

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

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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.

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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.

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

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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

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