

**APA Research Paper Assignment – Dealing with Loss: A Narrative Approach to  
Healing from Separation and Divorce**



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### Abstract

This essay examines the impact of divorce on attachment styles and explores how a narrative therapy approach to this situation can help individuals manage the sudden changes in their attachment style. Attachment style is a reference to the emotional bond between an infant with their primary caregiver, which influences how they form and maintain relationships in their adult lives. The modifications made in a person's attachment after divorce is influenced by factors such as the rationale provided for it and how one experiences the divorce as a child. This paper also emphasizes the role of attachment to God to mitigate the negative effects of divorce on the person's attachment style. Lastly, the essay discusses how narrative therapy can be implemented to help individuals reframe their experience of divorce and create a more empowering narrative for their future. A section on biblical integration is included to help Christians see what the Bible says about a person's overall narrative in God's eyes.

*Keywords:* divorce, attachment, attachment style, attachment to God, secure, anxious, avoidant



## **Dealing with Loss: A Narrative Approach to Healing after Separation and Divorce**

There are approximately 40-45% of first marriages that end in divorce (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). It is also one of the most stressful experiences a person can go through (Sbarra, 2015). Divorce has been a prevalent concern in our culture, and it is especially more concerning when we see it happen in Christian communities. Other than the loss of a marriage, children, and/or financial stability, the more subtle loss is the “loss of self” or ”identity and self-esteem” (Manvelian et al., 2018). Divorce changes relationships, but especially the relationship with one’s self. The following sections provide the background on the impact of divorce, a description of what narrative therapy is, an elaboration on how attachment theory and therapy apply to divorce, how to apply narrative therapy, and a biblical integration on the topic of divorce and attachment.

### **Background**

As mentioned above, Kreiger and Ellis (2011) list several negative outcomes resulting from separation/divorce. These include loss of perceived control, higher levels of depression and anxiety, reduced well-being, feelings of anger and sadness, loss of psychological support, and decline in physical and mental health (Kreiger & Ellis, 2011). What was once considered to be “within the Christian’s control” now seemingly is not in their control anymore. However, the reason for this is that the focus of their “control” was placed on the behavior of the spouse and not the person him/herself. This loss of perceived control often leads to higher levels of depression and anxiety because the person is faced with the reality that nothing outside of them is within their control, including their mood and fears (Kreiger & Ellis, 2011). Similar to the stages of grief, anger and sadness are also experienced. Ultimately, Christians going through a divorce may not seek psychological support due to the shame experienced which further

decreases their physical and mental health (Kreiger & Ellis, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, focus will be placed on how divorce affects the loss of identity and self-esteem.

### **Stigmas Associated with Divorce**

Identity and self-esteem are influenced by Konstam et al.'s (2016) 5 different stigmas. There is the initial stigma the person places on themselves followed by the stigma that the public may project on them. Other feelings associated are feelings of failure, embarrassment, and the perceptions of shame. The stigma is also enhanced and felt when religion is a factor in the person's life. Due to the embarrassment experienced, people often elect not to disclose information about the divorce and instead feel led to manage their feelings as to not letting others know how they are doing. Lastly, not everyone knows the details surrounding the situation, so having a personal understanding of the context of the issues in the relationship is often a source of the stigma when considering the context around the divorce.

Perry (2018) discusses how American Christians navigate the social stigma associated with their divorce. He concludes that depending on how often individuals attend church services and highly value religion in their lives, those spouses were more likely to blame their spouse for the divorce, while refraining to suggest how they contributed to it (Perry, 2018). This allows for them to "save face" in their religious community, and consequently, avoid the stigma connected to their decision. Lehrer (2004) and Mahoney et al. (2001) that the need for justifying one's divorce to avoid being stigmatized is a result of internalizing the religious community's standards of conduct in marriage which is remain married and avoid divorce.

The question stemming from avoiding the criticism and stigmas concerning divorce include how a divorcee within a religious community can develop a healthy, secure attachment style with themselves, their community, and with God. The techniques and principles found in

narrative therapy can provide an outline for doing this as will be explained in the following section.

### **Narrative Therapy**

The core of narrative therapy is that the human experience consists of a narrative structure which allows people to follow through on their actions due to the stories they say about themselves (Sarbin, 1986). Winslade and Monk (1999) summarize the narrative approach to counseling with the following statement, “The problem is the problem. The person is not the problem”. This separation of the client from the problem provides the necessary space to create a new narrative about their lives, and it is done first by externalizing the problem.

### **Techniques**

#### ***Externalizing the Problem***

The key about externalizing the problem or conversation is that it assists the clients in separating their identity from the problem they are experiencing (DeKruyf, 2008). In practice this can include seeing the problems as entities themselves or imagining them as separate characters in the client’s story (Rice, 2015). Ultimately, the counselor seeks to employ a sense of agency and autonomy as they separate themselves from the problem (DeKruyf, 2008).

#### ***Mapping the Influence of the Problem***

To fully understand the impact of a problem on an individual, it is important to understand the various dimensions of its influence. Mapping out the influence of the problem entails a thorough description of how, when and where the problem has affected the person. According to Winslade and Monk (1999), this includes the length, breadth, and depth of its influence as well as using concrete approaches that illustrate these aspects of the problem. Bourassa et al. (2017) encourages clients to lay out this map using their life experiences and

relationships. A couple of examples to illustrate this mapping out includes drawing pictures of the problem, labeling and shading a pie chart that is representative of the influence of the problem and graphing the intensity of the problem over time (Morgan, 2000). Each of these approaches can provide the individual with an overarching visual representation of how the problem affects them.

### ***Landscape of Action Questions***

The landscape of action questions are helpful because they allow for the client to explore what actions they have taken and meaning they have created from their experiences (White & Epston, 1990). White (2007) refers to these as the landscape of action (what happened) and the landscape of identity (the meaning of what happened). As people explore these questions, they garner a sense of what they have tried that works and what has not worked. This opens the potential for novel alternative stories to what they are currently identifying. However, this is only effective if the person takes a new action. Each new action provides space for new identity claims (Combs & Freeman, 2016). The counselor and client explore the consequences of how succeeding decisions will influence the person's sense of identity (Combs & Freeman, 2016). Furthermore, Combs & Freeman (2016) state, "All of us can think of change as involving a migration of identity, a process in which sense of self flows through time and space" (p. 222). Once a person reaches this stance, the new story is then communicated to a wider audience.

### ***Widening the Audience***

This wider audience must be one that brings healing through a community that is both strong and supportive (DeKruyf, 2008). This usually includes family, friends, peers, and coworkers. This notion of widening one's audience reflects what co-creating can look like when the client imagines what people might say or do in response to their changed behavior (Freeman

& Combs, 1996). Additionally, what clients are doing is providing close family and friends with enough new information so they can also take a supportive stance on the new stories the client is telling about themselves (DeKruyf, 2008). To have those supporters then share those new stories with others will solidify those new narratives in the mind of the client. The key is in entrusting these new stories to trustworthy and supportive audience (DeKruyf, 2008).

### **Dominant Story**

White and Epston (1990) assume that people come to therapy when the dominant story of their experiences in life is no longer helpful or satisfying to them for whatever reason. It may be that they are stuck in a socially constructed problematic view of themselves and others. Or the dominant story may cause distress when it is incongruent with their preferred views of self, or when they think that others view them in ways that are discrepant with preferred views of self (Eron & Lund, 1996).

### **Process Over Goals**

Additionally, emphasis on re-narrating the story is placed on the process of how one changes the view of themselves. There are certain goals that will be created to help create a narrating process focuses on the following: 1) Creating an autonomous self, 2) changing the negative views of self, 3) changing negative views about divorce, and lastly, 4) creating and using all available coping resources (Piesch, 2002). These will be elaborated on more in the methodology section. The following section shows how one can implement these narrative methods and interventions to their lives

### **Methodology of the Interventions**

Sbarra and Borelli (2019) suggest engaging in activating emotion regulatory strategies to

maintain and/or regain a sense of felt security by re-engaging with their former partner or relationship (Sbarra & Borelli, 2019).

The goal in applying the narrative methodology is to lead people to narrate their lives as someone who is securely attached. This would be evidenced by the level of comfort with intimacy, partner trust, and self-esteem a person displays in their adult relationships. These individuals have a positive perception of self-worth and believe they are worthy of love and acceptance. Consequently, they tend to view others in the same manner. Specifically, they can see their partners as loving and reliable via their cognitive appraisals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The following section shows how Christians going through a divorce can implement these narrative methods and interventions to their lives. This next section will provide a summary on attachment theory and therapy to understand how narrative therapy can be applied.

### **Attachment Theory and Therapy**

Bowlby describes attachment theory as the emotional bond that a child experiences with his or her primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1983). Ainsworth et al. (1978) observed what happens when the child is separated from the primary caregiver and evaluated what happens when the mother returns. She referred to this as the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Bowlby (1969) posited early on in his research that attachment was a biological need, pointing out that we are “programmed to seek comfort and safety through proximity to a reliable and protective caregiver” (p. 273). Thus, developing a secure attachment as an adult is an obtainable goal, but it is one that is contingent on the trust, safety, and consistency of the people we are closest to.

In general, attachment theory references four main attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. As Bowlby and Ainsworth illustrate, the early years with the primary caregiver set the foundation for the patterns of default in future

relationships (Bretherton, 1992). Since this paper focuses on the impact of divorce on one's attachment style, only the anxious-preoccupied and dismissive-avoidant will be explored in the following section.

### **Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Styles**

Anxious-preoccupied attachment styles are identified by noting individuals who crave affection and are overly dependent on their partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). On the spectrum of positive and negative views of self and others, these individuals have a low view of self and a positive view of others. Their low self-esteem is characterized by their constant need for reassurance and approval from their spouses. They fear being abandoned or rejected by their spouse because they project their low view of themselves onto their spouse, thus leading them to believe that their spouse also sees them the same way.

Dismissive-avoidant attachment style is characterized by individuals who have a high self-esteem but a negative view of others which leads to their avoidance of emotional intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These individuals believe that others are not trustworthy, loving, or dependable, so they dismiss their partners' needs and tend to distance themselves from relationships in general. Sbarra and Borelli (2019) suggest that individuals with avoidant attachment styles create emotional distance in their relationships to reduce perceived threats to their emotional security after a romantic breakup. One can conclude that individuals with an avoidant attachment style may find it more feasible to recuperate from a divorce due to the lack of connection. However, the literature has not specifically addressed this situation.

### **Attachment Reorganization**

Bowlby believed that the human grief response was an integral element of the attachment behavioral system which includes a period of activated protest, followed by a sense of despair,

and then ‘detachment’ that leads to recovery and preparedness (Sbarra & Borelli, 2019).

Attachment security means an enabling of regulatory flexibility where one can see themselves positively in the relationship even through the separation process (Davis, Shaver & Vernon, 2003).

Sbarra and Hazan (2008) suggest that the first step in this process includes shifting from coregulation with the ex-partner to a state of independent regulation. The former includes absolving one’s self from how the partner impacted their psychological and biological responses to moving towards self-regulation where the felt security is not contingent on the interactions with the ex-spouse. Sbarra and Borelli (2018) stated that Bowlby believed this shift was “the natural outcome of uncomplicated mourning, reminders about the loss are no longer challenges that require substantial emotion-regulatory effort” (p. 73).

Another significant shift to make was cognitive adaptation of how the person views the even over time (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). However, this adaptation is influenced by meaning being created by the individual and how well the new narrative aligns with the story desired from the experience. Interestingly, Bourassa et al. (2017) recently reported that “the extent to which participants felt they understood the story of their divorce and the extent to which the story of their separation made sense to them predicted decreased psychological distress” close to 8 months later.

### **Loss of Self, Self-Concept Clarity, and Coherent Narrative**

The loss of self is described as the “failure to reorganize and get back in touch with the self” (Bourassa et al., 2018, p. 300). When it comes to divorce, the loss of self is associated with psychological distress and a Christian’s testimony plays a critical role in the future definition of the self that is lost. Hill (2021) demonstrates how seminar trainings often describe how the Holy

Spirit “infuses the story and its teller,” and clients provide stories that implement research in popular science and personal experience. This allows for them to gain clarity on their self-concept.

Markus and Kunda (1986) demonstrate in their early research that knowledge and evaluation of the self is steady and flexible. Self-concept clarity is associated with low levels of distress, high self-esteem, active coping styles, and low neuroticism levels (Lee-Flynn et al., 2011). Narrative coherence is the extent to which participants felt they understood the story of their divorce and the extent to which the story of their separation made sense to them (Sbarra & Borelli, 2019).

The development of the coherent narrative is often obstructed by the overinvolvement of one of the partners to the point where they are unable to distance themselves from the relationship enough to create a meaningful, coherent self-narrative (Neimeyer, Priegerson, & Davies, 2002), affecting their ability to successfully cope with marital separation. Markus and Kunda (1986) also posit that the self-concept can vary depending on the social context surrounding the divorce, and this is where the key concepts from narrative therapy can be beneficial. The following section shows how Christians going through a divorce can implement these narrative methods and interventions to their lives.

### **Methodology of the Interventions**

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The goal in applying the narrative methodology is to lead people to narrate their lives as someone who is securely attached. This would be evidenced by the level of comfort with

intimacy, partner trust, and self-esteem a person displays in their adult relationships. These individuals have a positive perception of self-worth and believe they are worthy of love and acceptance. Consequently, they tend to view others in the same manner. Specifically, they can see their partners as loving and reliable via their cognitive appraisals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

### **Biblical Integration**

Divorce has often been a topic of controversy in the church due to damage that it has done to families and culture in general. Christians who go through this situation often experience feelings of shame and guilt due to the biblical standards they try to hold themselves to. The will often reference Malachi 2:16 where God says he hates divorce, or return to Genesis 2:24 where it says that the “two shall become one flesh” and that what the Lord has joined together let not man separate” (Matthew 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9; Ephesians 5:31, ESV). Each of these passages speak to the sanctity and commitment of marriage, and because one deems himself to fall short, guilt and shame are often ensuing emotions associated to divorce. Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) posit that an anxious attachment to God will contribute to how one displays anxiety in their overall behaviors.

Not only do they experience these feelings in their interpersonal relationships, but they also transition these emotions over into their relationship with God. This is especially true for those who view God as distant and judgmental, so they begin to question God’s love for them because they are not meeting his standard of being in and maintaining the covenantal marriage. The story behind the shame and guilt experienced for going through a divorce is that they are now “unworthy” or “undeserving” of God’s love for being divorced. They feel that they have failed God in such a way that He would no longer show them love.

However, the Bible has a different narrative when it comes to how God relates to his children, especially during adversity. Romans 5:8 tells us that God loves us so much He sent his Son to die for our sins (ESV). He wants us to be with Him. God also confirmed this love when the Israelites became distant from Him. Even as they were under captivity, the Lord reminded them that He still “plans for them” to give them “a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11, ESV). The same rule of love applies to us today because there is a long and ongoing history of how God treats and cares for those who love Him.

For those who are experiencing divorce, the new narrative needs to be surrounding the history of God’s love in their own lives as well as referencing how God displayed his power and love with his people.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of separation and divorce in Christian communities is complex, and the identity of Christians is heavily influenced by the stigmas associated within these circles. Significantly, divorce often leads to a subtle loss of identity and self-esteem. How religious individuals within religious communities develop a healthy, secure attachment style with themselves, their community, and with God is contingent on how effective they can apply a narrative therapeutic approach. The framework offered by narrative therapy emphasizes the externalization of problems, how it influences the person’s identity, what adaptive behaviors a person implements, what to share and with who one should share to create a healing narrative. Furthermore, the application of attachment theory and therapy highlights the relevance of the early years with the primary caregiver in shaping patterns of attachment styles, specifically focusing on the anxious-preoccupied and dismissive-avoidant styles. Additionally, the process of attachment reorganization, the loss of self, self-concept clarity, and coherent narrative emerge as

important factors in understanding and intervening in the aftermath of divorce. Lastly, the paper elaborate on the paper by including a biblical integration of these therapeutic strategies. Ultimately, the goal was to submit how a narrative therapy approach can help Christians heal from divorce by reframing the narratives surrounding their divorce through biblical principles and messages found in Scripture. God's love, compassion, and redemptive power is evident all throughout Scripture, and thus offers Christians a story of hope amidst the distress of divorce.

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