Dealing With Romantic Break-Up and Rejection: Understanding the Nature of Relationships and Romantic Break-Up

Boyan Robak  
Pace University

Paul Griffin  
Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, Pace University

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Dealing With Romantic Break-Up and Rejection

Understanding the Nature of Relationships and Romantic Rejection

Boyan Robak
(mentored by Dr. Paul Griffin)
The following study sought to better understand the psychological variables affecting romantic break-up and romantic rejection. Individuals who reported higher self-esteem, less rejection sensitivity, and lower levels of attachment anxiety reported less adverse effects to break-up. Contrary to predictions, who initiated the break-up did not result in significant differences in adverse symptoms. Moreover, no gender differences were found for response to break-up, nor rejection. Comparing grief symptoms for romantic break-up and those who experienced a loss through death indicates that in a normal population of young adults the former experience plays a more pronounced role in their lives.
Introduction

- Romantic relationships are a common part of most people’s lives.
- So, too, are romantic break-ups and, in some cases, romantic rejection.
- Recently there is an increasing amount of attention being paid to the connections between romantic relationships and a number of psychological variables.
- We know that the ways people relate to relationships differ across individuals, which yields multiple forms of attachment.
- We also know that the manner in which people think and react to rejection varies across individuals.
- Even with recent understandings of the way people engage in romantic relationships, much remains to be understood—especially in the context of break-ups.
We sought to investigate a number of issues in our study.

What psychological variables affect the way individuals process romantic break-ups and rejection?

Related to this point we made the following hypotheses:

- Individuals measuring high in rejection sensitivity would experience more distress to break-up
- Individuals measuring high in attachment anxiety would experience more distress to break up
- Individuals measuring high in self-esteem would experience less distress to break-up
Hypotheses

- Due to cultural influences and social norms, we also expected gender differences
  - We hypothesized that females would report greater distress to break-up than males
  - We hypothesized that males would be more likely to reject their partners than females

- Finally, given the population we were studying—young adults—we expected total grieving symptoms for break-up to be just as high as that for loss due to death.
Method

Participants

- Participants consisted of:
  - 162 adults (primarily college students) between the ages of 18-28
  - Approximately 85 women, 77 men
- All participants were required to have been in a romantic relationship of no less than 3 months that subsequently ended.
- Participants completed an anonymous questionnaire containing a number of measures (see below)
- Participants provided demographic information as well information pertaining to the quality and length of relationship they were describing.
Method

Measures

The measures used in this study included:

- The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Downey & Feldman, 1996)
- Experiences in Close Relationship Scale Revised (Fraley et al., 2000)
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)
- Texas Inventory of Grief Revised (Faschinbauer, 1981)

We revised the TRIG in order to assess symptoms related to the break-up of relationship.
To uncover relationships, a series of statistical analyses were conducted (correlation, ANOVA, Chi-square, regression).

As predicted, individuals who scored higher on self-esteem reported less distress after break-up.

As predicted, individuals measuring high in rejection sensitivity and anxious attachment style experienced the most adverse effects to romantic break-up and rejection.

In contrast, those measuring higher in avoidant attachment styles reported less adverse effects to break-up and rejection.
Table 1 - Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Self-Esteem</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Rejection Sensitivity</td>
<td>-.53**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Romantic Break-Up Symptoms</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- *. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)
- **. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)
Results

- Against predictions, there were hardly any notable differences in results across the genders.
- Although women did report higher symptoms in recovering from break-up, not statistically different
- No statistical difference in who initiated the break-up
- Women measured significantly higher in anxiety attachment style

- Against predictions, whether one initiated the break-up or was rejected did not lead to differences in adjustment
### Gender Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>33.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rejection Sensitivity</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Anxiety</td>
<td>23.5*</td>
<td>21.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Avoidant</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break-Up Symptoms</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Significant at less than p<.05
Results

In trying to determine best predictors of break-up adjustment, a hierarchical regression indicated the following variables: (1) importance of relationship (2) anxious attachment, and (3) self-esteem.

Rejection sensitivity was no longer significant when controlling for these variables.

Total symptoms for adjustment to romantic break-up were higher than grief symptoms due to loss.
Results

- Responsibility for the break-up played no notable role.

- Interestingly, individuals with an Avoidant Attachment Style experienced less symptoms after break-ups.

- This makes sense given that avoidant individuals tend to:
  - Restrain emotions in social/romantic relationships
  - Often keep thoughts and feelings to themselves
Discussion

These findings suggest an important connection between an individual’s self-image and his/her ability to overcome romantic rejection.

However, while individuals with higher self-esteem tend to resist rejection symptoms more easily, they also tend to place less emphasis on the importance of their romantic relationships.

It is evident that attachment styles play an important role in recovering from romantic break-up and rejection.
Discussion

- The lack of gender differences may suggest that rejection is experienced more similarly than might be argued based on theories of socialization and gender norms.

- With choice as an option, are 21st century women just as likely to reject as men?

- Finally, our research points to the common experience of romantic break-up in young adults’ lives.

- In fact, it seems that recovering from break-up is a harder experience for most young adults than is grief due to death— if only because the latter is less likely to happen to someone we have a very intimate relationship with.
One important limitation of this study: its correlational design makes it impossible to attribute causation.

Future research should:

- Use a longitudinal method to uncover changes
- Reexamine gender differences to check for potentially unseen factors.
- Examine for differences across age cohorts.
- Consider the role of attachment styles regarding rejection more closely.
- Examine the intricacies of self-esteem to further understand its role in rejection and life satisfaction.