Disclosure of Depression through Relational Dialectics

In Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This paper will look at disclosure related to depression in romantic relationships. It will look at this through a relational dialectics framework. It will examine all types of relationships, both current and past, through the eyes of the depressed individual. It will explore the reasons individuals have for and against disclosing their depression. This research will help set the ground work to possibly help with counseling between these types of relational partners in the future.

Research Proposal

Introduction
Disclosure of Depression

This analysis will look at romantic relationships with one depressed individual. It will examine how and why this depressed individual chooses to disclose or not disclose their illness to their partner. It will be examined specifically through a relational dialectics perspective.

Those affected by mental illness communicate in a different way than those of a normal mental health status. Communication patterns in couples with a depressed individual are often defined by the presence of depression (Duggan, 2005).

About 10% of the total American population suffers from depression in any given year (Duggan, 2005). This provides quite a large population for study, yet very few studies in communication have been conducted with a specialization of depression. To better understand the communication methods of a depressed individual we look at the reasons for and against self-disclosure of the illness in romantic relationships.

Self-disclosure can be influenced by such factors as rewards/costs and dialectical tensions (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Baitman, 2008). With this in mind we can look at self-disclosure of depression through a relational dialectics perspective. We can see the reason for self-disclosure as a way of receiving positive feedback, while we see the reasons against self-disclosure as a fear of negative feedback from the other romantic partner. By looking at self-disclosure of depression in romantic partners we can observe how the depressed individual’s communication patterns are changed to adjust to perceived reactions from the non-depressed individual.

This literature review will examine three different aspects of the study. First, it will look at the complexities surrounding mental illness with a concentration on depression. Next, it will look at how self-disclosure affects relationships. Finally, it will look at the pushes and pulls of relational tensions within the relational dialectics theory.
Literature Review

Depression

Depression is a pervasive public health concern with widespread personal, social, and economic consequences (Scott, Caughlin, Mikucki, & Donovan-Kicken, 2009). Depression can impact all of these areas, but the social impact may be considered to be the most important by some. With depression, you can lose some ability to have social interactions with others, specifically romantic interactions. Depression is becoming more and more of an issue in romantic relationships because it is becoming more and more prominent in everyday life.

A recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States indicated that approximately one in twenty Americans suffer from depression (Scott, Caughlin, Mikucki, & Donovan-Kicken, 2009). This is an alarming number of Americans. Also, the World Health Organization estimates that by the year 2020, depression will be a leading cause of disability among citizens of the world, second only to cardiac disease (Scott, Caughlin, Mikucki, & Donovan-Kicken, 2009). This can be seen as a reason for an increase in research on how depression impacts relationships.

Within this research, we see a need for further information to help those with depression. Communicating depression to a romantic partner can present some challenges, specifically challenges with disclosure. Disclosure of depression is an important process to examine because research on disclosure of chronic illness in general indicates that it is through disclosing their condition that people are more able to access social support, minimize feelings of social- and self-stigma, and seek out professional help (Scott, Caughlin, Mikucki, & Donovan-Kicken, 2009). Disclosure in romantic relationships is aimed more towards the social support aspect with the depressed individual disclosing to seek acceptance.
**Self-Disclosure**

Individuals consider numerous factors before disclosing personal or private information, including the closeness of the relationship, the expected response of the target, the timing of the disclosure, and the relationship role of the potential target (Magsamen-Conrad, Greene, Banerjee, & Bagdasarov, 2008). This shows how complex self-disclosure can be, it can strengthen or weaken any romantic relationship. The reciprocation of disclosure is a hallmark of relationship stability and satisfaction (Webster, Brunell, & Pilkington, 2009). When disclosure is reciprocated with acceptance then stability and satisfactions will increase. On the other hand, when disclosure is reciprocated poorly, stability and satisfactions will decrease in the relationship.

This means that disclosure is an important aspect of romantic relationships. Self-disclosure is an intrinsic component of the process by which strangers become acquaintances and then close others (Cumming & Rapee, 2010). Through disclosure we develop through relational levels until we reach that of romantic partners. Even within this romantic relationship, there are still different degrees of romantic closeness that depend on disclosure.

Intimacy in romantic relationships depends in part on a couple’s engagement in intimate conversation (Webster, Brunell, & Pilkington, 2009). The more couples talk about in depth issues, the closer the couples will become. Communication is a key component of any relationship and disclosure is a key component to communication. Therefore, relationships are determined by the amount of disclosure that is communicated.

Self-disclosure may also provide an opportunity for the discloser to receive social support from others (Magsamen-Conrad, Greene, Banerjee, & Bagdasarov, 2008). Two key aspects of intimate interaction are self-disclosure and the partner’s warmth during ones disclosure (Webster, Brunell, & Pilkington, 2009). A romantic partner is more likely to disclose personal information, such as suffering from depression, if previous attempts at disclosure have been met with warmth.
If attempts at disclosure have been met with hostility or negative feedback, then future attempts at disclosure may be kept to a minimum. Closer, more satisfying relationships are nurtured by disclosure and warmth (Webster, Brunell, & Pilkington, 2009). Relationships can only grow from disclosure that is rewarded positively. Without this type of disclosure, romantic relationships will falter and may eventually unravel.

Disclosure can be received both positively and negatively to create a combination of different outcomes. This means that during the evolution of dating relationships, specific and particular events contribute to changes in participant’s perceptions of the relationship and motivation relational movement in either a positive or negative direction (Loveless, Powers, & Jordan). This shifting from a positive to a negative may create some apprehension. This apprehension can also be met with certain needs to express yourself. This battle between needs can be attributed to relational dialectics.

**Relational Dialectics**

A dialectical approach to relationships suggests that in every relationship there are natural tensions between contradictory impulses or dialectics (Cools, 2005). From the perspective of relational dialectics, social life exists in and through people’s communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple opposing tendencies (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This creates a push and pull between the reasons for and against a specific issue. The pushes are the reasons for disclosing information, or the positive ramifications, while the pulls are reasons again disclosure, or the negative ramifications.

One view, based on research of relationship rules and expectations, suggests that openness or honesty is generally desired and expected (Zhang & Stafford, 2009). These desires
and expectations are what drive us to reveal personal information, such as suffering from depression. A second view holds that honesty is not always desired, needed, or beneficial for close relationships (Zhang & Stafford, 2009). This would be the apprehension associated with receiving negative feedback after disclosure.

Internal dialects are ongoing tensions within a relationship (Griffin, 2009). Internal dialectics helps to create relational connections through the different dialectic tensions that present themselves. These dialectical tensions, and how relationship parties respond to them, are the central dynamics that explain how relationships function and how they evolve and change over time (Cools, 2005).

**Conclusion**

These different dynamics create an imposing issue. Depression is becoming more prominent and with it comes a need for more information. Disclosure of depression has some apprehension with the push and pull of relational dialectics. This push and pull can be especially important within the relational dynamic of romantic partners.

These issues cumulate into a bigger problem, how do people deal with disclosure of depression? Therefore, this study will find the reasons for and against disclosing depression from one romantic partner to a non-depressive partner. This information will help educate depressed and non-depressed individuals on the apprehensions of disclosing depression.

**Methods**
**Data**

This study will examine interview transcripts as a source of data collection. These transcripts will be both textual and audio in nature. These interview transcripts will then be coded and reduce to supply a more central framework. This central framework of transcripts will then be applied to the theory of relational dialectics.

**Participants**

For this study, 15 to 20 participants will be expected to partake in an interview. These participants must suffer from depression. They must also be in or have been in a romantic relationship where the other partner does not suffer from depression. The non-depressed individual must be unaware of the depressed individual’s condition when the romantic relationship began. The couple can have sense had full disclosure of the depressed individual’s condition or no disclosure of the depressed individual’s condition.

These participants will be selected using networking sampling through the use of the social media site Facebook. They will be selected from a medium sized metropolitan area in the Mid-Ohio Valley. The names of the participants will be changed for their own privacy. There will also be a participation waver that must be read and signed before any individual interviews can take place.

**Techniques**

The study will use personal interview to collect data from. These interviews will be semi-structured. It will contain both open and closed question for data collection and analysis. The interviews will take place in a laboratory setting, such as an office. The interview will start with a list of closed questions for data collection of information, such as age and relational status. It will
then continue with open questions to obtain information about the interviewee’s reasons for and against disclosing their depression.

References


