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Triangular Relationships

The author discusses the issue of “triangular” relationships. “Triangular” relationships consist of two friends, one of which has introduced a romantic partner into their life, causing a feeling of alienation for the “abandoned” friend. The author cites scholars on the subjects of relational theories and also provides quantitative and qualitative research to support his findings. The article discusses the problems consistent with “triangular” relationships, as well as solutions to prevent such mistakes from occurring.

The majority of information pertaining to the issue of a best friend’s neglect during the development of a close friend’s new romantic relationship dealt with how friendships, especially in adolescence, produce semblances of how romantic relationships develop in adulthood. Furman (1999) suggested that adolescent friendships affect how individuals interact in initial romances:

Because romantic relationships have such affiliative characteristics, the competencies underlying reciprocity, co-construction of a relationship, validation of worth, and intimacy are likely to be important in the development of romantic relationships as well as friendships. Thus, experiences in childhood peer relationships serve as one of the foundations for the development of the affiliative competencies that are central in romantic relationships. (p. 10)

Furman (1999) explained how the characteristics which are essential to creating positive friendships at a young age played a significant role in how individuals approached romantic relationships. Researchers have discovered a stronger attachment to romantic partners and peer friendships than was once considered the norm. Researchers have long associated children’s central attachment to their parents or care-

givers, and, because of this mindset, have claimed parental interaction is a direct cause of how children develop in their friendships and romantic relationships. According to Furman and Wehner (1994), research indicated peer relations at a young age were a large implication to how romantic relationships progressed throughout the life course. According to Boston, Creasey, and Kershaw (1999), college students mentioned their romantic partners as the central attachment in their lives, even before their parents or caregivers.

Many different aspects of peer relations allowed for the association between friendships and romantic relationships. According to Boston, Creasey, and Kershaw (1999), conflict resolution was approached differently between peers as opposed to adolescents and their parents. In peer to peer conflict, researchers discovered resolution being produced through negotiation, compromise, and stop action; whereas during conflict between adolescents and their guardians, techniques such as submission or withdrawal were used. Such discrepancies have been attributed to many different reasons such as the adolescent's realization of the consequences of their resolution techniques. Yelling, dominating arguments, withdrawal, and submission have the potential to harm the evolution of the friendship or romantic relationship.

When the adolescents began to realize the consequences of their actions, the individuals reassessed the ways in which they interacted with their friends. Agreeability, encouragement, conflict resolution, along with other positive characteristics became enacted in the friendships, creating positive learning tools for the adolescent to assess in future peer relations. Such tools were put into practice in the adolescent's development of romantic relationships as well.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FRIENDSHIPS AND ROMANCES

According to Hendrick & Hendrick (1993), romantic relationships shared many features of friendships for adolescents. Hendrick & Hendrick (1993) provided research of college students describing their romantic relationships with aspects involved in friendships twice as often as aspects attributed to romantic relationships. In fact, almost half of the students involved in the study claimed their romantic partner was their best friend. However, when characteristics of friendships

and relationships became interconnected, those individuals labeled in each particular group became confused. Role confusion usually was responsible for breeding the conflict discussed in the present study.

According to Zani (1993), both the relationship partner and the friend would compete to fulfill the role of central attachment. If a romantic relationship was hinged on a friendship-based love (Grote & Frieze, 1994), such aspects as companionship and intimacy would overlap with needs fulfilled by the adolescent's friends, causing further confusion as to the role of each member.

The issue of role confusion would usually transfer into feelings of neglect and replacement. The best friend, whose role as central attachment was in jeopardy, many times would attribute the conversion of needs as a decision made by their friend to appoint central attachment to their new romantic partner. In many cases, such a "changing of the guard" did not occur; however, due to the lack of communication among all members involved, such a perception could be attributed.

ASSESSING MULTI-RELATIONAL CONFLICT

According to Parks & Adelman (1983), communication between a new romantic partner and the other partner's friends and family provides the romantic relationship a better opportunity to flourish. Such associations may be attributed to the understanding of how the new romantic relationship would affect all members involved and allowed those involved to assess the changes properly.

According to Moncur (2004), friends who may have felt abandoned or neglected needed to understand their role was still important in the life of their friend. Moncur reminded the reader of the importance of the role played in their friend's life. Moncur also warned the reader to watch the words used with their friend while in a jealous state. She reassured the reader of the imminent return of the friend and pointed out the friend's need for the reader in their life, even if the new commitment resulted in marriage.

METHOD

In order to encompass a full respect of information while researching the relational habits of members of a relational triangle, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. Two surveys were used

to determine the demographics and relational attitude of the interview subjects. One survey was constructed for the “friend” subject and another survey, identical except for verbiage, was constructed for the individual currently in a relationship, also referred to as “X.”

The requirements to take part in the “friend” study included being between the ages of 18 and 24, not currently being in a relationship, and the friend to whom their answers reflected must have been in their current relationship for at least one year. The requirements to take part in the “X” study included being between the ages of 18 and 24 and currently being in a relationship for at least one year. To satisfy the qualitative method, I created two long interview transcripts, one for the “friend” and one for “X.” Also, a focus group was held involving five participants. The participants in the study ranged from age 19 to age 21. All interviews were conducted by the author either at his residence or the participant’s residence based on convenience. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Each transcript was analyzed line-by-line as to extract only the true nature of the participant’s response (Creswell, 1998). Next, the data found through line-by-line analysis was processed into micro-themes, which involved collapsing the line-by-line data into categorical themes gleaned from the text. The themes which were assembled from the data analysis were: (a) the keys to having a positive, healthy friendship while in a relationship are being understanding, respectful, communicating, listening (IV 1, 543-546), and keeping them involved (IV 1, 522-525); and (b) by your significant other fulfilling different roles (IV 1, 429-430) you are not replacing them, even if they may feel this way (IV 1, 432-433), they are still your best friend and that role has not changed (IV 1, 544-545).

RESULTS

My research was divided into two sections: information I obtained from “X”, which will be referred to as ‘Janet’, which represented the friend involved in both a friendship and a romantic relationship, and information obtained from the “friend,” who represented the friend of “X,” or “Janet,” not currently in a romantic relationship. The research was obtained through survey interviews, long interviews, and a focus group. The main themes found in these research tools were

mistakes made by members involved in the “relationship triangle,” the keys to maintaining healthy friendships while involved in a romantic relationship, and how to keep all members satisfied with their roles in the “relationship triangle.”

ERRORS AND MISTAKES ASSOCIATED WITH “RELATIONSHIP TRIANGLES”

Situations or circumstances of conflict between members of the romance/friendship “triangle” could be magnified if the issues were not dealt with properly. Low communication fidelity, or a complete lack of understanding, bred potential obstacles for the “triangle” to overcome. In my long interview with Kristen (girl not currently in a romantic relationship, name changed for confidentiality), she attributed the lack of communication as the cornerstone for the problems which developed in her “triangle” (IV 1, 490-491).

In the surveys obtained from those categorized as Janet, most felt they participated in as many, if not more, planned events with friends as before entering into their current romantic relationship. Such information exemplified a lack of understanding and/or communication because of the response given by those categorized as “friends.” Half of the “friends” surveyed believed their friend participated in fewer planned events than before entering into their romantic relationship.

Unfortunately, time management was not the only circumstance where friends disagreed upon perceptions. A common opinion among members of the focus group, which consisted only of those categorized as “friends,” was the anxiety to be as involved with their friend’s (Janet) life as before for fear of intruding on the new romantic relationship. Many group members attributed this uneasiness to the lack of discussion with their friend on the subject.

The ‘third wheel’ sensation became a relevant topic during the focus group. One member noted her reason for feeling estranged was not because her friend would bring the new boyfriend into their social environment, creating the usual ‘third wheel’ sensation, but instead was the result of never having the boyfriend in the social environment. She felt the lack of interaction and involvement with her friend’s significant other was a prime reason for the uncomfortable mood which became obvious between her and her friend.

KEYS TO RE-ESTABLISHING RELATIONAL BONDS

Many times the reason “triangles” became so disillusioned was because the initial foundation which created the “triangle” was error-ridden. The circumstances which led up to, and generated, the situation were usually the best place to start renovations. Kristen felt one of the key aspects to maintaining a friendship was involvement. She clarified, “You let your friends know. . . I met a really nice guy. . . you kind of go through it together and watch it progress from, ‘He’s a nice guy,’ (to), ‘I think I want to pursue this relationship’” (IV 1, 523-525). She explained how there was a need for friends to be involved in the processes associated with finding a significant other. She also reiterated how such involvement reinforced those bonds of friendship.

A clear way for friends to feel involved in the processes of a romantic relationship was to guard against neglect. By prioritizing and scheduling one’s time properly, all members included could feel as though their time and person were properly valued. In my long interview with Kristen, an important aspect discussed was how to discourage such feelings of neglect by balancing those friendships and romantic relationships properly (IV 1, 74-76). She mentioned planning out significant events ahead of time to ensure both parties of equal participation (IV 1, 116-121). Different “triangles” had different approaches; however, an excellent way to guard against jealousy and insecurity was to continue allowing all members to feel like an important aspect.

Another aspect which Kristen felt was very important in assuring a quality friendship while in a romantic relationship was being understanding, which she felt was a responsibility of all involved. She attributed a few different circumstances to being understanding, first in the way one showed importance to their friends and/or partner:

I think it’s just all about understanding your friends and your boyfriend and what they need . . . maybe your boyfriend needs letters and stuff like that, and so you do whatever it is that that person needs to feel that you care about them and you’re involved in their life. . . (IV 1, 284-289)

In this quote, Kristen not only reinforced the need to realize what actions must be taken to satisfy one’s friend/partner, she also encour-

aged the managing of those needs in a way which allowed proper attention to everyone. Time management was another key to satisfying all members of the “triangle.” Kristen pointed out how having another person come into a friend’s life made it easy to become jealous (IV 1, 431-433), but it was important to understand how being their only friend did not translate into being their best friend. A person could be someone’s best friend without having to be their only friend. She noted that having the maturity to realize this could help the friendship’s progression and stability (IV 1, 543-545). She emphasized involvement, time management, understanding, communication (which included listening), and respect.

MAINTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONS

Similarly to the aspects used to get all members of the “triangle” on the same page, keeping everyone satisfied with the progression of the “triangle” required continued involvement, attention to detail, understanding, and patience. Once all members were able to fulfill the desired roles, allowing those members to continually have an active involvement in the progression of such bonds allowed the individuals the reassurance needed. A key to ensuring the members’ positive contributions to the “triangle” was the ability to let those individuals feel secure in those roles which were a part of their friend/partner’s life.

A common mistake discussed in the research obtained through my studies was the eventual regression of “triangle” members to their previous actions. The friend began to feel neglected again because Janet returned to spending an excess amount of time with her partner, Janet felt as though she could not satisfy the impossible demands required by the friend, and the partner became the scapegoat for the collapse of the friendship’s foundation.

During the focus group, a member brought up the concern of her friend’s lack of attention to details. She noted how, after the “triangle” seemingly worked through their initial problems, her friend regressed into the same habits which had caused the issues in the first place. A reason given for this “regression” was the satisfaction achieved by the “triangle,” causing Janet to revert back to what was easiest instead of continuing to actively work toward keeping all the members satisfied. Paying close attention to detail and “staying on guard” against regres-

sion was enacted by continually assessing the interactions of the “triangle.” Such “check-ups” allowed the “triangle” to assess problems at their start instead of allowing them to fester.

Another way to ensure the stability of the “triangle” was to stay flexible and understanding. In my long interview with Kristen, one piece of advice she offered for preventing conflict was to stay flexible and give the friend the “benefit of the doubt.” She noted a time when she and her friend dealt with a situation which could have resulted in conflict, but, through understanding and being flexible, both were able to achieve the desired outcome of the situation (IV 1, 322-326; 334-336). Finally, the best way to avoid conflict and resolve issues properly was to be patient with the other members involved. Being patient allowed all members the opportunity to assess the situation, take into consideration their feelings and the feelings of others, and approach the situation from a better perspective.

DISCUSSION

The main themes found in my research were the different kinds of mistakes which were encountered in the “triangle,” the keys to establishing positive relationships with all members of the “triangle,” and how to maintain the satisfaction of all members of the “triangle.” Much of the literature established that the adaptation of romantic relationships from the knowledge one had about friendships was a root to conflict. The “competition” between one’s friend and one’s partner was common because both were fulfilling similar needs. The information I obtained from Kristen added the point of both members needing to realize the roles, which usually could be found through active discussion and involvement.

Another issue which I observed in the literature and in my research was how to assess the situations which were created by the “relationship triangle.” Whether the circumstance was neglect, jealousy, or any other number of issues, patience and understanding are ways to “weather the storm.” The information found through literature, surveys, interviews, and the focus group allowed insight into the intricate aspects of “relationship triangles” and provided a tool which could be used as a guide for others to probe deeper into the details which encompass “relationship triangles.”

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