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Original

Characterization of a breakup in couples of university students: Differences in cognitive assessment of the event☆

Caracterización de una ruptura de pareja en universitarios y diferencias en la evaluación cognoscitiva del evento

Miriam Wendolyn Barajas Márquez*, Cinthia Cruz del Castillo, Jaime Fuentes Balderrama

Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico

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Abstract

The aim of this investigation was to analyze differences between young people who had a positive assessment of breakups and those who had a negative assessment, divided in turn by gender, in relation to the following variables: level of importance, level of commitment, duration of relationship, ways of loving, reasons for breaking up, coping styles, and level of depression resulting from the breakup. To that end, we conducted Student *t* tests with each of the variables involved. 326 university students age 17–26 (122 men and 204 women) who had recently gone through a breakup in their sentimental relationships participated in the study. Differences were found between women who assessed their breakups positively and those who assessed them negatively in relation to level of importance, level of commitment, duration of relationship, lack of sex drive, lack of commitment, rational incompatibility, in evasive coping styles, cognitive-reflexive analysis, ludic loving style, and total level of depression. In the case of men, differences were also found for level of importance, level of commitment, and coping styles: evasive, cognitive-reflexive analysis, and denial.

Keywords: Couple characterization; Breakup; Cognitive assessment; Reasons for breakup; University students

Resumen

Debido a la naturaleza de una ruptura de pareja y a los hallazgos en la literatura en torno a este tema, es posible considerarla como un evento estresante. No obstante, para conocer su impacto real resulta necesario indagar sobre la evaluación cognoscitiva realizada por el individuo ante dicho evento. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue analizar las diferencias entre los jóvenes que hicieron una evaluación positiva de la ruptura y aquellos que hicieron una evaluación negativa, divididos a su vez por sexo, en cuanto a las siguientes variables: nivel de importancia, nivel de compromiso, duración de la relación, estilos de amor, motivos de ruptura, estilos de enfrentamiento y nivel de depresión a consecuencia de la ruptura. Para ello se realizaron pruebas de la t de Student con cada una de las variables involucradas. Participaron en el estudio 326 jóvenes universitarios de 17 a 26 años (122 varones y 204 mujeres) que habían atravesado recientemente por la ruptura de una relación de noviazgo. Se encontraron diferencias entre aquellas mujeres que evaluaron positivamente su ruptura y las que evaluaron negativamente con respecto al nivel de importancia, nivel de compromiso, duración de la relación, desinterés físico sexual, falta de compromiso, incompatibilidad racional, en los estilos de enfrentamiento evasivo, análisis cognitivo-reflexivo, en el estilo de amor lúdico y en nivel total de depresión. En el caso de los varones, también se encontraron diferencias para el nivel de importancia, el nivel de compromiso y para los estilos de enfrentamiento: evasivo, análisis cognitivo-reflexivo y negación.

Palabras clave: Caracterización de pareja; Ruptura de pareja; Evaluación cognoscitiva; Motivos de ruptura; Jóvenes universitarios

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: miriamwen.bm@hotmail.com (M.W. Barajas Márquez).

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The couple relationship is one of the most significant bonds for a person. Many researchers have emphasized its importance (e.g. Buss, 2004; Fisher, 2005; Locker, McIntosh, Hackney, Wilson, & Wiegand, 2010). In that regard, it has been found to produce significant levels of wellness for both members due to the quantity of pleasant feelings it entails (Becerril, 2001). In fact, several studies have shown that people who are married or have a stable partner enjoy higher levels of psychological wellness and emotional equilibrium, greater perceived social support, and better health, compared with those without a partner (Myers, 2000; Vivaldi & Barra, 2012).

Because it represents so important a bond, the breakup of a couple relationship can be a very painful event for the person experiencing it, causing confusion, malaise, and anguish, among other negative feelings, and emotions such as high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Gary & Lewandowski, 2009). Consequently, it can be qualified as a stressing event. In fact, it has been found that problems with one's partner and/or breakups were the second most common category of traumatic events reported by participants in this study, behind only the death of a loved one, which underscores the importance people tend to ascribe to their sentimental relationships (Kloss & Leissman, 2002; Park & Blumberg, 2002; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002).

In this context, a stressing event is defined as one in which the individual feels that her safety and wellbeing are in danger, and needs to respond to the environment with the cognitive tools she possesses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). Such a response may be active (where the individual acts on the environment, attempting to modify it) or passive (where the individual changes himself to own adjust to the demands of the event). However, not all events are assessed equally, given that, whereas one person may consider an event dangerous and a drain on her resources, someone else may consider it irrelevant and even positive. Thus, to analyze a breakup's impact on an individual, we need to know his cognitive assessment of the event (Lazarus, 1994).

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), there are five possible ways to assess an event:

(1) Irrelevant: When the event has no implications for the person.
(2) Positive: When the consequences of the event are assessed as positive.
(3) Harmful: When the event is thought to have caused physical or mental harm.
(4) Threatening: When the individual perceives potential harm or loss.
(5) Challenging: When it is considered necessary to overcome a confrontation to obtain a benefit.

On the other hand, differences have been found between women and men in relation to levels of perceived stress, with a higher prevalence among women. For women, stress commonly manifests in the form of depression and eating disorders, whereas men tend to manifest stress by searching for experiences in extreme situations such as violent behavior or alcohol and drug abuse (Pereyra, 1995).

About coping styles by gender when going through breakups in Mexico, Diaz-Loving, Valdez, and Perez (2005) observed that men handle separation by consuming alcohol and spending time with friends and acquaintances as a means of evading the problem, while women tend to become depressed, take refuge in their families, and entertain ruminative thoughts about their former partner. On the other hand, Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) found that using strategies based on cognitive processing such as "positive reinterpretation" of a breakup, may be the best ways to cope with the situation, because they are strongly related to positive emotions, whereas coping strategies such as "ventilating the problem and constant complaining" are more strongly associated with negative emotions.

In addition to cognitive assessment, there are other elements which, according to the literature, may influence the impact of a breakup, such as level of perceived importance of the partner, level of commitment involved, loving styles – defined as an ideology of personal expression unique to love (Lee, 1977) – coping strategies – which are an individual's efforts to manage internal or external demands which are seen as stressing (Lazarus, 1993) – and who makes the decision to terminate the relationship (Waller, 2008; Locker et al., 2010), among others.

Accordingly, the purpose of this investigation was to identify differences between participants who had a positive assessment of their breakups and those who had a negative assessment, divided in turn by gender, in relation to level of perceived importance and commitment, duration of relationships, loving styles, reasons for breakup, coping strategies, and level of depression resulting from the stressing event.

Based on findings from prior research, we would expect to observe significantly higher means for level of importance, level of commitment, duration of relationship, and level of depression in the group of participants who had a negative assessment of their breakups. Regarding loving styles, we would expect to find higher means for agape and maniac loving styles among those who had a negative assessment, and higher means in the erotic, amicable, pragmatic, and ludic styles among those who had a positive assessment.

In the case of reasons for breakup, we would expect those involving a person's own decision to end the relationship to have higher means in positive assessment, with higher means in negative assessment for reasons related to a decision to end a relationship taken by the other person.

Finally, for coping styles, we expect those considered negative (evasion, denial, distancing, and reflexive cognitive analysis) to obtain higher means in those who assessed their breakup negatively, with positive reassessment shows higher means in those who assessed it positively.

Method

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 1425 young people. Then individuals were selected who had ended a couple relationship in the last nine months, leaving a final sample made up by 326

university students (122 men = 37.4% and 204 women = 62.6%). The age range was 17–26 years and 11 months (M = 20 years and 5 months; SD = 1 year and 9 months) and time since the last breakup varied from 9 months and 15 days (M = 3 months and 12 days; M = 6 months; SD = 2 months and 12 days). Of 100% of the sample, 59.5% were enrolled in public schools and 40.5% in private schools.

Instruments

To assess the characteristics of the last couple relationship, we applied an ad hoc questionnaire (see Annex 1), which enquired about level of perceived importance and commitment (using a visual analog scale), total duration of the relationship, and time since the breakup, among other questions of interest. Also, we applied a questionnaire which included the following instruments:

- Ojeda's Scale of Loving Styles (short version) (1998), in Likert response format, with a total of 24 questions such as: I proceeded carefully before committing to my partner; I am jealous of everything my partner does, etc.
- The Coping Styles Instrument by Zavala, Rivas, Andrade, and Reidl (2008), made up by 20 questions with four response options, such as: I dreamed or imagined that things were better; I went on as if nothing had happened, etc.
- The Barajas and Cruz Reasons for Breakup Scale (2014), made up by 40 questions in Likert format, such as: I stopped finding my partner physically appealing; she/he stopped attracting me sexually; I wanted to control everything I do; etc.
- Beck's Depression Inventory, validated and standardized for the Mexican population by Jurado et al. (1998), which includes 21 groups of sentences which examine the presence of symptoms related to depression.

On the other hand, cognitive assessment was measured by means of the question: *My breakup with my former partner was...* with five response options: irrelevant, positive, harmful, threatening, and challenging. This indicator was adapted from the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The options irrelevant and positive were subsequently regrouped under positive assessment, while the options harmful, challenging, and threatening were regrouped under negative assessment.

Procedure

As mentioned in the method, a total of 1435 questionnaires were applied at different public and private universities in Mexico City (subject to prior authorization by those universities). To encourage honesty in responses, participants were informed orally and in writing that their responses would be completely anonymous and confidential, for purely statistical purposes, and that the purpose of the study was to determine how we behave in and after a couple relationship. Finally, considering time since breakup, we selected questionnaires answered by participants who had ended their relationships in the last nine months, who made up the final sample.

Subsequently, the sample was divided between men and women, and in turn subdivided between those who had assessed their breakups positively and those who had assessed them negatively. To accomplish the objectives of this investigation, Student t tests were conducted to compare each sub-sample, to wit: women with positive assessment vs. women with negative assessment, and men with positive assessment vs. men with negative assessment.

Results

First, a Student t test was conducted with the group of women, to determine if there were statistically significant differences between those who had a positive assessment of their last breakup and those who had a negative assessment, in relation to level of importance, level of commitment, duration of last relationship, loving styles, reasons for breakup, coping styles, and level of depression (see Table 1).

As the table shows, statistically significant differences were found in the variables: level of perceived importance, level of perceived commitment, and duration of relationship, with women who had a negative assessment obtaining the highest mean in all cases. Likewise, differences were found in ludic loving style, where women who had a positive assessment obtaining the highest mean, and in reasons for breakup: lack of sexual attraction, lack of commitment, and rational incompatibility. Finally, differences were found in coping styles: evasive and reflexive cognitive analysis, and in level of depression, with women who had a negative assessment of their breakups obtaining higher mean scores.

Secondly, we conducted a Student t test among men who had a positive assessment and those who had a negative assessment of their last breakup. In this case, statistically significant differences were found in level of perceived importance, level of perceived commitment, and coping styles: evasion and reflexive cognitive analysis, with those who assessed their last breakup negatively obtaining higher means in all cases (see Table 2).

Discussion

The central purpose of this investigation was to analyze the differences between young people who had a positive cognitive assessment of their last breakup versus those who had a negative assessment (both men and women), in relation to the level of importance of the relationship, level of commitment to the relationship, duration of the relationship, loving styles, reasons for breakup, coping styles, and level of depression produced by the breakup.

Interest in studying such differences is driven, on the one hand, by the potential impact on a person's mental health of the breakup of a couple relationship, which, due to its characteristics, can be considered a stressing event, and on the other, by the importance of considering the person's cognitive assessment of the event, given that, whereas for one person a breakup can be

Table 1
Means of positive cognitive assessment versus negative cognitive assessment of breakups for women in relation to level of importance, level of commitment, duration, loving styles, reasons for breakup, coping styles, and level of depression.

	Positive		Negative		*t*	*p*
	M	SD	*M*	SD		
Perceived importance	5.7	3.18	8.12	1.93	−6.679	.000**
Perceived commitment	5.56	3.18	8.25	2.04	−7.310	.000**
Duration of relationship	1 year 3 m.	1 year 2 m.	1 year 10 m.	1 year 7 m.	−2.748	.007**
Loving styles						
Erotic	3.69	.95	3.86	.88	−1.325	.187
Ludic	1.82	.96	1.42	.66	3.396	.001**
Agape	1.91	.95	2.09	.91	−1.298	.196
Maniac	1.93	.89	2.13	.98	−1.514	.132
Pragmatic	3.37	.75	3.20	.82	1.554	.122
Amicable	3.39	.94	3.39	.88	−.001	.999
Reasons for breakup						
Lack of physical-sexual interest	2.53	.97	2.01	.87	3.836	.000**
Physical-emotional abuse	2.12	1.10	2.14	1.05	−.116	.908
Lack of commitment	2.20	.97	1.85	.82	2.663	.008**
Rational incompatibility	2.83	1.11	2.4	1.24	2.554	.011*
Animosity	2.82	1	2.74	1.12	.527	.598
Emotional conflicts	2.89	1.13	3.15	1.17	−1.612	.108
Incompatible friendships	2.27	1.14	2.28	1.09	−.016	.987
Family incompatibility	2.01	1.10	2.03	1.01	−.142	.887
Coping styles						
Evasion	2	.63	2.33	.63	−3.549	.000**
Positive reassessment	2.95	.66	2.81	.65	1.501	.135
Cognitive-reflexive analysis	1.84	.78	2.11	.76	−2.403	.017*
Denial	2.07	.70	2.24	.72	−1.683	.094
Distancing	2	.59	2	.66	−.023	.982
Total depression	6.73	7.17	9.55	7.83	−2.661	.008**

*$p \leq .05$.
**$p \leq .01$.

one of the most painful times of their life, for another it may lack importance or may even be construed as a positive decision.

About level of perceived importance and level of perceived commitment to the former partner, some authors consider them decisive for satisfaction, deep care, and wellbeing with the partner (Kirby, Baucom, & Peterman, 2005). Also, both factors play a fundamental role in the success or failure of a couple, because they involve a personal decision to love someone and stay by their side (Diaz-Loving & Sanchez, 2004). For the sample analyzed, we observed that individuals (both men and women) who assessed their breakups negatively, in turn expressed the view that the couple relationship was highly significant and that they had felt highly committed to it. This serves to confirm that a relationship which involves feelings of affection, closeness, intimacy, and passion is harder to confront and overcome.

Regarding total duration, differences were found only in the group of women, with those who had a negative assessment obtaining a higher mean. This coincides with the findings reported by Perilloux and Buss (2008), who observed more severe reactions in women who ended a long-standing relationship, due to the perceived cost in terms of time, protection, and support by the partner, which, according to Buss (2004), has its origins in the evolutionary background of our species.

In the case of loving styles, ludic women assessed their last breakups more positively, an interesting finding which perfectly reflects the characteristics of the ludic lover, who is not looking to commit to a single partner but rather to enjoy several relationships at once and have intense, short-time experiences (Lee, 1977). In this context, ludic women assess their last breakups positively, especially if they already have other potential partners in view. However, the main finding in this result involves the transformation contemporary women display in relation to couple relationships. It is important to recall that the sample is made up by university women, whom several authors describe as "liberated women," who defy cultural norms and seek to break out of the mold of traditional womanhood and pair bonding, basing their goals on personal growth, beyond marriage and raising children.

Analyzing reasons for breakups, we found no significant differences between men with a positive assessment and those with a negative assessment. However, women did show differences for reasons of: loss of sexual attraction (defined by loss of physical attraction and desire), lack of commitment (which refers to interest in experimenting with new partners), and rational incompatibility (involving differences in goals, aspirations, likes, and interests), with women with a positive assessment obtaining the highest means in all cases. These results reaffirm our previous remarks regarding the new profile emerging among such women, who are more pragmatic and rational and less passive, which is reinforced by their level of education. Thus, we can

Table 2
Means of positive cognitive assessment versus negative cognitive assessment of breakups for men in relation to level of importance, level of commitment, duration, loving styles, reasons for breakup, coping styles, and level of depression.

	Positive		Negative		*t*	*p*
	M	SD	*M*	SD		
Perceived importance	5.84	2.97	8.29	1.8	−5.55	.000**
Perceived commitment	5.9	2.88	7.84	2.44	−3.992	.000**
Duration of relationship	1 year 2 m.	1 year 3 m.	1 year 4 m.	1 year 4 m.	−.888	.376
Loving styles						
Erotic	4.17	.63	4.27	.65	−.841	.402
Ludic	1.82	.98	1.79	.90	.173	.863
Agape	2.77	1.03	2.79	.82	−.122	.903
Maniac	1.83	.81	2.04	.89	−1.304	.195
Pragmatic	3.31	.79	3.42	.90	−.702	.484
Amicable	3.54	.82	3.71	.82	−1.120	.265
Reasons for breakup						
Lack of physical-sexual interest	2.36	.92	2.32	1	.245	.807
Physical-emotional abuse	2.11	1.01	2.47	1.22	−1.750	.083
Lack of commitment	2.14	.86	2.29	1.09	−.856	.394
Rational incompatibility	2.67	1.06	2.68	1.01	−.023	.981
Animosity	2.55	1.07	2.76	1.07	−1.034	.303
Emotional conflicts	2.78	1.18	3.06	1.25	−1.241	.217
Incompatible friendships	2.57	1.22	2.49	1.18	.344	.731
Family incompatibility	1.90	.94	1.96	.96	−.343	.732
Coping styles						
Evasion	1.87	.66	2.39	.68	−4.207	.000**
Positive reassessment	2.71	.77	2.95	.64	−1.841	.068
Cognitive-reflexive analysis	1.97	.84	2.49	.86	−3.373	.001**
Denial	2.21	.71	2.16	.74	.333	.740
Distancing	1.84	.6	1.95	.62	−1.037	.402
Total depression	6.35	6.62	8.45	7	−1.70	.807

*$p \leq .05$.
**$p \leq .01$.

observe a significant change in women's attitudes toward couple relationships, which is not as evident among men (Barajas, 2014).

In relation to coping styles, we observed interesting results, given that, regardless of gender, participants who used strategies qualified as negative to cope with a stressing event in turn assessed their last breakups negatively. In this case, coping style includes situations such as evading or denying a problem, consuming substances to forget it, etc., whereas the style based on cognitive-reflexive analysis draws on situations which involve emotional distress and feelings of guilt when analyzing the event (Zavala et al., 2008).

Finally, in the case of depression, women who assessed their last breakups as negative in turn scored higher on depression, which confirms the findings reported by numerous investigations, which found a higher prevalence of depression in women due to biological, environmental, and cultural factors.

Conclusions

Although in some cases the results confirmed the expected hypotheses, some of the data point to a change in attitudes among women in the sample toward the end of a couple relationship. Such women, with an above-average level of education, do not conform to the stereotype of the traditional woman, whose primary concern was to find a husband for life and raise a family. In this regard, we suggest further research in this sector of the population, which reveals a gradual change in the roles women assume in contemporary society.

About cognitive assessment, a variable which has not been studied in depth, we observed the fundamental role it plays in the process of coping with a stressing event. Consequently, before investing in intervention to improve coping styles in an individual, we suggest assessing this variable, to determine whether it depends on a personality trait or something more situational. Thus, we can conclude that this investigation, in addition to providing information on the impact breakups have on young couples and how they have changed over time, proposes a more extensive study of the individual's perception and assessment in response to a stressing event.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was not funded by any institution.

Conflicts of interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

For this type of study formal consent is not required.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jbhsi.2017.11.002.

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