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INTERPRETATIONS OF DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN INTIMATE PARTNERS ACCORDING TO DIALECTIC APPROACH

Abstract:

Intimate relationships constitute the most important interpersonal communication area in people's lives. Communication has a key role in starting, maintaining and mending a relationship. A sound relationship with one's family, friends, colleagues, etc., is the root of communication goals of a person and it also influences that person's other relationships. By their nature, human beings want to achieve satisfaction in their relationships and this is often closely related to the need of being loved and approved. In an intimate relationship, each individual improves the welfare of another person. Intimate relationships are communal relationships. Relational dialectics theory explains intimate relationships as the continuous manifestation of new dialectics by the interactions of two different parties, and organization of the relationship by these dynamics. According to Baxter (1993), Baxter and Montgomery (1996), Montgomery and Baxter (1998) and Baxter and Braithwaite (2008), relational dialectics theory focuses on communication dynamics of the relationship and each relationship consists of innate contradictions. These contradictions are conceptualized as dialectics. Intimate partners are the focus of intimate relationships. Dialectic approach considers the relationship between intimate partners as progress and contradiction. Changes may occur and harmony may be achieved in subjects, which are perceived as differences within the process. Contradiction, however, is discussed interdependently and reciprocally, and it deals with closeness and autonomy interactions of partners. While similarities are more evident in the early stages of a relationship (age, education level, social class, activities and interests, personality, cognitive style etc.), individuals begin to realize the differences as the time goes by and these differences constitute the internal and external dialectical contradictions. In this study, the authors attempted to find an answer to the following question: "How intimate partners make sense of differences and similarities between them". Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with 7 couples/partners and the obtained results were analyzed through qualitative content analysis method.

Keywords:

intimate relationships; intimate partners; relational dialectic approach

JEL Classification: Z00

Introduction

Similarity in interpersonal relationships has been studied for years in different field of studies. It has been stated that although differences can be seen at the beginnings of the relationships as well as similarities, people usually notice them in the later stages of the relationships because they focus on the similarities more.

Relational dialects theory focuses on interpersonal communications among people. The theory explains that in intimate relationships new dialectics constantly occur and the relationship reorganizes itself accordingly. In this sense, attraction-similarity model explains that in interpersonal relationships similarities between the couples cause attraction. The present study aims to reveal how intimate partners make sense of differences and similarities of each other based on contradictions assumptions of dialectic approach.

Differences and similarities in intimate relationships according to dialectical approach

According to Bakhtin (1981) dialectical approach is based on dialogue extralocality; in other words it is based on the dialogue between two or more people. Each person in a dialogue has concrete temporal spatial position and this makes him/her gain unique features. This situation reveals that every person has different point of view and perception than the other. For this reason, each relationship is defined as dialectic opposition. Baxter (2004) states that in dialectical perspectives the core concept is the contradiction, which means that each individual is a unity of opposites. In other words, he refers this as "a tale of voices" and explains as "the contradiction-ridden dialogue of relating".

Dialectic theory is basically based upon four concepts: contradiction, change, totality, and praxis (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). "Contradiction refers to the dynamic interplay between unified opposites In general phenomena are opposites if they are actively incompatible and mutually negate one another definitionally, logically, or functionally" (Baxter and Montgomery, 1998). Second assumption is change. Dialectic requires a constant change. In this concept, differences and similarities between people show dialectic features and they bring perpetual change into their lives (Root, 2013). Third assumption is praxis; this implies how people comprehend other people's choices of communication. The last assumption of dialectic is totality. This refers to interdependence of contradictions. In order to understand relationships, phenomena are emphasized (Baxter and Montgomery, 1966). Within this context, contradictions in relationships are interpreted according to individuals; their similarities and differences can be defined interdependently, and this can only be put forward within the context of relationships.

From a dialectical perspective, positivity and negativity are regarded as main contradiction in close relationships (all interpersonal relationships). In this sense;

although negativity has oppose qualities, it is considered as both inevitable and necessary for relationships. “Similarity and difference are united terms, they are also opposites; total similarity negates difference, just as total difference negates similarity”. (Baxter and West, 2003). In other words, similarity and difference are connected with each other. It would be hard to say that there are only similarities and differences in a relationship. In fact, similarities and differences contribute to explain the meaning. Dialectical contradictions have the characteristic of interdependency; in this regard, relational dialectics includes complexity of relationships; it is based on the meanings constructed with multiple evaluations of partners in relationships. This requires definitions that are practiced through experiences and using dialectical reasoning (Dumlao and Janke, 2012).

“Similarity and difference may be united in both loose and tight ways” (Baxter and West, 2003, p.496). If partners constantly focus on contradictions in a relationship and this creates oppositional force in the relationship, it is seen that they define themselves as separate segment, unit of the opposites. This segmentation is defined as loose dialectical unity (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). On the contrary, if the partners co-present in the same phenomenon in both positive and negative way, this is characterized as tight dialectical unity (Baxter and West, 2003). Cools (2011) addresses typology of internal and external dialectical contradictions with a dialectic approach and discusses each internal and external contradiction in three aspects: integration separation, dialectic of stability-change, dialectic of expression-privacy.

Table 1: Typology of internal and external dialectical contradictions

	Dialectic of Integration-Separation	Dialectic of Stability-Change	Dialectic of Expression-Privacy
Internal	Connection-Autonomy	Predictability-Novelty	Openness-Closedness
External	Inclusion-Seclusion	Conventionality-Uniqueness	Revelation-Concealment

Source: Cools, 2011 adapted by Baxter, 1993; 1997; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996

As it can be seen in the Table 1. dialectic of integration has sub-dimensions as separation, connectivity and autonomy, and they are defined according to social division or social solidarity between the partners. Dialectic of stability-change aspect addresses the issue of stability and flux between the partners and is based on the beliefs and the expectations from each other. And dialect of expression-privacy aspect means the evaluation of expressed and disclosed versus what is not expressed and disclosed.

Similarities and differences in intimate relationships according to the attraction-similarity model

There are three principle theoretical explanations related to why similarities affect relationships in a positive way (Baxter and West, 2003). The first one of these is Byrne’s

(1971) study of attitude similarity and initial attraction. According to Byrne (1971) as individuals obtain true information about each other and share this information, they receive approval, and this strengthens the relationship in a positive way. In this context, the similarities between individuals enable this positive strengthening better than anything. The second one depends on the ideas of Berger and Calabrese (1975) that in interpersonal relationships the similarities would enable predictability and for that reason, it would cause showing less effort and much higher level of trust. The Third one, according to Werner and Parmelee (1979) the similarities in the relationships appears as activity similarity than attitudinal similarity and that strengthens the individuals' guesses of the activities of one another's. In time, what is provided is the demonstration attitudinal similarity more than activity similarity.

Duck (1994) states that in relationships individuals focus on the similarities during the entire processes of checking, balancing, and adjusting to others and the perception of similarity is constantly there and never fades away. On the other hand, it is also stated that in relationships the differences create a perception of not approving one another or causing problems. In contrast to the idea of differences generally brings about negativities or perceived as problems in relationships, Wood et.al. (1994) state that differences carry a great deal of positive meanings such as facilitating identity and autonomy of each partner and feeling secure in a relationship.

Morry (2011) explains the attraction–similarity model as “The attraction–similarity model indicates that across a variety of voluntary relationships, attraction to other people leads individuals to perceive these others as being similar to the self”. In this context, the individuals in the relationship are attracted to each other on the basis of their similarities, having a much more satisfying relationship, while dissolve relationships appears on the basis of dissimilarities or differences. (Morry, 2007). Having a great number of similarities in a relationship is perceived as benefits and the individuals feel themselves as understood and validated, in positive moods, (decreased loneliness)and less lonely, in a way the similarities between one another enables the perception of “the projections of the self”(Morry, 2003). At the same time, it is stated that the perception of the similarities in relationships provides consonance and reduces potential conflicts thus enables the long-term compatibility in the end (Morry et.al., 2011).

In a relationship when there are similarities such as partners' personality, value system, attitudes, it is stated that the relationship has been evaluated as positive in terms of quality and satisfaction (Luo and Klohnen, 2005). At this point, Sprecher (2013, p.181) explains that related results can show differences according to “actual similarity (the degree to which two people are actually similar) and perceived similarity (the degree to which similarity is perceived with the other). However, Morry (2003) draws the attention, at the same point, to the dependence of the issue on this statement: “these perceptions reflect a projection of the self rather than matching the intimate's self-ratings”

In Intimate relationships, the saturation of the relationship is evaluated in a positive relation to the partner's reciprocal disclosure and it is expressed that the disclosure also shows positive effects on the conflict resolution (Morry, 2007). Moreover, it is stated that the usage of affectionate messages in an intimate relationship also helps conflict resolution and mask the inappropriate feelings at the same time (Horan and Booth-Butterfield, 2013).

Having similar personalities has a positive impact on individuals' satisfaction in their relationships since the partners have similar emotional experiences (Kaufmann, 2011). It has been revealed that the relationship between the perception of similarity and satisfaction in relationship are closely related to communication styles. In similar communication styles partners want to spend more time to communicate with each other, can express themselves, manage conflicts and thus they can reach satisfaction in their relationships (Marquez et.al, 2015).

Method

Participants

Completed data were obtained from 7 couples/partners (they are in romantic relationships) recruited from undergraduate students in Faculty of Communication. The mean age of 14 participants was $SD= 23$ years; range 20-27 years. The mean duration of the relationship range 6 months- 4 years. Participants were chosen by using random sampling method and they contributed in the research voluntarily on condition that they must be in a relationship for more than 6 months (in order to establish differences and similarities).

Procedures

The purpose of this research is to reveal "how partners make sense of differences and similarities and how they define these differences and similarities". Accordingly, sub problems of this study are as follows:

RQ1: How intimate partners make sense of differences and similarities between them?

RQ2: Which differences and similarities do the partners define in each other?

In order for the couples to reveal similarities and difference in their relationships in-depth interview method was used in the study. "In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation" (Boyce and Palena 2006). During the in-depth interviews, participants were asked open ended questions. Open ended questions enables participants to fully explain their point of views and experiences (Turner, 2010). Open-ended questions also led the interview to become a dialogical interview. "The dialogic interview exposes its own means of production" (Denzin, 2001). In this sense, couples contributed to explain or make additional definitions on one another's questions.

Participants answered the questions in a private location where they felt comfortable. The interviews were at least 60 minutes and 140 minutes at most. The interviews were recorder with a tape recorder and the conversations were transcribed into a document. The obtained data from the transcription was 90 single spaced pages.

Analysis

The research design is defined as a phenomenological research design. Creswell defined phenomenological research design as “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their shared experiences of a concept or a phenomenon”. Qualitative content analysis method was used to analyze the research data. Krippendorff (1969) explains the "content analysis as the use of replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source". The data was coded by two different person based on the codes that was published in Leslie A. Baxter, Lee West's article “Couple perceptions of their similarities and differences: A dialectical perspective Dispositional Personality Attributes, Leisure Time Pursuits, Demographic or Family Backgrounds, Attitudes and Beliefs, Communication Style” in 2003. The codes were categorized as differences – similarities or negative-positive attributes. A third person checked the codes and the final data were formed. In the research, two more aspects (attitudes/behaviors as jealousy and friends) were added in list of Baxter and West (2003).

Results

Participant's answers concerning their differences and similarities, information regarding relevant aspects that is acquired through establishing dialogues between each other and the answers of participants are given below in a detailed way.

Dispositional Personality Attributes

The fact that all participants except one couple differ from each other in terms of personality attributes can be explained as "opposite poles attract each other". Participants state that they usually differ from one another in terms of personal traits by identifying the other side as patient-impatient, hypercritical-superficial, affectionate-uncaring, smarty-humble, optimistic-pessimistic, emotional-rational, petulant-calm.

Couple 7:

"Our emotional frame of mind is different, I am more emotional. S/he is petulant. S/he does not like loud noise and tension. S/he likes tranquility. I prefer ignoring in some cases, s/he does not. I am braver but C. is more timid." Participant M. (30 years)

"S/he is right. S/he is hastier and more impatient than me. S/he wants everything to happen immediately. I am more patient. S/he is more petulant than me. I am not easily-angered but my anger lasts more. S/he calms down instantly." Participant C. (23 years)

Leisure Time Pursuits

It is seen that the most similar case of all participants is their leisure time pursuits. Even though partners do not show similarities with each other completely, they prefer to agree with the opinion of the other and respect it. It is seen that couples choose going to places like cinema, cafe or seaside in order to spend their free time.

Couple 7:

"We decide together what to do in our leisure time. D. always prioritizes what I want to do and makes suggestions accordingly." Participant B. (23 years)

"B's choices are usually right, doing what B likes makes me happy." Participant D. (27 years)

Couple 1:

"We are generally at university on weekdays, we meet at the cafe in break times. As for weekends, we go either to the cinema or seaside. We plan it together on weekdays. If it is cinema, E is a bird-dogging of the latest movies and I agree with what he chooses." Participant I. (21 years)

"When we say: 'OK, what to do now?', we see that we want to do the same things." Participant E. (21 years)

Demographic or Family Backgrounds

While demographic characteristics and domestic backgrounds show similarity only in one couple, it is determined that there are differences in other couples regarding where their parents live, the number of siblings, occupations of family members, income state of the family, the family's being an extended or elementary family. These differences are thought to cause problems in relationships like female partners' going out at night.

Couple 3:

"I am the only child of my family. I am allowed to go out for a short period of time because I am a girl. However, T. just does not get it." Participant M. (20 years)

"I understand the issue of time but I do not understand why she is coming to the date with her mother. Her mother leaves her and then takes her at the end. I am under a lot of stress. Naturally, every date of us includes quarrels." Participant T. (23 years)

Another topic is that the number of siblings in the family and existence of younger siblings. Sometimes they cause the other partner not to be able comprehend the situation, which leads to arguments.

Couple 2:

"I have a younger sibling. My parents expect me to take care of and play with my sibling when I come home. However, because of the fact that E. does not have a sibling, s/he

cannot understand such kind of responsibility and love. S/he can even say that 'let your mother do this'." Participant T. (21 years)

"It is not like that actually. It is like when T. arrives home, s/he forgets me. It seems T. places more importance on her/his sibling." Participant E. (23 years)

It is stated that age difference between the couple may sometimes cause arguments, but sometimes it may be an enhancer factor for the relationship.

Attitudes and Beliefs

What the participants differ from each other the most about attitudes is attitudes towards family and friends. Most of the participants say that while they are alike in their perspectives on life, evaluation and interpretation of events, trust and being compassionate etc., they are different from each other in their attitudes towards family and friends.

Couple 1:

"We have the same attitude towards family. Family is very important for both of us. It is even our most important priority." Participant E. (21 years)

"Yes, E. is absolutely right. Demographic features and mindset of our families are the same. It is as if we grew up in the same family." Participant I. (21 years)

At this point, the couple accepts that they are very much alike in their attitudes towards family and they even think and feel the same things but there are some small differences at certain points.

Couple 5:

"We both value our family so much, especially our mothers. We love spending time with our family; it is important for us to be with them and support them." Participant M (27 years)

"But M met my family; my family is more open-minded. However I haven't met his parents even though we have been seeing each other for 15 months." Participant T(23 years)

"She hasn't met my family yet because in our family when meeting the girlfriend means marriage. We think it is too soon for marriage so I haven't introduced her to my family yet. At this point our families are different." Participant M (27 years)

While some participants share the same belief, some have different ones. It has been observed that couples have conflicts about beliefs because of differences and even if they come to an agreement about their differences, they still see that as a problem.

Couple 2:

"We both have similar beliefs. I am an atheist and E is a deist. She still believes in something. I respect that but sometimes I make a joke about it." Participant T. (21 years)

“I agree with T. I believe in God. He teases me sometimes and I feel bad about it. It can cause problems.” Participant E. (23 years)

Communication Style

Participants have expressed that they are different from each other in terms of communication styles. However, couples being in the relationship for a longer time have mentioned that their communication styles started to show resemblance in time. They define their differences as talkative-reticent, direct-indirect communication, using more intimate words-talking like a co-worker, emotional-reasonable, certain-uncertain, serious-humorist.

Couple 2:

“E. talks loud and clear. S/he explains what s/he is talking about. S/he tries to make me accept her thoughts. S/he usually uses positive statements.” Participant T. (21 years)

“Unlike me, s/he likes talking indirectly. S/he expects me to understand. Sometimes s/he can use rude or bad words..” Participant E. (23 years)

Couple 3:

“We both act like we know it all when communicating. We are very similar at this point. However I use the same communication style in every situation. I like talking so I just keep talking usually.” Participant T. (23 years)

“Unlike her I choose different communication styles according to the occasion. I don’t talk very much and like talking short but to the point but I am a good listener.” Participant G. (20 years)

Attitudes/Behaviors as Jealousy and Friends

In the research while defining their differences and similarities, partners have provided data especially about their jealousy-related behaviors and their attitudes and behaviors towards their friends.

Jealousy

Participants have stated that jealousy is about partners’ having different perspectives so it can be defined as a difference. All participants’ jealousy is the most important difference and it is the main reason of conflicts between partners. About jealousy, partners have mentioned different perspectives such as owning-belonging, not trusting others-not trusting his/her partner, lack of self-confidence-gaining dominance, not letting his/her partner do anything on her/his own – being an individual.

Couple 7:

“At first D wasn’t jealous at all. Interestingly enough he can be jealous of men who he shouldn’t be jealous of” Participant B. (23 years)

“She has always been jealous. In our relationship we had a trust issue. After that her jealousy just increased. Unnecessary jealousy has become suffocating.” Participant D. (27 years)

Friends

Participants have expressed that differences and similarities in attitudes and behaviors towards friends are important, too. At this point, all partners but one meet each other's friends and like spending time with them. However, all partners feel uncomfortable about a friend whom they don't know. One of the couples respect the other when he/she spends time alone with his/her own friends, the other couple is jealous of the time spent with friends and can cause trouble because of it. And this is defined as a difference.

Conclusion

In the light of the data obtained from the research, the couples defined the differences as communication style, attitudes and beliefs, dispositional personality attributes, and they defined similarities as leisure time pursuits, and attitudes towards their friends. While defining differences and similarities of each other, participants have expressed that they have been very clear and certain especially about demographic or family backgrounds but about other things they couldn't decide until they know each other better, related issues come up and they have a conflict about it. They have said that they like having similarities and it strengthens their relationship and those similarities make them feel like a couple. On the other hand, they have added that their differences cause conflicts and make them upset but interestingly those differences somehow remind them of their being an individual and creates an appeal to get to know the other better.

Contradiction, change, totality, and praxis, four main concepts of dialectic theory (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996), can be said to exist in the relationship between couples in this research. It can be said that partners interpret the other's communication style, they change in time and adapt themselves to each other or lose their harmony, the relationship has similarities but also contradictions, every relationship has its own phenomenon to be analyzed and it can only be analyzed in its own context. According to Baxter and West's (2003) “Similarity and difference may be united in both loose and tight ways” statement, when the data is evaluated it can be seen that partners who has less differences in their relationship define it more satisfactory and happy but those who has more differences in their relationship love being together but want each other to change and feel uneasy. Also, this observation supports Byrne's (1971) statement that when getting to know each other and sharing increases approval, it strengthens the relationship. Duck's (1994) statement that in every phase of the relationship both differences and similarities are detected means that partners who have been in the relationship not for a long time are aware of this but because they keep getting to know each other they are very pleased with their relationship. When this is evaluated according to Morry's (2011) the attraction–similarity model, it can be seen that even though partners

have many differences, they cannot be defined as dissolve relationships. However based on partners who have a long time relationship, differences reduce and turn into similarity and the relationship becomes much more satisfactory for the partners.

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