The Search for Eros: A Hazardous Journey for Children of Divorce

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This paper examines the psychological variables and cultural factors that create obstacles for adult children of divorce in their search for romantic love. The psychological and sociological literature is clear. Adults who grew up in divorced families are twice as likely to get divorced as those who grew up in intact families (three times as likely if both partners came from divorced homes). Especially anxious and conflicted about love, they either go from one relationship to another or else avoid them altogether like the plague. Pessimistic expectations, overly-high ideals, confusion about the nature of romantic love, poor partner choices, and dysfunctional communication and conflict resolution skills are among the problems requiring remediation and/or more adaptive resolutions. In addition, cultural factors that negatively impact the stability of long-term, romantic relationships, including marriage, add to these adults' confusion regarding Eros. When a society overvalues romantic love and sexual prowess, as is true in the US, it is difficult for adult children of divorce to find antidotes to their families' dysfunction. Toxic lifestyles, which include few friendships, minimal group involvement, excessive reliance on electronic gadgets for social interaction and overwork, contribute to their difficulties in attaining stable and satisfying long-term, romantic relationships.

Keywords: adult children of divorced parents, divorce, family relationships, marriage, romantic love

Introduction

While the negative effects of divorce upon children have been documented for over four decades, the effects of divorce upon adult romantic relationships, or the "sleeper effect", are a relatively recent addition to the research literature on this topic. In a 25-year follow-up study of divorced children, Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) reported that adult children of divorce were significantly more anxious than their counterparts about love relationships, less trusting, more likely to choose dysfunctional partners, more likely to have divorced if they married before age of 25, and more likely to have never married (40% of their divorced group had never been married). Their research results spawned much controversy (Hetherington, 2002; Ahrons, 2004), but their main findings have been replicated in many other studies (Bartell, 2006; Piorkowski, 2008). A number of other investigators, for example, documenting the higher divorce rates among adult children of divorce have reported that parental divorce approximately doubles the odds of offspring divorcing (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

Many hypotheses have been formulated to account for the intergenerational transmission of divorce that surprisingly extends even into the third generation. Amato and Cheadle (2005) found that the grandchildren of divorced parents had lower educational attainment, higher levels of marital discord, higher divorce rates and greater tension in parent-child relationships than those from intact families. Because the family life of children

of divorce has been found to be more stressful with many more disruptions, losses and transitions than intact families experience (Marquardt, 2005), adult children of divorce appear to be less trusting of their partners, more pessimistic about romantic love, more hyper vigilant about relational problems and less committed to long-term relationships. The departure of a parent from the family home often leaves these adults waiting for the other shoe to drop in their own romantic lives. On the lookout for similar trouble, they seem to be wary of love and approach it with caution.

Many adult children of divorce are also quick to see minor flaws in a romantic relationship as major stumbling blocks, especially those flaws that are reminiscent of parental problems. For example, if their divorced parents fought a great deal, an angry exchange with a partner becomes a red flag signifying trouble ahead. Similarly, when an adult grew up with emotionally distant parents who later divorced, emotional distance of any kind in a romantic relationship, no matter how temporary or natural, can feel unsafe. Fears of being deserted or abandoned often surface at this time. In addition, when there was a cheating, unfaithful parent in the picture, mild flirtatiousness or gregariousness on the part of the partner, even when totally innocent, can signal danger in flashing red lights. Parental infidelity leaves children particularly sensitive to disloyalty in any form. Unfortunately for children of divorce, their parents' problems get passed down to them, a magnified sensitivity to related problems and skewed interpretations of love are part of that inheritance.

Expectations of Romantic Love

While "expect the worst and hope for the best" may be a realistic motto for romantic love, the "hope for the best" part of the motto for children of divorce often takes the form of overly-high ideals for acceptance, affection and sex. In other words, they believe that romantic relationships should be full of high levels of acceptance and affection along with passionate sex. Then, when romantic passion fades (as it normally does after two to three years when the ingredients that fuel passion—fantasy and novelty—dissipate), they are ready to call it quits. Because they do not have a roadmap for a long-term, romantic relationship derived from their parents and are often home alone captivated by soap operas, movies and romantic novels, they are more likely to adopt their culture's rendition of romantic love. Children of divorce are home alone after school frequently, because their single mothers are working long hours to support their families.

Replete with unrealistic standards, the media in many countries (the US, in particular) contain myths of romantic love that promote disillusionment and unhappiness. Myths dealing with "love at first sight", predestined or fated love, the transformative power of love and pyrotechnic sex, all contribute to a society's obsession with and confusion about love. To the extent that children of divorce rely on popular culture for a definition of romantic love, their expectations, ideals and standards are likely to be distorted.

Media Myths

Galician (2004), in her book on the portrayals of romantic love in mass media, wrote about media myths that influence the expectations brought to romantic relationships. "Love at first sight" is one of those myths that has existed for generations. The stranger across the crowded room whose amorous glance elicits heart palpitations and sweaty palms has been a mythic figure in ballads, poetry and novels for centuries. However, what make the stranger magical and mysterious is, the instantaneous emotional arousal experienced at first blush is not love, but sexual attraction, romantic passion or infatuation, that is, a powerful attraction based on strong, unconscious, needs and associations. Often an early developmental fixation in origin, romantic passion is not trustworthy as a predictor of safety, security and durability in relationships, because it is usually based on

the most superficial of qualities. Physical appearance, demeanor, social status and/or a twinkle in the eye bespeak only one aspect, not the totality nor the essence of a person. Falling in love with strangers is unpredictable at best, foolish at worst. And yet, the popularity of American TV shows, such as “The Bachelor”, where visceral reaction determines mate selection, attests to the enduring appeal of such myths.

Incidentally, falling in love with a good friend is more likely to have a positive outcome. Because most formulations of romantic love include emotional intimacy as an important part of the definitional mix (Sternberg, 1988), romantic relationships with people one knows are safer. Emotional intimacy entails feelings of closeness, connectedness and caring and as such, and requires time and knowledge to develop. Whereas “love at first sight” is clearly a contradiction in terms, the slower-developing romantic love based on friendship—the sturdier and more dependable kind—comes closer to what is generally meant by the word “love”.

Another related media myth that beguiles children of divorce is the destiny myth, the belief that Fate determines one’s choice of partner. Based upon Plato’s notion of the division of the human race into two sexes forever longing for reunion, the predestined love theory presupposes that God or fate has ordained that two individuals belong together. While it would be comforting if Plato’s ideas about love were true in reality, the search for a soul-mate—a carbon copy of oneself with only slight variations—is a long and fruitless odyssey. Typically, falling in love is a matter of timing and mutual need rather than predestination.

“The beauty and the beast” fantasy, or the belief that love is transformative, also has a long mythical and literary history. In the fairy tale, the spell placed upon the beast is broken when he falls in love and reveals his true identity as Prince Charming, thereby providing the tale’s happy ending. The poets also were smitten by love’s transformative power. Roy Croft, e.g., in his poem entitled “Love”, speaks of the power of love in working its magic upon the writer: “I love you because you—Are helping me to make—Of the lumber of my life—Not a tavern—But a temple!... I love you—Because you have done—More than any creed—Could have done—To make me good...”. In other words, love transformed the poet into a noble, virtuous soul. In a similar vein, many young people believe that the magic of love will transform an ordinary, immature and irresponsible young man into a sterling and reliable character once he “settles down”—a belief responsible for the many foolish romantic choices and decisions made throughout the ages.

When there are vast differences in social status, values, interests or goals, the belief that “love will conquer all” and overcome such disparities is akin to magical thinking. The higher divorce rates among inter-racial and inter-religious couples suggest that significant cultural and value differences between romantic partners can create conflicts that are not necessarily “irreconcilable”, but close to it. In the movie *Knocked Up*, a popular romantic comedy that was released in the US in 2007, an example can be found of dramatic lifestyle and cultural differences between protagonists that make their love relationship seem absurd. In the movie, Katherine Heigl plays the role of a gorgeous, smart and rising television star, who gets involved with an unemployed, unpolished, pot-using, immature young man acted by Seth Rogen. A one-night stand between this unlikely pair results in an unplanned pregnancy that becomes the basis of their ongoing relationship. Love does have an idealizing effect, which often fades after a few years, but it does not easily leap over chasms of difference.

The American media’s obsession with sex in all its myriad shapes and sizes takes its toll, especially on young people looking for a romantic love relationship. Focused on techniques for enhancing sexual satisfaction, the media, primarily men’s/women’s magazines and computer sex sites, convey the message that bed-hopping

and super-sex are the vehicles for meaningful love relationships and ultimately, personal fulfillment. Perfect, explosive, uncontrollable and ecstasy-filled sex becomes the interpersonal goal, irrespective of other considerations. Then, when a sexual experience is awkward or anxiety-laden, the relationship is deemed to be flawed and unredeemable. The real-life fumbling, uncertainty and mediocre pleasure that characterize many sexual experiences, especially early ones, can be sources of profound disappointment that blur one's judgment about the relationship's potential. Unfortunately, popular American culture appears intent upon conveying the distorted message that sexual intimacy separated from emotional closeness is the pathway to a loving relationship. For children of divorce, whose personal experiences with long-term, romantic relationships are often limited, their culture's prescriptions for the attainment of love become internalized (in the form of expectations and ideals), ultimately leading to disillusionment when they are not met.

Expectations and Marital Satisfaction

The relationship between expectations and marital satisfaction has been established in a whole host of studies dating back to the seventies. To the extent that one's beliefs about marriage and other romantic relationships are realistic, it is more likely that one will be satisfied. Epstein, Baucom, and Daiuto (1997) have identified five major types of cognition that affect one's emotional and behavioral responses: (1) selective perceptions, or what is attended to; (2) attributions, inferences made about the causes of certain events; (3) expectancies or predictions about future events; (4) assumptions, basic beliefs about the relationship and each other; and (5) standards or ideals about the relationship. In an unhappy relationship, partners tend to focus on disappointments, attribute negative (rather than benign) motivation to the other's behaviors, e.g., the other is selfish rather than just tired, expect that negative interpersonal events will continue, believe that romantic relationships are filled with more pain than pleasure, and disagree about what is important in a relationship. Such negative beliefs and expectations often function as "self-fulfilling prophecies", which perpetuate conflict and dissatisfaction in ongoing relationships.

Similarly, Bartell (2006), in a review of the literature on children of divorce and romantic relationships, discussed the concept of "cognitive representations", which are organized knowledge structures about relationships consisting of autobiographical memories as well as beliefs, attitudes and expectations about the self and others. Such representations are believed to influence the manner in which new romantic experiences are attended to, interpreted and stored in memory. In other words, the cognitive lens formed by observations of one's parents' marital experiences can become the filter through which one's own romantic life is distilled.

Lack of Perspective

Lack of perspective on interpersonal behaviors, such as a partner's limited romantic repertoire, disloyalty in trivial matters, emotional distance, periods of sexual apathy, lack of conversational intimacy and angry exchanges, characterizes many romantic relationships (Piorkowski, 2008). Lack of perspective usually takes the form of hypersensitivity to perceived lapses and failure to distinguish minor "sins" from more serious transgressions. For example, the absence of romance can be perceived as a basic defect in the relationship by adults who are pessimistic about love and buy into their culture's romanticized version. When candlelight dinners, surprise gifts of candy or flowers, and/or outpourings of romantic song or poetry are missing from the picture, ordinary life together can seem drab and lacking in vitality.

While there are many different ways of expressing love, Chapman (1992) described five basic love languages: words of affirmation, quality time together, gift giving, acts of service and physical touch, each

person tends to have a preferred mode of expression. When two people have very different styles, the stage is set for misunderstanding and conflict. Children of divorce, who are wary of love to begin with, often overlook or misinterpret love expressions different from their own, e.g., a household chore performed diligently out of a desire to please one's partner is not regarded with the same enthusiasm or importance as a bouquet of flowers.

Absolute loyalty is often regarded as a necessary ingredient in a love relationship by young adults who hold an idealized view of romantic love. What is demanded is not just sexual fidelity or basic caring that is important to most romantic partners, but rather unswerving allegiance to one's views, opinions and beliefs about a whole host of issues. Then, when a normal disagreement occurs, the partner feels betrayed, let down and disillusion about the nature of the other's commitment. Similarly, emotional distance, lack of conversational intimacy and/or sexual apathy can be interpreted negatively—as an indictment of the quality of love—when, in psychological reality, any of these behaviors can be a function of stress, work conflict, or extended family turmoil requiring a temporary retreat. Lacking perspective on what is normal or typical in a given situation, adult children of divorce are all too ready to question their partners' dedication.

Confusion About the Nature of Love

While all individuals wrestle with the concept of romantic love, the confusion about the nature of love is even more perplexing for children of divorce. In *Adult Children of Divorce: Confused Love Seekers*, Piorkowski (2008, p. 24) wrote, "For the adult who grew up in a divorced or dysfunctional family, the uncertainty about what constitutes love is even more profound than for those growing up in intact families because of the contradictions and disparities regularly experienced in family life regarding love". In a divorcing family, moments of affection might be suddenly followed by icy distance or explosive conflict that is difficult for the onlooker, especially a young child, to decipher. Not comprehending how affection can be transformed into bitterness and misunderstanding at the drop of a hat, children are often confused by the emotional volatility they observe. One young woman described her confusion upon reading the love-filled, effusive greeting cards sent to her mother by her angry, critical and alcoholic father. When her father was sober, he was a reasonably pleasant man, but when he was intoxicated (which was a nightly occurrence), his demeanor changed dramatically into a bitter, verbally abusive person. "How could he love her when he was usually so mean to her?", she often thought. The contradictions and inconsistencies she witnessed rendered the concept of love a baffling phenomenon to her.

Children of divorce who regularly observed such emotional instability in their families have difficulty in distinguishing love from infatuation, sexual attraction, romantic passion or psychological need. Needs for completion and/or validation, for example, regularly play a role in sexual attraction and romantic passion for them. When people fall in love with their ideal selves, that is, with others who possess qualities that they value, but are lacking, the need for completion is operating. The young student who falls in love with an older teacher hopes that the wisdom and status of her professor will add to her own stature and ennoble her in some way. The wealthy, older man attracted to the young, beautiful starlet hopes to find the youth and beauty that are fading from his life, while she is looking for the stability, power and/or money that are not a part of hers. Depressed persons often look for vibrant, confident souls to energize them, while unreliable, immature young people look for conscientious, pragmatic partners to give them some stability.

Sexual attraction is also influenced by psychological vulnerability, self-esteem and familial roles. When one is feeling needy or depressed, the psychological setting is ripe for falling in love. States of high anxiety

and depression can magnify feelings of love as can drug use. The racing thoughts and quickened heart rate can be interpreted as love when, in effect, they are a function of too much caffeine or another stimulant. Research (White, Fishbein, & Rutstin, 1981) has shown that in moments of crisis or danger (when there is heightened physiological arousal), people are more likely to fall in love. The fact that many children of divorce marry at a younger age than others suggests that they are especially susceptible to the lure of love because of their own vulnerability.

Familial roles also affect sexual attraction and romantic passion. When a child has been “parentified”, that is, put in the role of “little parent” or caretaker in a divorced family (usually the oldest child), the child becomes accustomed to caretaking and derives self-esteem from taking care of others. In Marquardt’s study, “Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce” (2005), she described the confusion and isolation of these “parentified” children, who felt obliged to pick up the pieces in their families after a parent’s desertion. Having to provide emotional caretaking to younger siblings and perform household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, while a single mother worked or was otherwise unable to function (many mothers became quite depressed when their partners left), the caretaker child became adept at hiding his/her own emotional needs under a pseudo-mature façade. Since the caretaking role is typically strongly valued and reinforced by society, it becomes ingrained and valued by the child himself/herself. The caretaking role, then, becomes the basis for seeking out impaired or incompetent partners to nurture, which, while temporarily providing a boost of self-esteem, ultimately leads to dissatisfaction.

Poor Partner Choices

Motivated to repair old emotional wounds, children of divorce frequently substitute fantasy for the objective qualities of their partners, and as a result, make unhealthy partner choices. The fantasy that impairs their judgment often deals with a missing, unavailable or highly ambivalent parent or caretaker, whom the young adult is trying to understand. Mastery motivation or the desire to conquer, rework and improve upon unresolved issues from the past, operates when people are intent upon rewriting the old, family scripts with a new, happier ending. To accomplish this end, people choose partners that bear an uncanny resemblance psychologically to the original parental figure who had been the source of unresolved pain. The parent may have vanished from the child’s life suddenly through death or desertion, or continued to be a highly ambivalent figure, e.g., someone famous or admired who was seldom available. In selecting a psychological clone of the original heartbreaker, the adult hopes that this time around it will be different. Because children of divorce frequently lose a parent entirely or the parent becomes available only intermittently as a result of the divorce, they search for a partner who, they hope, can help resolve the original loss. Unfortunately, mastery motivation, focused on those same characteristics that led to disappointment in the first place tends to perpetuate the same unhappy outcome.

Among the types of individuals who make poor romantic partners are other children of divorce (birds of a feather flocking together do not make for harmonious relations in this case), neurotics, extreme extraverts, highly disagreeable, easily angered personalities lacking in conscientiousness, alcohol and/or drug/abusing persons and personalities whose styles of defense create conflicts in intimacy, such as blamers, conflict avoiders aka passive-aggressive personalities, emotional hermits, narcissists and oppositional types. Some of these personalities wind up on divorce court rosters regularly, while others show up in couple therapy sessions. The research literature on divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006) pointed to certain traits: impulsivity,

recklessness, low agreeableness, low conscientiousness, alcohol and/or drug abuse and low frustration tolerance (tendency to get angry easily) as impediments to marital harmony, while clinical experience highlights several other personality types in addition (Piorkowski, 2008).

Blamers and Conflict Avoiders

Blamers, as the name implies, are those individuals who manage to duck responsibility for each and every interpersonal problem by quickly passing the blame onto others. No matter what the situation is, blamers focus on the provocation. Their angry outburst is a result of the person or object causing the frustration, not at all of their doing. Their neglect of professional or personal duties is a function of the onerous nature of the task or the injustice of the system, not the result of their shortcomings. Even when their behaviors are extreme, e.g., a physical assault, blamers manage to circumvent their roles in the altercation and spend all their energies on what the other person said or did to warrant such a reaction on their part. A propensity to anger and a suspicious, judgmental attitude about others are part of the picture. Road rage is evident not only on the highways, but also on quiet, tree-lined streets where blamers reside as well.

In contrast to blamers, conflict avoiders appear to be benign characters on the surface. Ordinarily easygoing, passive persons, conflict avoiders go to inordinate lengths to avoid topics or situations that are even remotely suggestive of disagreement. Eager to please, they are adept at changing the conversational topic to a safer, more neutral one whenever a discussion shows signs of heating up. Because the conflict avoider fears that disagreements will escalate into chaos or dangerous warfare, he/she treads carefully, trying to avoid the fault lines in relationships. Generally, a product of an angry, conflict-ridden home where nothing got resolved, the conflict avoider knows all too well how dangerous disagreements can get.

The problem with conflict avoiders is that they seldom address problems directly, and therefore, none of the run-of-the-mill conflicts in an intimate relationship, such as household responsibilities or financial expenditures, gets worked through and resolved. When a partner brings up a problematic situation for discussion, the conflict avoider often freezes and goes silent. Sensing the partner's criticism and anger beneath the surface, he literally cannot think of a thing to say because he is immobilized by anxiety. When this happens, the partner becomes frustrated by the lack of response and discouraged by the non-resolution of the problem. When not mute, the conflict avoider will express his own frustration at the confrontation by eye-rolling, sighing or a passive-aggressive tactic of some sort. Such strategies, as not listening, forgetting, changing the topic, and/or humor only compound the problem by infuriating the partner. Other passive-aggressive behaviors, which include lying, sarcasm and chronic procrastination with regard to chores, e.g., are even more destructive to the relationship, because they have an impact upon trust. It is difficult to trust a partner who is hard to pin down and whose words can not be counted on. Over the long haul, because of the helplessness they engender, conflict avoiders can be just as poor at negotiating romantic relationships as other dysfunctional partners.

Other High Risk Partners

Another poor risk intimacy partner is the emotional hermit, who can appear romantic and loving during the courtship phase of a relationship, but reverts to form shortly thereafter. Primed to their maximum emotional capabilities during the early days of a romance, they retreat to their usual, non-emotional style of coping with life after the first blush of romance has faded. Often intellectually gifted, emotional hermits are found in the ranks of scholars, bankers, engineers, lawyers, chemists, doctors and other professionals. Because of their excellent paper credentials and professional achievements, they are frequently sought after as marriage

prospects. More comfortable in the world of ideas and concepts than feelings, they manage to hide their emotional deficits under a façade of competence. However, their discomfort at dealing with interpersonal conflict makes it difficult for them to stay involved when problems arise; they prefer books and scientific papers to the unpredictable world of people and their emotions. Their lack of emotional sensitivity to their partners is a decided impediment to couple or marital satisfaction. Since their withdrawn defensive style is not evident at first, they are difficult to identify during the early days of a relationship. Their paucity of close friendships throughout life is probably the best indicator of their life-long pattern of emotional withdrawal.

Narcissists and oppositional types are two other high risk, intimacy partners that fall within the gravitational pull of adults who grew up in divorced families. Because their parents are often poor intimacy partners themselves, their children are drawn to similar, familial types in hope of mastering the conflicts their parents engendered. Of these two personality types, narcissists, with their self-absorption, grandiosity, need for admiration, sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy, are easier to spot. Generally haughty, boastful, and/or arrogant, they are markedly insensitive to the feelings of those around them and yet, often surprisingly successful in their careers. Because they enjoy the limelight, they tend to gravitate to careers where they are on center stage, such as the performing arts, drama, music or politics. While they may be superstars in their professional lives, their demanding, emotionally labile, interpersonal style is likely to create chaos and high drama on the home front. Their self-centered style, which takes up most of the psychological space in an intimate relationship, leaves their partners relegated to the roles of adoring audience or disgruntled lackey. As a result, their partners wind up feeling ignored, devalued and unloved.

Oppositional types have an inordinate need to maintain control. Likely to contradict or correct another's perceptions, feelings or ideas, they are adept at creating tension wherever they go. Typically responding to another person's comments by critical adjustments—"No, it wasn't Wednesday, it was Tuesday night" or "The party was on Christmas Eve, not Christmas Day"—oppositional personalities behave as if these minor corrections are absolutely necessary to the veracity of a tale. Their belief in accuracy or precision of expression is so extreme that they feel compelled to correct even trivial discrepancies from their version of truth.

Often adept at comic relief in the form of puns, oppositional types use humor to disarm and distract intimate partners from more serious concerns. The shift to humor in the midst of their partner's complaint leaves the partner confused about the legitimacy of his/her concern. While comic relief often defuses a difficult situation by reducing tension, it also serves to trivialize the issue and render the complainer impotent. Humor is thus a way for the oppositional person to minimize helplessness and gain control when the situation appears headed for conflict. For the partner, the chronic lack of serious attention to important concerns is demeaning and demoralizing.

Poor Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills

Because the child who grew up in a divorced family was either subjected repeatedly to heated, verbal exchanges that went on for hours or to stony, cold silence between parents that lasted for days, the child was not exposed to adaptive ways of communicating disagreement. In either case—the high or low conflict divorced family—parents were not positive role models for communicating and resolving conflict. In a number of studies, children of divorce have reported more parental conflict, more triangulation and less respect between parents than children from intact families. As a result, adult children of divorce following the patterns they

observed in their families tend to be poor communicators themselves.

What is a poor communicator? Research by Gottman and Levenson (1992), who videotaped and coded the interactions of couples during an argument, provided some answers. Spouses were given points for attempts at warmth, collaboration or compromise, and minus points for displays of anger, defensiveness, criticism or contempt. Not surprisingly, the couples with the highest points were more satisfied with their marriages than the others. More interesting, however, was the finding that more than half of the lowest scoring couples were divorced or separated four years later, whereas less than a quarter of the highest group had split up. In other words, behavior during one argument could predict the likelihood of divorce four years later.

Unhappy couples repeatedly engage in what is called negative affect reciprocity, that is, when one member of the pair is angry and critical, the other is likely to follow suit in a quickly escalating cycle. As the argument heats up, name-calling, cursing and blaming become rampant. The unfortunate consequence of such interactions is that each participant winds up feeling misunderstood or unappreciated, and nothing gets resolved. Other components of maladaptive communication are defensiveness, contemptuous remarks, black-white statements (e.g., “you NEVER follow through” or “you ALWAYS...”), personality attacks, vague statements without behavioral referents (“you’re not considerate”), and negative rather than benign interpretations of behavior. Giving the partner “the benefit of the doubt” is clearly in short supply with unhappy couples. Another negative interactional pattern is the demand/withdrawal pattern where typically the wife demands and the husband withdraws—an interaction deemed to be negative in several countries, e.g., Brazil, Italy, Taiwan, along with the US.

Happy couples, in contrast, engage in more constructive communication that has been shown to correlate highly with marital satisfaction. The more positive tone and contents of their messages are accompanied by breadth and frequency, that is, they talk together more frequently about a broad range of topics, including work, school, home maintenance, family members, food, travel and politics. Talking together is a pleasurable activity that accompanies mutual leisure-time pursuits and other joint activities. In addition, while happy couples are comfortable bringing up conflictive matters and do so with much less negative emotionality than unhappy couples, they are not in conflict frequently. While it is not clear whether positive communication is the cause of couple satisfaction or vice versa, it is apparent that positive communication enhances a romantic relationship and negative communication patterns contribute significantly to its deterioration. For adults exposed to faulty communication styles in their families, learning to communicate in a clear, constructive manner (e.g., by taking a course on communication and conflict resolution skills) would be invaluable in altering negative and intergenerational patterns of communication.

Cultural Factors

Cultural factors also play a vital role in the stability of long-term romantic relationships, including marriage and contribute to society’s confusion regarding Eros (Piorkowski, 2008). When a society overvalues romantic love and sexual prowess, as is true in the US, it is difficult for adult children of divorce to find healthy antidotes to their families’ dysfunction. In contemporary Western society, romantic love, especially sexual passion, tends to be idealized. In movies, romantic novels and soap operas, romantic love is portrayed as the be-all and end-all of existence, with other human experiences (e.g., friendship, family involvement, participation in religious and/or community institutions) relegated to secondary roles of much less importance. This overvaluation of romantic love, which entails having overblown expectations regarding love’s ability to provide integrity and meaning to life, ultimately leads to disillusionment and unhappiness. Among the most

vulnerable victims of this overvaluation are children of divorce who hunger for the kind of enduring love that were frequently missing from their family life. As Stephanie Coontz (2005), a historian, wrote (regarding the fallibility of placing too much emphasis on romantic love as the basis for marriage), “For most of history, it was inconceivable that people would choose their mates on the basis of something as fragile and irrational as love, and then focus all their sexual, intimate and altruistic desires on the resulting marriage”.

Too few friendships and minimal group involvement contribute to society’s obsession with romantic love. Excessive use of electronic gadgets, the impersonal nature of urban life, and overwork further add to the widespread sense of alienation that many young people experience. The decrease in social support and increased loneliness intensify the longing for a romantic partner and the preoccupation with romantic love as the solution to life’s problems. Sociological research has provided ample evidence in support of the thesis that social support has been significantly reduced in recent years, particularly in certain parts of the world.

In the US, the number of confidantes dropped from three to two in the last 20 years, and the number of people saying that they had no one they could confide in nearly tripled (McPherson & Smith-Liovin, 2006). In a similar vein, Rokach, Moya, Orzeck, and Esposito (2001) found that North Americans scored higher than their Spanish counterparts on five measures of loneliness, including feelings of social inadequacy, interpersonal isolation and self-alienation. Less socially connected than their Southern neighbors and Europeans, North Americans were less satisfied with their lives, and as a result, less happy than others.

In the US, Americans are less involved (compared to thirty years ago) in groups of all kinds, from political, civic, religious and work-related associations to volunteer participation. They are also less social in general; for example, they entertain friends at home much less than they did earlier. They, especially college-educated persons, tend to overwork, working 50 hours a week or more—twice as often as Europeans. Their leisure time is also less social, as they often spend their free time in watching television or playing video games on their computers. Americans currently watch television an average of four hours and 30 minutes every day—90 minutes more than the world average. With the number of hours in front of electronic gadgets increasing each year, Americans are doing little else besides overworking, and then, collapsing in front of their television sets or computers upon arriving home.

Communication via e-mail, text messages or i-phones, while important in conveying information, is less likely to satisfy the need for relatedness. Lacking most of the emotional components so vital to social support, electronic communication is less effective in meeting social-affiliation needs than face-to-face contact. The sense of connectedness is reduced, because facial expression, tone of voice, other voice qualities (emphasis, inflection, pitch, etc.), gestures and physical touch/proximity are missing.

The move from small town America to large metropolitan areas over the last 50 years has further intensified the sense of isolation. Putnam, the author of “Bowling Alone” (2000), wrote:

In the 1950s, barely half of all Americans lived in metropolitan areas, whereas in the 1990s roughly four in five of us did. Throughout this era we have been moving to places that appear to be less hospitable to civic engagement. (p. 207)

Furthermore, suburban life, which has grown significantly more than rural or city life in the last 50 years, has become as synonymous with civic disengagement and isolation as that of urban America. The empty suburban streets and half-filled PTA (Parent-teacher Association) meetings offer a poignant picture of anomie and lifelessness. Life with all its vibrancy and complexity is taking place elsewhere, not in these suburban bedroom communities.

In the 21st century in many industrialized nations, the strain on families, especially on parents, to provide a sense of human connection to its members is enormous. If parents lack a blueprint for a reasonably stable and meaningful family life derived from their own parents, the stage is set for further alienation among family members. In addition, if parents have not replaced their early romantic passion with a quieter, more companionable love, their connection and commitment to one other will be lessened.

In their search for Eros or romantic love, children of divorce have a difficult, but not impossible, journey trying to achieve happy and healthy long-term, romantic relationships. In order to do so, they need to reduce their own anxiety and confusion about romantic love, alter their pessimistic expectations and overly-high ideals, and learn adaptive ways of communicating, especially when in conflict. In addition, choosing a partner based upon compatible personality traits, interests and solid values—a best friend—is also extremely important. Finally, because popular culture, particularly in the US, provides glittery and shallow models of romantic love, children of divorce need to adopt more substantial and enduring values from the healthy institutions around them, whether religious, spiritual, social or civic in nature.

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