

# 12 The Decision to Divorce: Changes in the Narrative about the Marriage

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This paper examines the changes that take place in narrative about the marital relationship when, during the course of marital therapy, a couple comes to the decision to divorce. These changes fall into four general themes. The first three themes: long-held resentments, divergence from the ideal, and positives into negatives, emerge early in the therapy and form the basis of the fourth theme, disillusionment, which signals the end of the relationship. As disillusionment emerges in the narrative, the partners' abilities to acknowledge positive aspects of each other, and of the relationship as a whole, diminishes. Positive memories cannot be recalled, and the entire existence of the relationship is questioned. This narrative shift appears to signal the beginning of the emotional withdrawal necessary for physical separation to take place.

Much of the research into the psychology of marriage and divorce has concentrated on the patterns of communication between marital partners (eg. Gottman, 1997), or on the strength of factors involved in the commitment of the couple to stay united (eg. Johnson et al., 1999). Little has been written about those issues aired in marital therapy that may be seen to presage a couple's decision to separate and divorce. This paper presents an analysis of narratives about marriage and the decision to divorce provided by couples who presented for marital therapy. Clear themes can be determined which differentiate between those couples who decided to divorce and those who stayed together in their marriage. Examination of those themes can provide some insight both into the reasons why a couple grow apart, and how the decision to divorce affects their current and retrospective perception and interpretation of the course of their relationship.

Transcripts of the course of therapy (average number of ninety minute sessions = 12, range of sessions = 8 - 14) undertaken by five married couples who decided to divorce were analysed for common themes, following the method described by Riessman (1993). In this paper, I report specifically on the identification of global themes that represented the underlying rationale for the dissatisfaction with their relationship that brought participants to the decision to divorce. As the transcripts were of ongoing psychotherapy sessions, and not the results of research interviews, material was omitted from the analysis that pertained to incidental issues rather than to the issue of the couple

relationship itself (eg. comments about participants' work lives). In this way, it was hoped that a more focused understanding of the couple relationship and its unraveling would be possible.

In addition, transcript narrative analysis studied the way in which the tone of the narrative shifted over time throughout the course of therapy, to try to identify the possible impact of the decision to divorce upon the way in which the separate members of the couple began to explain the decision to themselves, and started to re-frame their understanding of the relationship and its place in the overall context of their lives.

All five couples who decided to divorce had been married for ten or more years. Four of the couples had at least one child. In order to insure that the themes identified reflected only those related to marital break up, two cases of marital therapy with intact couples, matched as closely as possible to the divorcing couples in term of length of marriage and numbers of children, were analysed and themes emerging from that analysis were used to contrast the data about divorce.

For the purposes of this paper the themes that emerged in the divorcing couples' narratives have been grouped into four major categories, namely: long-held resentments; divergence from the ideal; positives into negatives; and, disillusionment. Brief vignettes will be used to illustrate the narrative themes. The first categorical theme is quite self-explanatory. Long-held resentments usually derived from very early on in the relationship, often from the honeymoon. An incident took place which one member of the couple cannot forget, even if they have seemed to "forgive". That incident is revisited in times of distress and anger between the couple, until it becomes almost emblematic of the way in which the person disappointed in the incident comes to see their partner's adequacy, or lack of it, as a spouse.

For example, the Gs were childless and had been married ten years when they entered therapy to try to decide whether they should stay together or separate. They met while in college and had supported each other through early career development and a couple of relocations to different parts of the country. While on honeymoon AG had seen a piece of the local jewellery, a necklace, she really liked and showed it to BG in the hope that he would buy it for her as a memento of the honeymoon. Instead, BG bought another, more expensive, necklace that AG did not like. Throughout the marriage the necklace incident was raised as an example of BG's insensitivity to AG and as an example of the way in which he obviously did not listen to her or know and respect her tastes and requests. By the time this couple came in for therapy the necklace incident had been revisited numerous times in the course of angry interchanges, and while BG consistently explained his reasons for the "wrong" necklace and apologized, AG could not let the matter rest. When the issue was raised in therapy AG's anger was strong and appeared to be as fresh as if the incident had occurred the previous week instead of over ten years ago.

I told him what I wanted but he didn't listen. He never listens. How could he even think that I'd like that other necklace - it was showy and ugly and NOT LIKE ME. He just doesn't really know me - who I really am.

In a similar vein, CS, married to DS for almost fifteen years with three children, could not forgive the fact that D had not been immediately available to her on the day her father had died, six years ago. D had been out of town on a course and had tried to get back as soon as he could after hearing the news of the death, but had arrived the next day. CS considered his absence as a betrayal of her and as a graphic example of D's inability to "*be there when I need him*". D was then able to recite various other examples of this flaw in C's character, but the incident of her father's death became the central theme in her anger and disappointment with C.

The second narrative theme that seems to dominate in divorcing couples is that of divergence from the ideal. In this situation, one spouse appears to have a clear idea about the way in which the other *should* behave, often based upon an image of an ideal wife or husband. All disappointments are experienced as divergences from this ideal, which itself appears often to be modeled either upon a parent or a previous lover who was "perfect". In these cases, that person is often introduced into exchanges between the couple through a statement such as "*If only you were more like ...*". In extreme anger that can change to "*If only I'd married --- instead*". In either case, this is a very damaging theme as, while the long-held resentment theme described above is often organized around a particular incident, which reflects a particular character trait, this theme attacks the psychological being of the not-Ideal spouse.

In some cases this theme has simmered under the surface of the relationship for years, only finally being articulated when the disappointed spouse has made her/his mind up to leave. For example, MC married DC on the rebound from a very tumultuous and passionate relationship. In his heart he constantly compared his calm, low-key wife with the previous lover. He talks about trying over the years to encourage her to become more sexually adventurous and more expressive of her feelings. After fourteen years of marriage and two children he began to verbalise the comparisons he had been carrying in his head for many years and the marriage quickly began to disintegrate. While DC had felt constantly criticized, and had wondered whether MC had really ever loved her, the fact that he had been constantly comparing her to an idealised previous lover destroyed her faith in him and undermined her commitment to the marriage.

I feel like Princess Diana – there was a third person in our marriage too, only I didn't even really know about it or who she was.

Their break-up was very bitter and acrimonious.

The third narrative theme that emerged from the analysis was positives into negatives. In this theme, traits of the partner that were originally seen as positive, and often which were part of the initial attraction to the partner, have now become irritating and annoying and the grounds for criticism and frustration. For example, RJ talks about being attracted to WJ because of her energy and willingness to try new experiences. Now, after eleven years of marriage, he talks of her as being:

mercurial, she cannot stick to one thing and is always disorganized and dashing off on some new project - leaving me to take care of the groundwork at home.

In a similar vein SV describes how fifteen years earlier she was drawn to her sociable, fun-loving husband because his personality was so different from her own rather quiet and shy self. In therapy she complains bitterly about JV and his

constant partying, always wants to be out with the lads. Has to be the centre of attention. He never grew up - doesn't see that life is more than fun and laughs - someone has to be responsible and take care of the house and the kids.

To which JV, in more than one instance, retorts "*That's what I married you for*".

The final theme, disillusionment, is in some ways a superordinate category, as each of the other themes represents some degree of loss of illusion about the spouse. However, this aspect of the narrative is presented as an independent theme because it became dominant in all of the therapy transcripts at the time that the decision to divorce began to coalesce between the members of the couple. Disillusionment represents the realisation on the part of at least one member of the couple that the relationship has become untenable. Phrases such as "*This will never change*", or "*I've given this marriage everything that I can*" illustrate the extent to which the spouse has exhausted her/his ability to cope and has come to see the end of the relationship as inevitable. For example, RJ talked a great deal towards the end of the course of therapy about exhaustion.

I've just had it, I'm exhausted. I feel that I've given about as much as anyone could've - and it hasn't helped. We've come here and you've tried to help us solve our differences and learn to talk to each other better. But, you know what? I can't do it any more. She just won't give an inch and I'm too tired to care anymore. And the worst of it is that our kids will be the ones to suffer the most - she's told me over and over that she'll take them away from me - which hurts, REALLY hurts. But I'm too fucking tired to even fight anymore.

It is important to note here that the themes mentioned above often presented themselves during the course of the therapy in a kind of a dance. One theme would emerge and then subside, another would take its place, perhaps the first would re-emerge or a third theme would surface. This interplay would go on until the clear introduction of the final theme of disillusionment. Once this theme had surfaced the others diminished, and if raised, were used as supplementary support for the loss of the illusion of the possibility of change.

It is also important to note that in some instances the first three themes would occur in the narratives of the couples who stayed together, but in those cases the appearance was fleeting and tempered by a growing understanding and willingness to accept the partner as who he or she was. For example, ST talks of her husband,

I used to hate it when he'd retreat from an argument and go away to be alone. I like to get the issues into the open and sort it out there and then. But I've learned that's just who he is. He needs to think it through and then come back and talk about it calmly. He doesn't like anger. Me, I'm the emotional one – must have some Italian blood in me!!

Concurrent with the emergence of disillusionment a change in tone regarding the partner becomes evident in the narratives. Most striking is what I will call the *negative focusing* by the couple about each other. It is as if any positive characteristics of the partner cannot be acknowledged, perhaps because they might resurrect hope for the relationship, or cause one or the other to soften resolve about the desire to split up. Whatever the motivation, and it is perhaps mostly unconscious at that, partners begin to magnify the differences between them and to lose sight of, or diminish, any of the attractive or worthwhile aspects of each other's character or personality. For example, MC, mentioned above, talks about his decision to marry DC:

I shouldn't have married her. I think I knew even then that she wasn't right for me - it didn't feel right. I don't think I was ever really in love with her. I know that makes me sound stupid, or cruel maybe, but, if we were to meet today I don't think I'd even want to go out with her.

After over ten years of marriage, that is a very negative statement, and dismisses many of the things MC had said earlier about DC's personality and her abilities as a good mother and supportive friend.

In the same vein, any good aspects of the relationship become objectified, especially around the children, or around a particular period in the life of the relationship. More than one person talked about the children of a marriage as "*The only good thing about this relationship*", which excises from conscious recognition any good times the couple might have enjoyed. Some people were

able to keep a few more positive memories about the marriage, “*The best times were when we lived in Manchester*”.

The move to a decision to divorce seems to require each partner to look more exclusively at the negative aspects of their partner and the course of the relationship, as a means of starting to disengage from the closeness of the relationship. When one partner is unable to do this, the enduring connection, and the pain brought by the impending loss of the partner, are very intense.

In conclusion, analysis of therapy narratives provides a valuable resource for use in our developing understanding of the forces within a marital relationship that can lead to its dissolution. It is difficult to know whether the themes identified in this paper represent a picture that can be generalized to all divorcing couples. Couples who come for marital therapy may represent a particular subset of the population as a whole. Even if that is the case, the themes presented here indicate possible important areas of therapeutic insight and intervention.

Divorce, or the break-up of any committed relationship, is an extremely painful experience, with serious emotional, social and economic consequences for all members of the immediate family and the larger society. Our growing understanding of the forces inside a relationship that cause it to disintegrate is important, and may have implications for preventive education. However, it would be irresponsible to write a paper such as this without reference to the importance in our society of contemporary ideas about love and romance. It may be that aspects of falling in love create situations where illusion and images of the Ideal are inevitable. But, as the narrative analysis described above indicates, these aspects of romance can create serious difficulties for a couple over time, unless they are tempered by realism and understanding. If that is so, then we need to pay greater attention to the narratives of enduring intimate relationships, ones that have not been eroded by disillusionment, to learn more about the ways in which romantic idealism develops into enduring love.

## **References**

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