A Unit on Relationship Termination for the Basic Course

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A Unit on Relationship Termination for the Basic Course

Lynn A. Phelps

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 relationship 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

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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


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


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 communication. 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 in 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


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


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


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


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

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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


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


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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Musician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td>Stevie Nicks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Leaving Me Is Easy</td>
<td>Phil Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Don’t Care Anymore</td>
<td>Phil Collins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Relationship Termination

- **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**  
  - Nashville 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


