and prepare a handout containing the words to the song. Each student is provided five minutes to explain why they selected the particular song, do an analysis of the words according some model of relationship termination, and play an excerpt from the song. Another version of this exercise is for the instructor to provide the class with a song and have each student write a 1-3 page analysis of the lyrics applying a termination model. A third version of this exercise is to have students do an analysis of the top ten songs for a particular week. How many of the songs are relationship termination songs? Or different types of music may be used. Some class members could analyze the top forty of country music, others rock and still others could use jazz.

Listed below are examples of song titles which an instructor can use during this exercise.

Song Title	Musician
Dreams	Stevie Nicks
If Leaving Me Is Easy	Phil Collins
I Don't Care Anymore	Phil Collins

Hello, I Must Be Going	Phil Collins
Never Say Goodbye	Bon Jovi
You're Still My Man	Whitney Houston
1000 Umbrella's	XTC Skylarking
'Til I Can Make It On My Own	Kenny Rogers
I Miss You	Klymax
My Loves Leavin'	Steve Winwood
No One in the World	Anita Baker
No More Tears	Anita Baker
Funny How Love Is	Fine Young Cannibals
Morristown	Nashvillle Bluegrass Band
Nevermind	Replacements
This Time	INXS
All Cried Out	Lisa Lisa

3. ***Termination Card Exercise***: This exercise allows students to display their creativity while at the same time allowing them to show some application of a theoretical principle. Recently, Hallmark Greeting Cards has begun to market a line of divorce/termination cards. While these cards are rather mild in their approach, the possibilities are limitless. The assignment calls for students to produce a termination card and bring it to class. An actual card should be made. Each student is then allowed 2-3 minutes to show their card and explain the theoretical proposition their card represents.

SOURCES

Albert, Stuart and S. Kessler. 1978. "Ending Social Encounters." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14: 541-553.

Altman, I., and D.A. Taylor. 1973. *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Anderson, S.A. 1988. "Parental Stress and Coping During the Leaving Home Transition." *Family Relations*, 37: 160-164.

Baxter, L.A. 1979. "Self-Disclosure as a Relationship Disengagement Strategy: An Exploratory Investigation." *Human Communication Research*, 5: 215-222.

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Cody, M.J. 1982. "A Topology of Disengagement Strategies and an Examination of the Role Intimacy, Reactions to Inequity, and Relational Problems Play in Strategy Selection." *Communication Monographs*, 49: 148-170.

Duck, S. 1982. "A Topography of Relationship Disengagement and Dissolution." In S. Duck and R. Gilmartin, eds., *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships*. New York: Academic.

Fisher, H.E. 1987. "The Four-Year Itch." *Natural History*, 22-30.

Jaffe, D.T. and R.M. Kanter. 1976. "Couple Strains in Communal Households: A Four-Factor Model of the Separation Process." *Journal of Social Issues*, 32: 169-190.

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Ragan, S.L. and R. Hopper. 1984. "Ways to Leave Your Lover: A Conversational Analysis of Literature." *Communication Quarterly*, 32: 310-317.

Rose, S. 1984. "How Friendships End: Patterns Among Young Adults." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1: 267-277.

Rusbult, Caryl. 1983. "The Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect Model." *Responses to Dissatisfaction in Close Relationships*, 209-237.

Shapiro, B.Z. 1977. "Friends and Helpers When Ties Dissolve." *Small Group Behavior*, 8: 469-477.

Stewart, J. 1977. *Bridges Not Walls*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Vaughan, D. 1986. *Uncoupling*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.