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Research Article

# Separation and Remarriage with the Ex-Spouse: Redefining Meanings and Rediscovering Bonds

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## Abstract

Part of a broader investigation on remarriage to an ex-spouse, the present study aims to understand how the participant's experiences, during the separation, influenced their rapprochement with their ex-spouse. We conducted a qualitative study, interviewing 12 subjects, from 12 distinct heterosexual couples from Rio de Janeiro's middle-class population, remarried to their respective ex-spouses, with children from the original marriage. To analyze the results, we employed the content analysis method, via categories, discussing the category separation period and its subcategories: it was worth it, fantasies x realities and taking a break. Findings indicate that the meaning given to the experiences of separation and the attachment styles of former spouses had an impact on the reorganization of old bonds, resembling them to new ones.

## Introduction

Marital separation is a difficult process for the majority of people. Reconstructing individuality, while deconstructing marital identity, is a painful process, in which greater freedom is mixed with feelings of loneliness, which makes it even more complicated in the beginning [1]. On the other hand, experiencing various types of stressful situations can generate a new perspective on the relationship and opportunities for thoughtful change, having a positive impact on reconciliation [2,3].

IBGE's civil registry statistics (2015) [50] show interesting data, when comparing the years 2011 and 2015: (a) 10% growth in the number of marriages, including remarriages; (b) 6% reduction in the number of first-time divorces; and (c) the rate of divorces went down from 27% to 23%. Although the statistics report that 25% of marriages end up in a break up, the actual number of divorces are going down while the importance of marriage is going up. The data makes it clear that in today's ever increasing individualist society, the importance of marriage is still relevant [4-6].

Limited investigations suggest that several separated or divorced couples are likely to overcome their marital difficulties, in order not to experience a breakup. Recently, the study by Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk and Adams (2014) reported a 6% proportion of reconciliations among North Americans [7]. The research by Doherty, Willoughby and Peterson (2011) identified, during the process of divorce that about 10% of couples, and individually one in four spouses, believed that their marriage could be restored [8]. The results of the investigation by Zordan, Wagner and Mosmann (2012) indicated that about 22% of couples who had initiated a divorce lawsuit abandoned the action or reconciled with their spouse [9]. When associating reasons for divorce and openness to reconciliation, Hawkins, Willoughby and Doherty (2012) pointed out that "not having enough attention" increased this interest by 77% [10]. The study by Waite, Luo and Lewin (2009) suggested a significant reduction in the general level of well-being of married couples who separated and did not remarry with another spouse, as compared with those who remained married [11].

Findings like these reinforce the need for high-level research with a deeper focus on the reasons that lead people to remarry their ex-spouse [46-49]. Currently, no research seeking the roots issues has been found in Brazil; and very limited address certain characteristics of the theme in the United States, such as the one by Pearce Plauche, Marks and Hawkins (2016) [12].

When reflecting on the subject as a whole, one can observe that one of the explanations which can be used to understand the reasons why some married couples do not separate emotionally, but only physically, is called the attachment theory [13,14], applied to adult life [15]. For that to happen, it is assumed that the beliefs internalized in the experiences with the first caregivers create an internal model to establish and maintain other bonds and to deal with losses, including loving relationships [14,16]. The anguish produced by separation, in happy or unhappy marriages, suggests that, even if certain experiences changes other elements of love, attachment remains; only vanishing slowly in response to the other's absence [15].

Some issues have been linked to a greater attachment to the ex-loving partner; and among them are: (a) More affection or romantic love [2,17-19]; (b) Not wanting/starting the breakup [8,17,19,20,44]; (c) Greater concern with the ex-partner and (d) Rowdy contact after the separation [15,17,19]. It is noteworthy that there is an interaction between the attachment patterns of the two ex-spouses and that the respective combinations produce distinct relational dynamics [21]. Several studies have investigated the association amongst attachment styles, as described by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978), and the reactions to love separation, as one of the main factors that affect adaptation in this period [22]. Under the paradigm that attachment to the ex-spouse reflects an emotional maladjustment, many of these researches have focused on maladaptive behaviors, emphasizing that most of them are linked to the difficulty of psychological adjustment with separation and/or to insecure attachment styles [18,20,23,24].

However, the widespread assumption that emotional attachment between ex-spouses is linked to an inadequacy has led to the "pathologization" of this interaction, which may be functional in some cases [25]. In this sense, Lamela, Figueiredo and Bastos (2010) postulate that conflicts and maladjustments may result from the process of reorganizing the bond, which, per Bowlby (1980), is the last stage of adaptation to the loss of the attachment figure [13,26]. That enables the continuity of transformed bonds and adjustment to new situations, based on the reorganization of the self-representation and representation of the other. According to those authors, their postulation contributes to the "depathologization" of behaviors after the separation, as they start



to be evaluated as adaptive to the process, whose quality depends on attachment styles. Based on the same idea, Davis et al. (2003) argue that a person with a secure attachment pattern can interpret, for example, that the relationship with the ex-spouse brought learning, or that he/she felt strengthened by the loss [19].

Even with these possibilities, one can observe that all the adaptive potential for separation, belonging to people with secure attachment, has not been the focus of most research on the subject. Adults with secure attachment are open to interdependence, closeness, receive care or express their needs without difficulty, care for their partner and generally have long, reliable and friendly relationships [16,27,29, 51]. They are optimistic about the possibilities of maintaining relationships [21]; but, if there is a break, they are more successful in doing it harmoniously, which results in mutual respect and the desire to be together again, whether in a romantic relationship, or not [30]. Because they have more adaptive internal resources, they use appropriate strategies to deal with separation and change whatever is needed more easily [19,26,30].

Adults with an anxious/ambivalent attachment pattern have doubts about the partner's affection, demand reciprocity in their relationships, tend to want a kind of fusion and feel more jealous and angry [16,21]. Facing a separation, they have a sense of identity loss, greater difficulty in adapting and being alone; react with anger; exaggerate attempt at reconciliation, committing themselves to issues they previously rejected; and are more concerned with the ex-partner, because, for them, divorce means not only the loss of an attachment figure, but also the support mechanisms linked to him or her [19,21,23]. Research shows that high rates of this style predict resistant attachment to the former partner [20,31].

On the other hand, people with an avoidant attachment style see intimacy as a threat, invest little in relationships, show no empathy or willingness to take care of others, and are afraid to depend on them [16]. These adults tend to suppress negative emotions, to emphasize self-confidence, to keep their distance from the ex-partner, and not to show interest in reconciliation [19,21,23].

Although attachment theory is comprehensive and several aspects of the theme can be linked to the reasons why certain people do not separate emotionally, this path is not the only way to look for an explanation for that. The theory of interdependence, for example, is another way and advocates that relationships are broken or maintained depending on the evaluation of the results of one's personal investment, when compared to expectations for such relationships and other options [32]. Thus, factors other than attachment can be combined and reflect in this rapprochement, for example, the fact that the separation improved the relationship and that no better options for a romantic relationship were found [3,33,43]. It should be noted that, if there are poorly resolved issues among ex-spouses, proximity to other partners may become more difficult [34,45]. In addition, new relationships may be seen as threats if they evoke the fear of new rejection and, with this, the loss of other resources [23]. According to Schneller and Arditti (2004) and Chan and Pfeifer (2015), this sensation is less common among younger people (up to 35 years old) [18,35].

For Lamy (2016), this need to love, and the idea of what love is, are not focused on objects [36]. In contrast, when one is in love, the desire, which implies a selection, is focused on an object that can be replaced, if it does not satisfy the need or if the concept of love changes.

Thus, nowadays, one can notice that many people demand too much from their marriage and partner, but they are not willing to invest, in the same intensity, to achieve what they need [37]. The study by Amato & Hohmann-Marriott (2007) confirms this statement insofar as it points out that about half of divorcees reported marriages with little unhappiness, which suggests the precarious commitment as one of the two basic motivations for divorce [38].

Given this panorama, assessing how certain experiences of the separation period impact on ex-spouses, as part of the resumption of their marriage, becomes relevant because, in addition to having received not enough attention from researchers, it allows a broader view on what can, initially, motivate this type of remarriage. Thus, the objective of this study is to understand how the experiences lived by the participants, during the separation period, influenced their rapprochement with their ex-spouse.

## Method

### Delimitation

Both researchers are couple and family therapists and conduct investigations focused on themes related to couple and family issues at the University to which they are affiliated. This study stems from a more comprehensive research, doctoral theme of the first author. The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution in which it was developed (Opinion no. 2016-17). It is a qualitative and exploratory research, being

its main concern to know the characteristics of the diverse phenomena occurred in the marital dynamics of the remarriage to the ex-spouse.

The focus of the investigation was to understand the processes used by the participants to overcome substantial marital problems, so that they could remarry to the former spouse. In this way, the qualitative approach was an appropriate choice for in-depth discussion of the meaning that individuals gave to the experiences they had lived which led them to remarry. This approach permitted participants to explain, in their own words, the most relevant points that helped them remarry to their ex-spouse and, with that, we could understand in greater profundity what was behind their decisions (Alves-Mazzoti & Gewandzsznadjer, 2000) [39].

Just to clarify what we mean by some terms in our research, when we say 'marriage', that relationship can also be a cohabitation; when we say 'divorce', that is an official separation; and when we say 'separation', that means that any court had not to be involved with the process. More details about the participants and their recruitment criteria is described below.

### Participants

The field research was carried out with 12 independent subjects, that is, members of distinct couples (six men and six women), indicated by the researcher's personal and professional knowledge network, constituting a convenience sample. The participants did not know each other and we decided not to interview both members of the couples because we were aiming to investigate if, and in which main points, when only one spouse changes him/herself, the relationship changes. Having this objective in mind, interviewing only one member of the couple would be enough. The number of participants was determined by the saturation, due to the themes repetition [40].

The first researcher explained about her project and participation criteria to various professional colleagues and personal friends, in order to identify possible interview participants. Upon receiving the indications, this researcher, through an initial telephone conversation, recruited those ones who met the following criteria: they should belong to the middle strata of Rio de Janeiro population, be heterosexuals, be remarried with the ex-spouse at the time of the research for at least 1 year, and have at least one child from the original marriage. In addition, participants would need to have had a first marriage or cohabitation of at least 2 years; and would need to have been separated or divorced for at least 6 months, living in different homes. Civil registration was not required for the couple to be considered as married or separated.

### Instrument

We employed semi structured individual interviews, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed completely. The interview script was formulated based on the literature on the subject, focusing on the following central themes: meanings and expectations as to marriage; parenthood-related issues and the children's influence on the separation and remarriage; events of greater repercussion for the separation; differences and similarities between the remarriage and first marriage; post-separation experiences and attitudes in relation to employment, finances, relationships and other factors; losses and gains with the separation and remarriage.

The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and their location, date and hour were scheduled per the participants' availability. All participants signed an informed consent form, authorizing the disclosure of the results for teaching purposes, research and publication, and they were informed that their identities and those of their family members would be withheld.

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data obtained in the interviews, we employed the content analysis method, via categories, as proposed by Bardin (2016) [41]. This method permits one to make inferences as to the conditions underlying the production and reception of messages; that is, it enables one to discover what is behind the words. It is based on the connection between the description and analysis of the texts and the factors that determined these characteristics, deduced through logic. As each participant had his own story, with different reasons for having once separated or divorced, and diverse motivations for having remarried, this method was the most appropriate to understand the main themes behind the different perspectives as to why they reconciled. Although the focus of this research was the process of shared rebuilding of the marital relationship in a remarriage with the ex-spouse, understanding the motivation for separation was important to help explaining the big picture of this process. So, it is important to mention that their separation occurred for different reasons-infidelity, incompatibility of life projects, divergent values, constant and exaggerated jealousy, among others, that caused very serious conflicts.

After the first author transcribed the 12 interviews, she advanced to the process of coding each one of them, whose objective was to identify and relate the meanings amongst the participants' stories. Each paragraph was analyzed and their units of analysis were highlighted with the purpose of finding a word or idea that expressed the theme of that section. With that, it was possible to observe the most frequent feelings and ideas. These data were compared with each other, in order to construct the possible categories and, later, to reduce them to the most relevant ones, through the integration of those with similarity of meaning throughout the different speeches. Thus, the main processes for guiding the discussions were identified, as the data was gathered and connections were made between thematic categories and subcategories that emerged from what had been said. These processes were systematized into five principal concepts, confirmed by the second author, which gave us a broader view of the different variables that can help individuals to be successful when remarriage to the former spouse. This article addresses one of them-how the main individual changes affect the reconciliation in a remarriage to an ex-spouse.

### Demographic data

The participants ranged in age from 36 to 76 years (M=56 years). The individuals in the study had been married for the first time between 5 and 25 years (M=11,7 years); their period of separation or divorce, living in different homes, lasted from 9 months to 25 years (M=9,3 years); and they were remarried, by the time of the interview, between 1 and 22 years (M=10,3 years).

The sample was well educated. Three out of the 12 individuals had a postgraduate degree; 7 of them had a graduate degree; only one was undergraduate and another one completed high school. In terms of religion, only one woman said that she had none. Six out of the 12 were Catholic, 4 were Protestant, and 1 was Buddhist.

### Results and Discussion

This study presents part of the results of a more comprehensive study that sought to ascertain, by way of the participants' accounts, the main factors that contribute to rebuilding marital relationships in remarriages with the ex-spouse. In our presentation of the results, the participants will be named F (female) or M (male), followed by a number from 1 to 6, and their ages will be specified.

It was observed that all respondents had experienced, during the time that they were separated, certain situations and feelings of attachment that made them evaluate this period as crucial for the resumption of the relationship. Thus, in order to achieve the objectives of this study, that is, to understand how the experiences lived by the participants, during the separation, influenced their rapprochement with their ex-spouse, the category separation period will be divided into subcategories and discussed.

#### Separation period

The period of marital separation generates losses for both their couples and their families' couples and families, but it can also be a time for deep reflection and analysis of various aspects of the failed marriage relationship, in order to better understand what happened, take on their own responsibilities and seek change. Based on our understanding, from the situations and feelings experienced during the period of separation, this category discusses what was perceived as the most relevant topic for the participants' rapprochement of their ex-spouse.

Among the experiences mentioned, the interviewees pointed out the following issues as very important for their stories of rapprochement, which will be addressed next: the feeling that it was fundamental to have gone through the separation, the difficulty in emotionally disconnecting from the ex-spouse, and the amorous disappointments with other partners. The separation period category was, thus, broken down into three subcategories: *it was worth it, fantasies x realities, and taking a break.*

#### It was worth it

The circumstances that culminated in the separation of participants from their spouses, as well as the situations experienced by them during the period in which they were separated, were from different natures. Some separated due to adultery, others due to addictions or incompatibility in their daily lives, amongst other reasons. During the separation, there were financial difficulties, problems with children, and many different issues. However, for all of them, to have lived in these situations, regardless the type of experience, 'it was worth it' so that they could rediscover themselves and rebuild their lives.

*Including everything I suffered, it was worth it [...] for having this consequence, understand? If I hadn't broken the relationship up, maybe it was frayed, maybe it had survived, but in a bad... way, worn out, you know? Maybe we would just cling to each other's*

*defects, and... And in that way, no. We preserved the feeling for the other, to the point of reconciling (M<sub>6</sub>, 66 years old).*

*She [the daughter] said [to her father]: 'you don't love anyone, you love drinking'. It was chaos. I was scared, but I said, it should be like that for ... it had to be done for her, it had to be done for me, it had to be done for him. The three of us had to go through this. I don't know if the method had to be this ... And it was from that day on they started to adjust the way of living (F<sub>7</sub>, 55 years old).*

*There are certain things in life that are inevitable. Painful at times, but inevitable. You have to go through them (F<sub>9</sub>, 65 years old).*

*[She] We will rebuild, but I am hurt, it still hurts. Then, I said: so we must heal together because your wound was caused by me through my attitudes and the ones I have were also caused by me (M<sub>2</sub>, 68 years old).*

From the narratives, one can observe that the interviewees are certain that it was essential to have gone through painful experiences so that their marriages would have a chance to change and be gratifying again, maintaining feelings of love, respect and mutual understanding. Despite the reduction in family well-being, as postulated by Waite et al. (2009), for them, the breakup made a restart possible on new bases [11]. The data suggest that there was a perception that all the pain they had experienced positively transformed the ex-spouses in such a way that the remarriage achievements rewarded the effort to overcome the traumas and problems altogether [32]. Thus, one can notice that the breakup did not mean the end of interdependence, but the redefinition of the way of being connected, aiming at a greater satisfaction [3].

In general, the statements suggest that the participants became stronger with the learning acquired through coping with pain and suffering [12]. The interviewees made it clear that having lived during a period of separation brought a conscious assessment of what they wanted from a marital relationship. This led them to make better decisions and to change behaviors, as the focus of their reflections was on the process of interpreting the relationship issues that had finished and not as a loss [35]. M<sub>2</sub>, in fact, is one of those who assumes the responsibility for the separation and is clearly willing to face, together with the spouse, the difficulties and wounds caused by what they lived during the separation period, aiming to reconstruct the relationship. Such a supportive gesture brought security, re-approached the former spouses and strengthened the bonds between them [12].

Thus, the results indicate that experiencing different stresses and frustrations during the time of separation can provide a good chance of resuming the original marriage with the ex-spouse, if there is a high chance of satisfaction and recovering the emotional investment made in the relationship [2]. In support of the reconstruction process, several respondents had used psychotherapy.

*I did a lot of therapies. As soon as I separated, I started to do a Freudian therapy with a psychoanalyst. I did it for a good time. Then I tried Lacan. Then I tried some alternatives, like, bio... I don't even remember the name (F<sub>1</sub>, 59 years old).*

*Then, with the divorce, I had to start a job ... actually a job in psychology, right? Or ... psychoanalysis to understand, to try to understand, some reasons why everything happened the way it did (M<sub>3</sub>, 45 years old).*

*It was impossible to continue taking that wear and tear and that way of living without, without a breakup. [...] he said he was doing self-reflection. I also had to do this. [...] but I was already in therapy; so, I think I was already doing this exercise. [...] at that time I felt that he had really stopped to make some self-criticism of his role in that marriage. I think that, from then on, he opened up more to build this return (F<sub>3</sub>, 45 years old).*

Two thirds of the participants sought specialized help in therapy, with the aim of, above all, understanding what did not work well in the marriage so that a future relationship would be more rewarding, bringing more meaning to life for two. The reports suggest that many couples would benefit from a therapeutic space to reflect on their difficulties and reconsider their trajectories, even considering the resumption of their marriage as one possibility if they believed they would be able to overcome their problems [8].

Half of the participants who sought therapy had separated, mainly due to "lack of attention" and, in this study, basic incompatibilities between them and their ex-spouses were not identified, indicating that a therapeutic process could be beneficial for their reconciliation [10]. Thus, the results suggest that evaluating their entire story during the separation period, composed of facts of greater or lesser severity, is therefore a precious opportunity for maturity. This story is also essential for ex-spouses looking to reconstruct their relationship in a way which will be gratifying.

#### Fantasies vs realities



People often make a balance between future possibilities and what they previously had in their marriages, when going through different experiences during a separation. When asked if there were any gains from this, all participants reported that the period was very useful for, starting from other love relationships, to go on a journey of self-knowledge and review their fantasies about how life could be with other people.

*So, it was like I was looking for... all the time, like, the Prince Charming, you know? Someone who... that ideal, you know? [...] I wanted to find my Prince Charming, wonderful, great, beautiful. [Interviewer] 'Did you find it?' No, of course not! I would never find it, understand? I already had it, right? The difference is the way you see it, the way you face it ... I would say imitations, but no, they are limitations, the characteristics of the other person that you don't like so much, you know? You will not change the other. You change the way you see. You become more tolerant... (F<sub>3</sub>, 59 years old).*

*I spent two years separated, I met many men who were not worth it, and that left me wanting to retreat. Everything I told you that I liked about F. I didn't find it in anyone, absolutely nobody. I lived a relationship and felt in love, but it was an even more superficial, more physical relationship. I was never interested in having anything with the guy (F<sub>2</sub>, 39 years old).*

*I rode a lot ... I checked the taximeter and nothing ... The market ... [bad signal with the thumb]. Nothing better than a friendship. There's no more!!!! What do you want? [...] I am not pretty, I am not hot, I am not rich, I have no intention of any of this except to live in peace [...]. It is what you value, your children, your grandchildren, your home. And it's true! [...] I am very well! Very fulfilled today (F<sub>4</sub>, 55 years old).*

A point draws attention in F<sub>1</sub> report-the lapse occurred when the participant argued that she was going to speak 'imitations', but wanted to speak 'limitations', suggesting a replacement of the conscious idea by an uncontrolled incursion, full of meaning, which broke her defense unexpectedly [41]. From this, it appears that there was a certain disappointment as to what she thought she might have in terms of options for a new partner, as if all men were the same-'imitations'; or, as they say, popularly, it would be "to exchange six for half a dozen."

These three statements show the connection between disappointment at the realization that there is no ideal model, or prince charming, for their true love relationships and the reevaluation of what can be expected for these relationships, ratifying the postulations by Schneller and Arditti (2004) [35]. This suggests that having a real experience, with what was previously thought to be better, can change people's perspective in relation to these possible 'delightful' alternatives, corroborating the study by Doherty et al. (2011) [3]. Even when there was affection for other partners in this period, the participants were disappointed with what they had experienced.

*I started to have a certain involvement with this ex-boyfriend of mine, who was a repressed passion that I had [...] the guy was already 30 years old; he could have evolved a little bit. But, no ... He had that 15-year-old head. You know, that thing? A beast man, without content, I didn't like it. Then I said: no, this guy is good, like, to kiss, to make out, but just for that. Because, in reality, what I had as an ideal family expectation was with G. (F<sub>3</sub>, 36 years old).*

*This relationship I had was also... it was the watershed in the balance, you know? What I had before [...] I had my wife, who liked me, had my daughter, had fun at home, had affection, I had ... we went to church, there were a lot of things. But not with that other person. That other person was totally different. And in addition to the problems with, with her mother, jealousy, with the father... This time, as I had already had this experience and had not liked at all, then, I started to appreciate a lot what I had before (M<sub>1</sub>, 55 years old).*

The interviewees' need to find a loving partner who would help them to enrich their lives emotionally, and not just having fleeting relationships, which shows the key importance of having someone who can provide such an experience for a good adaptation to divorce. This data shows us that having romantic relationships remain central to people's identity [24,42]. However, these participants were not successful in relationships with their new partners. This fact brought to light the good memories they had of their original marriage, suggesting that, as one realizes that the alternatives are not what they had expected as thought, the previous relationship comes to be seen in another way - as more attractive or valuable [3].

The reports point to the lack the interviewees felt, not only of the ex-spouses, but of what they represented of their family ideals, suggesting that the multiple losses - family unity, security, friends, among others, may continue to have importance and to influence their responses to their new relationships (23,33,35). The fanciful search for loving in and of itself also appears in the reports, generating frustration.

*You don't find that bunch of amazing people that you could immediately find in fantasy. I didn't find anyone like that, that was important, you know? I had fun here and there, I*

*met a guy or another, but nothing important that really made me happy with any other relationship (F<sub>3</sub>, 45 years old).*

*He also had girlfriends, but he never consolidated a relationship, right? I think that also facilitated the homecoming, right? [...] I had many passions, many passions. Then you also fall in love with your own feeling, you know, in reality. Because, like, if I take the relationships I had in this period, it just got worse. [...] Do you know the one you don't even want to remember? [...] This also contributed to the return, you know? Because it gets worse over time, then, when you open your eyes ... [...] and say like: what is this, my God? Goodbye! (F<sub>1</sub>, 59 years old).*

The narratives indicate that there is a distressing search for something more in relationships, to the point of making the person 'fall in love with their feeling', as if there were someone imaginary, who had just not yet been discovered, who would make the other person 'really' happy. One can notice that the interviewees are primarily looking for love and, secondarily, for a specific partner with a compatible image with a love script in their memories, one who can reactivate it [36]. However, the described experiences suggest that these people have begun to understand the value of setting healthy, but realistic, expectations for their relationships; and such an attitude is important so that there is a greater commitment in marriages [38].

All participants' reports, and not just the ones of elders, show pessimism and insecurity about other partners, due to the various disappointments during the separation period. It is important to note that more than half of the respondents in this study had become separated between the ages of 27 and 35 years old, and at this point, the results are not completely aligned with those by Schneller and Arditti (2004) and Chan and Pfeifer (2015) [18,35]. In the present study, one can notice that when people have negative experiences with other partners, being younger does not necessarily influence them to have a more optimistic view on such relationships just because they will have more time and opportunities.

In general, the data indicates that the meanings attributed to the loving experiences during the separation period can have repercussions on the illusory perspective someone had before these relationships, as well as on the reevaluation of the relationship with the ex-spouse. Thus, returning to the concepts of the interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), one can observe that the comparison of alternatives to the original relationship with the ex-spouse can influence resuming the marriage as it is perceived that, even not being perfect, the relationship with the ex-spouse is still a better option for his/her family ideal [32].

#### Taking a break

Many people find it difficult to let go of their previous stories as a couple. In this study, all participants, with the exception of one, reported situations that point to the continuity of strong affective bonds with their ex-spouse. Several interviewees said that they saw the separation as temporary, even if they were for 1 or 25 years apart.

*So, we were separated, but, like, I [emphasis] was not separated in my head. I was going there, I was taking a break (M<sub>2</sub>, 68 years old).*

*Yeah ... I, actually, never wanted to get divorced. That is the truth. Never! I always said that to everyone (M<sub>3</sub>, 45 years old).*

*I think it is very difficult for you to separate when you still have a feeling for the person [...]. And a withdrawal started and so on. But at the beginning, I was very afraid, at the same time, of losing the person for good [...]. So, that thing, instead of speaking the word separation, it is talking about taking a break. It is like trying to hold on a little bit (F<sub>3</sub>, 45 years old).*

*But I never wanted ..., I think that in these 25 years, I never stopped thinking about L., despite having had other relationships. She also had her relationships, but I always liked her a lot (M<sub>0</sub>, 66 years old).*

The statements indicate that the participants believed that there was a chance for their relationships to be restored, with no need for a definitive separation, corroborating the study by Doherty et al. (2011) [8]. Respondents show that they did not want the breakup and that this was due to the partner's initiative, pointing to an attachment to their ex-spouse [17,19,20]. One can perceive the feeling of a lack of control over the situation in these people, typical of those who did not start the separation. They tried to appease the fear of losing their partner forever, by understanding their attitudes and reactions as 'taking a break', which complements the study by Chan and Pfeifer (2015) [18]. Thus, the data suggests that not having the initiative for the breakup directly threatened the attachment bonds of these participants which triggered a strong desire for reconciliation [8].



It is also observed the maintenance of affection and romantic beliefs for the ex-spouse, such as believing that he/she is his/her true love, even if both have been involved with other people [2,17,18,19]. The results point to a strong association between emotional involvement and not having started the breakup process [17,19].

Some statements indicate that ambiguity and denial were related to the non-breaking bond with the ex-spouse.

*F. never gave up on me, he suffered like crazy [...]. Because every weekend, every week, he was calling, crying, crying. A man of almost 2 meters, looks like Hulk, strong, knocking on my door, he promised me that he would not cry, that he would be strong [...]. When he saw me, he cried. And that idiot, like that, was able to mobilize me. And as much as I didn't care (it was even in that time I was in love with that other guy), when I saw him crying badly for me, I was moved (F<sub>2</sub>, 39 years old).*

*[He] I'm already around you for a while and until now you don't say if you want to come back to me. Then I thought: what an insult this is, huh? Then, I looked at him and said: look, I always knew what I wanted from my life, and that was to stay married [...]. You are the one who doesn't know what you want out from life [...]. And at that moment I was done, you know? No, I wasn't going to let him do that to me. Because deep down I was very emotionally dependent on him. And I just didn't want to go back (F<sub>3</sub>, 36 years old).*

*Ten years later I went to take the surname out. [...] I kept my married surname. Then, right after I took the last name, we came back. [...] But I put my married surname on the wedding invitation, and I was already the maiden name [...] So, like, it was like a very internal desire of mine to return and to restart and to rescue [...] what had been lost, you know? (F<sub>6</sub>, 65 years old).*

These interviewees had no rational intention to reconcile; and even the decision to separate was theirs, due to abuse and adultery. However, the reports suggest that they were still attracted to former partners and remained connected, even though they were angry with them, in love with another person, or after 10 years of separation. The statements of F<sub>2</sub> and F<sub>3</sub> show that the ex-spouses weakened their decision to maintain the breakup, even without admiring or respecting them, generating ambivalent feelings of desire for reconciliation and anger at the other for the separation. This caused conflicts, but, in parallel, characterized the continuity of attachment, as postulated by Weiss (1976) [15].

F<sub>2</sub>'s relationship was marked by serious problems before and after the breakup. Despite this, one can observe that the fact of seeing the ex-spouse crying, because he wanted to reconcile the marriage, 'moved' her, making her feel a great concern for him. F<sub>3</sub>'s narrative exemplifies a type of conflict with greater hostility, in which she felt very offended when being pressured by the ex-spouse to reconcile, as she realized that she was 'very emotionally dependent' on him and interpreted that he did not know her intimately truly. The data indicates that post-separation conflicts are often associated with concerns for the ex-partner and/or affection [17,19].

F<sub>6</sub>, on the other hand, only managed to remove the ex-husband's surname, after ten years of separation and, even so, used it in the wedding invitations of the remarriage. When explaining this question during the interview, she verbalizes: 'and I was already the maiden name', instead of saying something like: 'and I had already changed back to my maiden name'. The practical attitude of denying 'what had been lost' shows the 'desire to rescue' it and illustrates the connection between strong emotional involvement and the sense of identity loss, characteristic of ambivalent attachment, per Davis et al. (2003) [19].

Other reports are linked to the issue of taking care of each other, which normally does not happen when people are separated, but has continued to occur with these people.

*He was always very careful, very fatherly, very much! With me and with her [the daughter]. And I have always relied on him during all of those years. At first I didn't do it much, but then, you relax. Until we got back [laughs] 13 years later (F<sub>1</sub>, 59 years old).*

*I was always C's friend. I changed C's car every 2 years. [...] I'm not worried if a lover will enjoy it or not. [...] it's her right! She is a free woman. I was the one who did the s.. [...] my vision was that I had to change her car to give her comfort [...] I was not one of those who ... 'let's separate things' [...] There was no need to sell the apartment or divide things. The bank accounts remained joint, the apartment was in my name and hers. The office I had was in my name and hers, do you understand? (M<sub>3</sub>, 63 years old).*

*The worst thing is when you have these spinal crises, you get paralyzed, and you don't know what you're going to do. He called me and I had to break into his house to get in with the paramedics because he was stuck on the floor. He fell (he fell with his cell phone in hand), called me and how would I get in? (F<sub>4</sub>, 55 years old)*

*And so, every time my husband became ill, my ex-husband, you know, I was always... I would help, I would see. When I was sick, I called him, so that he would ... help me, too. So,*

*in fact, there was never a breakup, there was no clear breakup and such. First, the friendship continued, even because of the children, you know? (F<sub>6</sub>, 65 years old).*

Some respondents had reactions of relying on the care received from the ex-spouse, taking care of him/her, or protecting him/her from potential threats, which indicates attachment and a strong commitment to maintaining a good relationship in the future [28]. F<sub>1</sub> even associates the spouse with her father figure. The narratives indicate that these participants maintained with the ex-spouses, feelings and attitudes related to secure attachment, such as satisfaction, assuming responsibilities, trust and closeness, during the separation [16,29]. The data points to the use of a positive mental model in view of the successful way in which the interviewees reorganized the bonds and dealt with the separation anguish, even using the ex-spouse as a support for themselves, or vice-versa, confirming the characterization of these people as possessing a secure attachment style [22,9,26]. Such style seems to have facilitated the breaking up of these relationships without resentment or disgust, which made it possible the existence of a friendly relationship after the separation, indicating their influence on the resumption of the marriage [30].

From the narratives, one can notice that there were unbroken mutual emotional bonds between the participants and their ex-spouses, as neither of them established clear limits for the breakup, which contributed to the fact that the marital bond was not definitively broken. Thus, the results suggest that the interviewees' separation was experienced as temporary, since the behaviors during that time demonstrated the objective of not allowing the breakup to be consolidated, by retaining the attention of the attachment figure in an adaptive manner, so that they could reorganize the experience [26].

## Final Considerations

The results of this study suggest that the loving rapprochement between ex-spouses is associated with the meaning given to the different situations experienced during the separation period, and with the dynamics resulting from the interaction between those who have a secure and anxious-ambivalent attachment style and the attachment style of their ex-partners. In other words, people mature when they constructively interpret everything they have experienced through separation-and not as a source of resentment, including disillusionment over the existence of charming princes; thus, being able to re-assess and re-value the prior relationship with their ex-spouse.

When analyzing the concept of bond reorganization, it was possible to realize that it would be feasible to borrow it to understand such a rapprochement, since there are several losses with the separation process-dreams, ideals, expectations, assets, close relationships, and others, even though the decision to resume the marriage happens later. In this sense, the data indicates that there are several internal reorganizations and adaptive changes from the experience of separation, in such a way that the remarriage with the ex-spouse looks and feels like a new marriage with a new person.

The narratives show that emotional maturing, as a consequence of the experience lived during the breakup, make's many people feel stronger and more proud of themselves. Hence, they become able to use their internal and external resources in order to rebuild the relationship, suggesting that these people see separation as more rewarding than causing irreversible suffering. This occurs mainly when they realize that the alternatives are not better in view of the potential of the prior relationship with the original ex-spouse. In other words, people learn that expectations are healthy, but within a level of reality, so that relationships become a source of satisfaction and partners do not need to continue their eternal searches for non-existent princes and princesses.

Additionally, the results suggest that secure attachment is partially related to the process of rapprochement, as half of the participants had feelings and/or behaviors that show the presence of this style, such as optimism, taking responsibility for mistakes, trusting the other, feeling comfortable with the proximity of the ex-partner, caring and letting oneself be cared for him/her, and be respectful. It was also identified that the anxious-ambivalent style additionally influences this process, insofar as it generates a certain psychological domain of the other over oneself, which is reflected in feelings such as ambiguity and loss of identity.

Thus, separation can provide a new beginning if people see it as a starting point for redefining their relationships, in order to value what was good and readjust what caused serious damage to the relationship. In other words, when someone wants to build something in a place where there already is another construction taking place, the original one must be destroyed or remodeled so that the latter is seen as new. In the case of relationships, this means having new perspectives on how to deal with your own reality and the one of the other, and making the changes that are possible and important for the reconstruction of the relationship. The reports indicate that, for such a transformation to occur, a good amount of investment will be required from both parties. Therefore, one should not be under any illusion that there will be no more problems, but a commitment



to deal with marriage issues with a new mental model.

This study was focused on the perspective that married partners have capacities that can be activated to reconstruct and rebuild their broken marriage with the partner they chose to seal a marital commitment with, if they decide to do so, mainly, from the meaning they give to the separation experiences. In this way, it provides tools and subsidies for reflection, which can be used in clinic care for separated people or in unstable marriages, but open to reconciliation, through a greater understanding of the dynamics of the processes that promote rapprochement between ex-spouses.

The present study has some limitations. It would be desirable to have increased the minimum duration of time from the period of separation and remarriage, seeking greater homogenization of the group of participants. Nonetheless, it was not possible, at this time, to apply this criterion since remarriage to the same spouse is a relatively infrequent phenomenon. The research was conducted with independent members of remarried couples; however, if it had focused on couples, it could support a deeper consideration on the bonds established between the spouses in the reconciliation, based on both perspectives about the changes that have taken place. Besides, as we are dealing with a theme with scarce specific literature, it was necessary to include, in our discussion, research on romantic relationships in general, and not only research on relationships involving remarriage to an ex-spouse.

On the other hand, the exploratory nature of this study leaves room for several others. A point that draws attention is that in 80% of these couples, the two spouses, or at least one of them, were between 15 and 20 years old when they started dating and, in more than 50% of them, we each other's first love. One of the future studies could assess the extent to which these aspects are related to the difficulty of breaking the affective bonds in separation. Another possibility would be to further investigate if and how the emotional bonds maintained between ex-spouses have made it difficult for other partners to get closer.

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