The Breakup Phase

Emiris Contreras

University of Kentucky

**Abstract**

In this paper my focus will be about the negative cognitions that people can experience after a relationship breakup as well as some of the affects that these break ups can have on them. Following a relationship breakup some effects that people can have are depression, complicated grief, and anxiety (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009). Age, gender and how long the relationship has been going on for, are also factors that can cause negative emotions in a person. I will cover three themes, which are reasons for a breakup, effects and symptoms of a breakup and moving on from a breakup. Additionally, I will discuss limitations and future research.

Keywords: *relationship, break ups, negative emotions*

**The Breakup Phase**

In today’s social environment the majority of people will experience a romantic relationship. Along with romantic relationships, there will also sometimes be some type of relationship break up as well. There are a lot of different factors that can determine what kind of affect a relationship breakup will have on a person including age, gender, how long the couple was in a relationship, and reasoning for the breakup. Boelen and Reijntjes (2009), said “depression, anxiety and complicated grief are negative cognitions that can be a part of the break up experience”. Going through a break up can be compared to the same steps people experience when a loved one dies, which is known as the grieving process. When going through the grieving process there are five different stages you may experience. These stages are known as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then eventually acceptance. Different studies that were taken will show the variety of negative cognitions teenagers and adults can encounter during a relationship breakup. Along with these studies there will be different ways that can help people cope after a romantic relationship breakup.

**Literature Review**

From personal experience, a lot of people say that a person’s teenage years are the most important years we can have because these years are usually when people are beginning to become familiar with themselves. A part of growing up, we face certain experiences that can teach us lessons for the future. One of these experiences is being able to have a romantic relationship. Sometimes romantic relationships can last, but for the most part nowadays being in a relationship means breakups will eventually occur if it doesn’t work out too well. Romantic break-ups are frequently cited as one of life’s most stressful events (Fagundes 2011). There are many reasons why a couple should decide to break up and so, many times, relationship breakups can either be really simple or really difficult. If the relationship breakup was difficult, it can most likely have a lasting negative affect on someone. Boelen and Reinjtjes (2009), examine the negative cognitions following a relationship break up. Examining the role of several demographic variables (age, gender, current dating status), variables related to the relationship break-up (duration of the relationship, time since break-up, degree of commitment, initiator status and suddenness of break-up) and personality factors (Boelen & Reinjtjes 2009). Depending on a person’s personality, there can be different coping styles that can be contributed when adjusting to a poor break-up. Specifically, cognitive models of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) postulate that a traumatic event may shatter pre-existing positive core beliefs about the self and the world, or confirm pre-existing negative ones, (Boelen & Reinjtjes 2009). With someone having PTSD, it can easily affect their everyday life. People with neurotic personalities (those with a tendency to worry, feel anxious, and be apprehensive) report more negative emotions in everyday life than less neurotic individuals (Adler & Proctor 2011).

**Effects and symptoms of a breakup**

A relationship breakup can happen during any stage in a person’s life. Rather you are a teenager or an adult these breakups can make an individual go through emotional stress and put them through many different feelings. Often times, women or men become single due to their partner passing away, rather than two people agreeing to break up. Women who were separated or divorced were more stressed or depressed than the women who were widowed (Bakermans and IJzendoorn 1997). It would be harder to watch someone you love be with someone else, than to accept the fact they’ve passed away. Wiscman (1975), for instance, paired the five stages of mourning described by Kubler-Ross (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance; Kubler-Ross, 1969) with the process of divorce. The breaking-up before marriage is generally less stressful than the experience of marital disruption. Nevertheless, in essence the same processes of grief and adjustment may occur (Bakermans and IJzendoorn 1997). Based on findings among bereaved individuals (Boelen et al., 2003), it was expected that negative global beliefs about the self, life and the future, and catastrophic misinterpretations of one’s reactions would be among the most important cognitive correlates of break-up related emotional problems.

**Coping**

A few narrative-based studies have suggested that people rationalize and reassess how they think about their ex-partner in order to emotionally adjust (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Many models of relationship dissolution have proposed that people do not emotionally adjust to a loss until they fundamentally change the way in which they cognitively represent the lost person (Bowlby, 1979; Rollie & Duck, 2006). This suggests that adjustment after separation or divorce might be different for those who initiated the break-up of their relationship than for those who were confronted with a partner who did not want to continue the relationship. It may also be the case that certain aspects of personality (e.g., tempemment) affect the process of coming to terms with the breakup of a romantic relationship (Bakermans and IJzendoorn 1997). Reassessing their thoughts to make things easier to deal with is a lot like the bargaining stage because you try to make sense out of things and switch them around to make whatever it is, easier to deal with; eventually leading to an acceptance that things are over. Boelen and Reinjtjes (2009) analyzed different personalities and how each person coped with the breakups. Depending on a person’s personality, there can be different coping styles that can be contributed when adjusting to a poor break-up. The study showed how when people focus on the negative cognitions, the breakup phase is comparable to the grieving stage after losing someone you love. Once you’re able to accept a break up, you’re able to move on in life. But even when someone is able to move on, little things here and there can remind them of certain relationships and/or make them think of ways that could have helped that romantic relationship. Even as you move on, the ending will live forever inside your head, Marano (2007).

**Limitations**

Within every study, there is always room for improvement. There are inevitably limitations that occurred throughout the process of these studies. There are three limitations that can be found in the studies mentioned above on Boelen & Reinjtjes (2009), (Bakermans & IJzendoorn 1997), and (Fagundes 2011). In able to get accurate research responses, there should be an equal ratio in gender. 66 participants (83.5 per cent) were female and 35 participants (44.3 per cent) (Boelen & Reinjtjes 2009). There is a significant amount in difference in this study and having an equal ratio could possibly make a difference in the data they collected. Another limitation can be found in the study conducted by (Bakermans & IJzendoorn 1997); a total of 83 currently married women were selected for a study in which they were asked questions on former boyfriends and husbands; questions consisted of how they dealt with the breakup or divorce. This study could be bettered if they add some opinions from the male perspective. Another limitation can be found in the study conducted by (Fagundes 2011), 108 individuals completed the first assessments, 24 individuals chose not to return for the second assessment for undisclosed reasons, and 9 individuals completed the second assessment but re-established a committed relationship with their partner. This study is limited because not everyone completed all assessments. As well as some individuals getting back together with their ex, it may have altered their feelings. To better these studies there should be a better gender ratio and equal studies conducted.

**Future Research**

In future research, the limitations discussed should be kept in mind. Equal gender ratio is very important and can make a difference in the outcome of any study taken. Aside from these studies, this is a very interesting topic and there are several areas that can continue to be studied. Boelen and Reinjtjes (2009) study had similar concepts in the study that (Bakermans & IJzendoorn 1997) conducted. Both studies focused on the negative cognitions that come along with relationship breakups and how these negative emotions can affect a person’s outlook on the world and themselves. During the study Fagundes (2011) conducted, I would work on bettering and using individuals that can give more accurate data results. For example, finding individuals that have been separated from their partner for at least six months to see the actual ways they have coped from their relationship breakup. Still, these studies conveyed useful information.

In conclusion, the studies provided have shown factors in why people breakup, ways in which people deal with relationship breakups and how individuals are able to cope and move on in life. Age, gender, degree of commitment, and personality factors are key points in what can cause two people to break up (Boelen & Reinjtjes 2009). Leaving it to many individuals to help move on by having to rationalize and reassess how they think about their ex-partner in order to emotionally adjust (Rollie & Duck, 2006). As discussed in limitations and future research, there are some questions that can help produce a better outcome for future research.

RQ1: While going through a breakup, what kinds of interactions can help an individual with coping and moving on?

RQ2: What are the most common reasons for breakups and the most common way to cope?

RQ3: Is it harder to move on from a relationship that lasted a significant amount of time if family is involved and get along well with your partner? How can this affect someone trying to move on?

**References**

Adler, R. B., & Procter II, R. F. (2011). *Looking Out, Looking In*, (13 ed.). Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning. ISBN: 0-495-83335-5.

Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1997). Adult attachment and the break- up of romantic relationships. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 27(3/4), 121-139, doi: 10.1300/J087v27n03\_08

Boelen, P. A., & Reijntjes, A. (2009). Negative cognitions in emotional problems following romantic relationship break-ups. *Stress & Health:* *Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 25(1), 11-19. doi:10.1002/smi.1219

Boelen, P.A., van den Bout, J., & van den Hout, M.A. (2003).The role of cognitive variables in psychological functioning after the death of a fi rst degree relative. *Behaviour Research* *and Therapy*, *41*, 1123–1136.

Bowlby, J. (1979). The making and breaking of affectional bonds. London: Tavistock.

Fagundes, C. P. (2011). Implicit negative evaluations about ex-partner predicts break-up adjustment: The brighter side of dark cognitions. *Cognition & Emotion, 25*(1), 164-173. doi:10.1080/09602011003683976

Marano, H. (2007). Breaking off a romance: The case for kindness. (Cover story). *Psychology Today, 40*(6), 75.

Rollie, S. S., & Duck, S. (2006). Divorce and dissolution of romantic relationships: Stage models and their limitations. In M. A. Fine & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 223\_240). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.