REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

The Key Role of Vulnerability in Developing Authentic Connections in Romantic Relationships

Romantik İlişkiler İçinde Özgün Bağlantılar Geliştirmede Kırılganlığın Kilit Rolü

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Abstract:

Among the recent relationship dynamics, Vulnerability is emerging as a strong foundational facet of fulfilling relationships, provided, the nuances of the idea are understood in an evolving fashion. This topic sheds light upon understanding the role vulnerability plays in building authentic relationships. The article explores the concept in depth touching every nook and crannies of elements that impact relationships. There has been some work done in this field thus far and understanding those existing literature has guided towards the existing gaps which can be bridged with further research, manifesting novel perspectives. Much evaluation and assessment were conducted on myriad facets, viz. self-disclosure, conflict resolution, response effect, models/theories of self and relationships, spousal support, societal influence, and intimacy. After selective mining and analyses of available data, it has been observed that there is a limited understanding of vulnerability as a whole concept, albeit being relevant in bits and pieces in its components. Nevertheless, it is observed that there is a dearth of detailed research in understanding the nature of vulnerability and interrelated concerns. As vulnerability creates an opportunity in creating emotional freedom and intimacy between couples, the article is followed by a concluding discussion highlighting its impact and effect on relationships.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Self-worth, Love, Authenticity, Emotional Intimacy, Communication

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Öz:

Yakın zamanda görülen ilişki dinamikleri arasında, gelişen fikirsel nüanslarının anlaşılması koşuluyla, Kırılganlık, ilişkileri gerçekleştirmenin güçlü bir temel yönü olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, kırılganlığın özgün ilişkiler kurmada oynadığı rolü anlamaya ışık tutmaktadır. Makale, ilişkileri etkileyen unsurların her köşesine ve ince noktalarına dokunarak kavramı derinlemesine araştırmaktadır. Şimdiye kadar bu alanda yapılan bazı çalışmalar olmakla beraber mevcut literatürü anlama, yeni bakış açıları ortaya koyarak, ileride yapılacak araştırmalarda ortaya çıkabilecek boşlukların kapatılmasını sağlamaya yönelik rehberlik sağlayacaktır. Çok sayıda değerlendirme ve değerlendirme yapıldı, yani. kendini açma, çatışma çözme, tepki etkisi, benlik ve ilişkiler modelleri/teorileri, eş desteği, toplumsal etki ve yakınlık. Derinlemesine çalışmalar ve mevcut verilerin analizlerinden sonra, bileşenlerinde parça parça alakalı olmasına rağmen, bir bütün olarak kırılganlık konusunda sınırlı bir anlayışın olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Bununla birlikte, kırılganlığın doğasını ve birbiriyle ilişkili endişeleri anlama konusunda ayrıntılı araştırmaların eksikliği olduğu görülmektedir. Kırılganlığın çiftler arasında duygusal özgürlük ve yakınlık yaratmada bir fırsat olarak ele alındığı bu makalede ilişkiler üzerindeki etkisi sonuçlarıyla tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kırılganlık, Özdeğer, Sevgi, Özgünlük, Duygusal Yakınlık, İletişim

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Introduction

Building meaningful connections are indispensable to human lives as human beings desire social bonds. This fundamental drive brings meaning, purpose, and growth into existence (Cag & Yildirim, 2018). The "Hierarchy of Needs" is a classic theory through which Abraham Maslow (1943) expounded the love and belongingness needs for any individuals' psychological growth. Regardless of young people becoming more involved in romantic relationships, the existing and growing knowledge is not being used for individuals at a much early stage which can help in providing guidance for facilitating them towards healthy relationships. It is important to understand that love is not merely responsible for forming fulfilling relationships. In today's world, studying functional core beliefs with which people set the tone of their relationships is vital to comprehend the noticeable shift in relationships. Since the drive for connection cannot be avoided, people would time and again come across potential partners who can uncover their unhealthy patterns in different situations within the relationship. This uncovering can surface ego stories which we internalize as children to define ourselves, others, and life circumstances (LePera, 2020a). Such internalizations when carried forward influences' adult relationships in numerous ways. It overall impacts the way couples show up in a relationship, expresses love or manage relationship threats which creates destructive patterns.

Living in a pre-existing uncertain and complex environment, forming connections are becoming incrementally complicated. Upcoming generations do not possess the same biological, psychological, social, and cognitive functioning (Tillman et al., 2019), owing to many changes in the culture, environment, upbringing, and technological advancements. To survive in such complex surroundings, the one thing an individual can be certain of is their identity (Prager et al., 2013) and to strive for being their best version. Being Honest and aligned to their authentic self is exactly where people are feeling turbulent and detached. Therefore, the need of this review is to understand the trends, challenges, and research gaps around vulnerability as a fundamental aspect of romantic relationships in the present time by creating an understanding of the existing literature. This review is focused to understand how vulnerability serves as a resource to build strong connections and impact

relationships at individual, relational and collective aspects.

Vulnerability and Its Impact

The constant human interaction with the world inevitably creates numerous occasions that evoke hard emotions such as sadness, shame, hatred, anxiety, guilt, or worthlessness. These strong feelings can manifest themselves into different forms of unhealthy behavioral patterns which serve an underlying purpose of feeling loved and accepted. This continuous process of reinforced patterns creates trauma/fear-based behaviors leading to inauthenticity. The issues researchers have pointed out as inauthenticity (Soller, 2014), lack of autonomy (Gubbins et al., 2010) and, neglect of education on building relationships (Weissbourd et al., 2013) contribute to the fear of embracing vulnerability in relationships. People are becoming afraid to be seen, known, and heard for who they truly are and to share their life experiences with their loved ones.

Ironically, every human being has three core desires i.e., "they want to be seen, heard, and loved for who they are" (LePera, 2020b). In relationships, vulnerability is when an individual lets another person see their inner world. They allow themselves to be seen for their genuine self and consciously chooses to not hold back their true emotions with their partner. Few pieces of research have suggested that among couples this can be achieved through sharing interests, beliefs, feelings, fantasies (Shaffer et al., 1990), needs, desires, and expectations (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984). It is equally important to study the ways partners put themselves out in a relationship, display boundaries, express curiosity, and share their life experiences. By being vulnerable "we step into the uncertainty" (Brown, 2013, Myth 1: Vulnerability is Weakness, para. 4), show up in relationships, take initiatives, freely share thoughts, emotions, and feelings without worrying about the consequences with an intention to connect and hope for it to be received. Many studies have used the term "self-disclosure" to explain this phenomenon of vulnerability in bits and pieces (e.g., Welker et al., 2014; Quek et al., 2015). Much research has concluded self-disclosure as a powerful communication tool to nourish and enhance emotional intimacy and satisfaction in any relationship (Collin & miller, 1994; Prager et al., 2013). Communication here signifies a two-way conversation between couples as a speaker and a respondent. When one partner expresses openly and the other partner shows

presence by positive engagement, it builds trust, intimacy (Welker et al., 2014; Prager et al., 2013; Reis and Shaver, 1988) and a sense of belongingness as it results in the feeling of being heard, loved, supported, understood, and validated. This psychological intimacy and joy can be achieved if couples are ready to create and hold space for welcoming each other as they are. The two models of social psychology i.e., the self-expansion model (Aron, 2004) and social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) support the former statement as they conclude that these practices strengthen the relationship. Creating love is a conscious process, as it requires to learn and unlearn to thrive in a relationship. To begin building such connections it requires people to feel worthy of receiving love along with the balanced act of giving. It is important for couples to be open to building their capacity and resources to experience what they have to offer to a relationship and what relationship has in store to bring out for them (Groves, 2020). One research finding (Arriaga et al., 2007) proposes that people who feel committed in their relationships make intentional efforts to accept the imperfections and handle any perceived relational threats with their partners in a constructive manner as opposed to people who feel uncertain and less committed in a relationship. Partners who find it difficult to handle any sort of uncertainty such as doubts, questions or insecurity related to relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) or keep on picking on any unfavorable quality of their partner tend to function on impulse, fixed perceptions, and beliefs which weakens their relationship and perception about their partners. When people are comfortable with being vulnerable, they are free of shame and low self-worth (Brown, 2013, Vulnerability and Shame in one book, para. 11-12) which helps them to channelize their emotions constructively and have either difficult or easy conversations with their partners without the fear of being judged or influencing the relationship in any negative form. Few studies have concluded that couples who engage in deep conversations, personal sharing of pleasant as well as unpleasant matters with their partners easily define the strength of their relationship (Levinger & Senn 1967; Laurenceau et al., 2005). Therefore, relating with each other through intimacy requires vulnerability where people take "emotional risks" (Brown, 2013, Myth 1: Vulnerability is Weakness, para. 4) based on the trust that whatever it might be that the other person is feeling, will be openly shared and discussed constructively with respect. The purpose of being Vulnerable in a relationship is of great importance. Vulnerability in an estranged relationships can be presented in the form of oversharing, emotional dumping, approval and validation seeking. Research (Salvatore et al., 2011) mentioned that anxious attached individuals seek intimacy through vulnerability but for different reasons. They practice unhealthy patterns (fear-based) to feel loved. A study has also shown that when a self-disclosing person indulges into sharing personal information that can quiver the feeling of safety in the relationship can lead to conflicts (Gilbert, 1976).

It can't be stressed more that vulnerability creates emotional intimate connections. It carries the power of either strengthening or breaking the relationship, therefore it has greater control over our mental and psychological well-being (Prager et al., 2013). It is essential to share the parts of one's life that are directed towards relational growth and freedom. In one of the telephonic interviews (Hoskins et al., 2008) conducted

with women who are inclined towards breast and ovarian cancer (BRCA mutation) were asked if they have shared about their condition to their partners. The result indicated that several participants despite feeling fearful and anxious decided to disclose their concern to their partners and to their surprise they felt deeply supported and connected because of the compassion and support they received as a response.

Sense of Self affecting Vulnerability

Studies determines that people who have been able to "earn" security in the relationship i.e., people who have overcome their past relational traumas and unhealthy patterns, experience much more intimacy motivation than any secure attachment style (George et al., 1985; Roisman et al., 2002). Interacting from the place of vulnerability as a process in relationships affects self-esteem, self-worth, self-doubt and vice versa. Individuals with higher self-esteem can trust their partners and show confidence in their relationships as compared to low self-esteem individuals (Prager et al., 2013; Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995). It has been found that people who appreciate and consider themselves as favorable and competent in comparison to people who do not feel worthy or competent enough to receive appreciation from the environment or other people predict the quality of relationship (Levinger & Senn, 1967; Weiser and Weigel, 2016). The way one perceives self-worth gives rise to inhibitions which interfere with their expression of true feelings with their partners and a very calculated amount of self-disclosure exists between couples which leads to lower emotional intimacy (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958). Studies have also found that people who are high on self-efficacy tend to indulge in behavior that helps in enhancing positive relational experiences through acts of openness, assurances, networks and positivity (Weiser & Weigel, 2016; Canary & Stafford, 1992). The study on triggers that activate internal trauma responses like ego stories, over-introspection, self-blame, or the role of inner critic etc., due to intrapersonal communication remains finite.

Self-Disclosure and Communication

Self-disclosure is a tool for increasing verbal intimacy in relationships which leads to satisfactory relationship experiences (Louise et al., 1991; Prager & Roberts, 2004). Communication through self-disclosure has been studied broadly as a bilateral dialogue exchange between a partner who discloses (discloser) and a partner who responds (responder). Many studies have concluded that when couples engage in reciprocal communication it is likely for them to feel deeply connected because it promotes intimacy and interdependent relatedness (Cag & Yildirim, 2018; Quek et al., 2015; Prager et al., 2013). Therefore, Intimate responsiveness is associated with greater satisfaction in relationships (Welker et al., 2014). Research has pointed out two patterns of self-disclosure (Cag & Yildirim, 2018) i.e., conditional self-disclosure (only if a partner discloses, the other person tends to disclose) and non-conditional self-disclosure (one partner discloses despite the level of disclosure of their spouse). It was established that even though the disclosure by a partner is not dependent on the amount of disclosure by others, there is a visible amount of high satisfaction in people with high or moderate disclosures as compared to couples with low disclosures. Therefore, the intensity or frequency of disclosure may vary but mutual disclosure is considered essential for survival of a long-term relationship (Cordova et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2004). To be able to set boundaries around being vulnerable in a relationship,

benefits couples become aware about each other's wants, needs or perceptions and consider it as an opportunity to form deeper connections through curiosity, support and understanding (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984; Nystul, 1999).

Content and Order of Disclosure in Communication

Several researchers have focused upon the order of sharing in communication and the type of message that is conveyed through self-disclosure. There are many mixed findings and contradictions in this area of research. A research has discussed the benefits of self-disclosure on the basis of context (Schumm et al., 1986) according to which the goodness or badness of experience in the relationship depends upon the positive or negative information that is disclosed or shared among couples. On the contrary, a researcher has found that, the couples who share and support their partners good as well as bad experiences and have an open conversation on anything that is being shared (Levinger & Senn 1967) impacts the perceived level of satisfaction and increased sense of value in a relationship. It has been observed that couples usually avoid deep or tough conversations and engage in talks that do not remove the tension in their minds. Research has mentioned that communicating at a superficial level is more common than having an intimate conversation (Taylor, 1968). Similar research concluded that opening in a relationship to share the innermost desires and feelings usually happen in a superficial manner at the beginning and with time pave the way up to personal intimate emotions (Altman & Taylor, 1973). One interesting finding suggests that people who embrace each other's vulnerabilities since beginning with understanding, acknowledgement, and support, helps in balancing the threats that get triggered internally because of the emotional baggage or poor past experiences that are carried into the relationship (Salvatore et al., 2011). It can be concluded that it is important for the couples to establish an environment of safety and trust to focus on the feelings and emotions being shared (Nystul, 1999) rather than the type of information because it reassures their partner and their experiences. Therefore, presence of few components in relationships such as acceptance, mutual investment, emotional maturity etc. increases relationship quality.

Gender Aspects of Relational Self-disclosure

Research on self-disclosure has significantly focused upon gender differences (e.g., Cag & Yildirim, 2018; Quek et al., 2015). It has been found in research that women get affected by the level of partner disclosure (low, high, or moderate) which is not the case for men (Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Similarly, another research concluded that women tend to disclose more and demand change in relationships whereas men disclose less and withdraw to the demands of change (Fincham, 2003). To build deeper intimacy in relationships, it is required for the couple to practice vulnerability irrespective of the gender. An interesting finding (Knoll et al., 2007) suggests that men tend to enhance their positive feelings through disclosure and women tend to reduce their negative feelings through disclosure with each other's support. A pattern has been observed among women where they often feel a lack of affection and value because they do not receive a desirable response or emotional reciprocity from their partners after they express. This observation is supported by several findings mentioned at the fore. One study (Louise et al.,

1991) found that married women often complain about their spouses' restraint from self-expression which increases their doubt towards relational intimacy level. Another study evaluated the results based on the data collected from Singaporean and Greek couples (Quek et al., 2015) to which they concluded that among Greek couple's wife cares more about husbands' self-disclosure than men for their wives, whereas in Singaporean couples' women use more of indirect or coated communication style to resolve any issues, which further blocks clear and open interaction leading to the risk of negative consequences commonly perceived as relational threat. Similarly, in another study (Millar & Millar, 1988) they found that women who perceived less self-disclosure from their husbands were low on a satisfactory scale in their marriage leading to conflicts. Interesting research conducted by Komarovsky (1964), found that wives tend to look forward to sharing their life experiences with their spouse as compared to the husbands in his targeted sample. He also found that women showed greater levels of disappointment because they felt like their expectations were not being fulfilled by their partner because of less involvement through self-disclosure which often led to negative communication patterns. One of the research (Gubbins et al 2010), proposed that women are more affected and conscious about many components of relationships as compared to men. This gender difference is still prevalent in today's romantic relationships. It has been concluded by research finding (Ortega et al., 2017) that women take more responsibility for relationships than men do which makes women more actively involved in conflict resolution because of separation anxiety. It is hard to understand the gender differences in terms of self-disclosure as most of the research is women centric encompassing emotional expression. This has formed a gap for understanding men's attitude and expectations in relationships. Characteristics that are essential to build and maintain long lasting, fulfilling relationships are "sex typed as feminine" (Cancian, 1986). It is equally important to shed light towards understanding the behavioral and thought patterns of men and their comfort around being vulnerable in relationships.

Prevalent Research Methodologies

Reviewed articles have used quantitative methods, such as surveys and questionnaires (e.g., Gubbins et al 2010; Quek et al., 2015). Whereas qualitative methods have also been used for data collection to gain insights on how people respond and express themselves in relationships. Variety of methods used were Laboratory and Videotape based observation (Welker et al., 2014; Arriaga et al., 2007; Gable et.al., 2004); Interview methods like, face to face, telephonic interviews were used (Weissbourd et al., 2013; Levinger & Senn, 1967; Hoskins et al., 2008). Few researchers also used a diary method (Sullivan et al., 2010) and case study/reports analysis (Janardhana & Manjula, 2018).

To understand the experiences of people and gather a deep insight of relational practices, it is beneficial to use qualitative research based on feasibility. Surveys and interviews and case study analysis are the best in understanding human behavior meticulously. To discover and analyze the prevailing relationship patterns, it is essential to dig into the symptoms that need attention by collecting raw experiences and data to represent the maximum population.

Concluding Discussion

Self-disclosure cannot exist without the courage of being

vulnerable. Vulnerability is much more than self-disclosure; Opening one's heart towards the possibility of getting hurt is much deeper than simply sharing one's life events or dreams. It is the way towards authenticity in relationship. This helps couple connect with conscious efforts and intention rather than with unhelpful, faulty patterns. Therefore, it is important to study how it is brought into a relationship as it acts as a core strength of romantic relationships which helps in building an interdependent relationship. According to Sternberg's theory of love (1986) a healthy and happy relationship cannot alone survive on one component, it requires progression to consummate love which involves intimacy, love, and commitment in everyday interactions. All the three components are achieved through the quality of communication individuals indulge in either with self or with their partners in a relationship. The synthesis, evaluation, and analysis of extensive review articles have shed light on the existing gaps, numerous different perspectives, and scope of future potential research. It is essential to conduct gender-neutral studies to understand the contribution of couples at various levels in relationships. Highlighting the disclosure style and patterns of women than men has led to puzzling conclusions due to contradictions and observations in real scenarios. Surveys were proved vague, as every individual define love, sex, intimacy, or passion within his or her own created understanding; knowing how one interact with such terms can be a major predictor of a healthy relationship. In-depth studies will help in providing conclusive statements which would be in alignment with the necessities and demands of changing environment and increased self-governed culture. Studies have focused a lot on couples who are married, even though much of the younger generation is romantically involved (Carver & Udry, 2003) who are facing difficulties and challenges in understanding relationships, suffering from breakups and maintaining connections based on many unhealthy factors like seeking instant gratification, unhealed trauma or repeated unhelpful patterns. It would be beneficial at societal level to conduct research on personal relationships on a population which is not much represented. For example: India, has focused extensively upon physical, sexual intimacy, dating violence, separation anxiety and fear of loneliness (Janardhana & Manjula, 2018). It is an urgency that we focus beyond the familial influences and childhood patterns as much as we cannot deny the fact that it plays a major role, we also need to accept that todays' youth is much aware about their operational unhealthy patterns. Many studies have focused upon people acting on their best behavior during the honeymoon phase of a relationship (Quek et al., 2015), whereas a limited amount of research has talked about destructive forms of vulnerability that exists initially between couples to seek love and avoid shame and rejection. Therefore, the role of vulnerability in young adults remain unclear in changing landscape of relationships and the lopsided focus on certain aspects affect non-productively on digging deeper in to more psychologically and cognitively entwined aspects of behavior. The overall quality of relationship management could benefit a lot if the focus of research finds the right balance.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate
Not applicable.

Consent For Publication
Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution
The author worked as the primary responsible in all areas of the study, read and approved the final version of the article.

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