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Thin-Slicing Divorce: Thirty Seconds of Information Predict Changes in Psychological Adjustment Over 90 Days

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When a couple's marriage dissolves, members of their social network are often charged with intuiting their psychological states, and, in many cases, these impressions of their well-being dictate the emotional and social support friends provide. Should I visit him more often? Should I call her frequently? Should I recommend therapy? This report evaluates the accuracy with which people perceive the psychological adjustment of recently separated adults using small amounts, or thin slices, of information. Although the thin-slice paradigm has shed light on the way people process information and make judgments about others (Ambady & Skowronski, 2009; Ames & Johar, 2009; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992), only recently have these methods been applied to perceptions of psychological well-being (Fowler, Lilienfeld, & Patrick, 2009; Friedman, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2007; Mehl, 2006). There is a conspicuous lack of thin-slice research addressing perceptions of interpersonal distress, and in everyday life, interpersonal exchanges (and decisions to provide social support) hinge on accurate perceptions of others' psychological states.

In this study, we first investigated the degree to which judges accurately perceived recently separated adults' (targets') adjustment, either after hearing 30-s recordings of targets discussing their separation experience or after reading transcriptions of the recordings. We then asked if the perceptions of these listener judges or reader judges predicted changes in targets' adjustment to their separation over 3 months. Finally, we evaluated the role of each communication channel by asking if judges gleaned more information about targets' adjustment from listening to the recordings than from reading the transcripts (cf. Funder, 1995; but see Nisbett, Zukier, & Lemley, 1981, for an alternative prediction).

Method

Participants

Participants were 105 community-dwelling adults (38 men, 67 women; mean age = 40.4 years, $SD = 10$ years) who had experienced a marital separation, on average, 3.8 months before entering the study ($SD = 2.1$ months). Of the 105 participants, 29 were from a cross-sectional sample (not invited for a second visit), and 76 were invited to return (66 returned).

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Sixteen undergraduate students (ages 18–34 years; 6 men, 10 women) served as unacquainted judges.

Procedure

Participants were mailed a questionnaire packet, which they completed immediately prior to their laboratory visit (Time 1). The measures were assessed again 3 months later among a subset of participants (Time 2; $n = 66$). Participants who did and did not return for Time 2 did not differ significantly in age, sex, relationship length, initiator status (i.e., who initiated the end of the relationship), time since separation, or psychological adjustment to the separation. During the first laboratory visit, participants were asked to mentally recall a detailed image of their former partner for 30 s; they were then recorded for 4 min while speaking in a stream-of-consciousness fashion about their separation, expressing their thoughts and feelings. The first 30 s of each recording were converted into sound clips and transcribed into text files. Prior to rating the targets' adjustment, eight judges listened to the sound clips, and eight read the transcripts.

Measures

Psychological adjustment—Psychological adjustment was operationalized using the 22-item Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R; Weiss & Marmar, 1997). Higher scores reflect greater emotional intrusion, somatic hyperarousal, and avoidance behaviors following the recent separation. The IES-R internal consistencies were high at both assessments ($\alpha s > .90$); the correlation between scores at the two assessments was .61. IES-R changes (Time 2 – Time 1) correlated with changes in scores on both the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988), $r = .51, p < .000$, and the Loss of Self and Rediscovery of Self scale (LOSROS; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007), $r = .39, p < .001$, demonstrating that the IES-R covaries with other important divorce-related outcomes.

Judge variables—The listener-judge (LJ) and reader-judge (RJ) variables were computed as the mean ratings for the following five items (rated on a scale from 1 to 7, with the last three items reverse-scored): (a) How well is this person able to control his or her emotions? (b) How well is this person coping with his or her divorce? (c) How much stress is this person experiencing about his or her divorce? (d) How much has this person's divorce affected his or her life in a negative way? and (e) How much is this person stuck on thoughts about the previous relationship? Reliabilities for LJ ($\alpha = .93$) and RJ ($\alpha = .94$) were high. Intercode agreement (intraclass correlation, or ICC) was averaged across the listener judges, $ICC(2, k) = .58$, and the reader judges, $ICC(2, k) = .65$.

Results and Discussion

Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to evaluate the associations among judges' ratings and targets' current and future adjustment (see Table 1). After accounting for relevant covariates, both LJ and RJ were positively associated with targets' IES-R scores ($ps < .05$). Prospectively, however, only LJ predicted increases in targets' IES-R scores over 3 months.¹ Judges who listened to (but not those who read about) 30 s of participants' divorce

experiences rated these individuals in a manner that predicted changes in the self-reported impact of the event over time.² This finding held after accounting for RJ scores.

This study is among the first person-perception investigations to focus on interpersonal distress, and the findings both extend prior thin-slice research and contribute to current understanding of the lay assessment of clinically relevant variables. Using a mere 30-s verbal account of participants' separation experience, unacquainted judges achieved a high degree of consensus concerning participants' psychological adjustment to the end of their marriage. In turn, these perceptions of distress predicted both the current state and the future trajectory of participants' self-reported adjustment to the separation; these findings held after statistically accounting for three key correlates of postdivorce outcomes at Time 1 (relationship length, initiator status, and time since separation at Time 1). It was the manner in which participants spoke about their life circumstances, and not the verbal content of their speech, that predicted changes in psychological adjustment, and this finding is consistent with previous emotion-perception research (Scherer, Feldstein, Bond, & Rosenthal, 1985). Although people may hear the words others use to explain difficult experiences, data from this study suggest that they listen for the emotion leaking through the words, and it is in this way that people form lay impressions of psychological distress.

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¹We compared the unstandardized regression coefficients of LJ and RJ for the concurrent ($Z = 1.35, p = .41$) and prospective ($Z = 3.70, p < .001$) models (Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998). In the prospective model, LJ was a statistically stronger predictor of change than RJ.

²The reverse models (predicting Time 1 from Time 2) were not significant (LJ: $p = .59$; RJ: $p = .58$), which suggests directionality in the observed effects.

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Table 1

Results From Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Targets' Concurrent (Time 1) and Future (Time 2, Residualized for Time 1) IES-R Scores From Judge-Rated Variables

Model	<i>b</i>	<i>SE(b)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	95% confidence interval
Reader-judge ratings (RJ)						
Concurrent	0.22	0.08	2.81	98	.01	[0.06, 0.38]
Predictive	0.10	0.07	1.40	58	.17	[-0.04, 0.25]
Concurrent, accounting for LJ	0.02	0.09	0.20	97	.84	[-0.17, 0.20]
Predictive, accounting for LJ	-0.03	0.10	-0.36	57	.72	[-0.23, 0.16]
Listener-judge ratings (LJ)						
Concurrent	0.43	0.09	4.66	98	.00	[0.25, 0.61]
Predictive	0.24	0.09	2.57	58	.01	[0.05, 0.42]
Concurrent, accounting for RJ	0.41	0.12	0.41	97	.00	[0.18, 0.65]
Predictive, accounting for RJ	0.27	0.13	2.13	57	.04	[0.02, 0.52]

Note: Covariates in all equations included initiator status (i.e., whether the partner or the target initiated the end of the relationship), relationship length (in months), time since the separation (time since the physical separation in months), age (the target's age in years), and sex (the target's sex). IES-R = Impact of Event Scale-Revised (Weiss & Marmar, 1997).