

# INSECURITY, CONTROL AND DISINTEREST BEHAVIORS ARE RELATED TO BREAKUP DISTRESS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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University students listed behaviors that led to their recent romantic breakups and reached consensus on 16 behaviors that led to breakup, categorized as insecurity, control and loss of interest. These behaviors comprised the Breakup Behaviors Scale which was administered to a larger group of students. The scale was used to divide the breakup sample into high and low breakup distress groups and then compared to determine which breakup behaviors contributed to greater breakup distress. The high breakup distress group scored significantly higher on 80% of the insecurity items, 40% of the control items and 17% of the loss of interest items. Insecurity and control behaviors were dominant reasons for breakups of those who later experienced high levels of breakup distress.

Several problems have been related to breakup distress in university students including intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety and academic performance problems (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009). It is not clear that these problems contributed to the breakup itself or were simply side effects of breakup distress. To address that question we administered the Breakup Reasons Scale based on reasons given for breakups by high school students including intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and

autonomy reasons (Field Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010). In that sample of university students, only the intimacy items discriminated the high breakup distress from the low breakup distress group, 75% of the loss of intimacy items being highly rated by the high breakup distress group. The problem with that study is that those problems were derived from a qualitative coding study on high school students (Connelly & McIsaac, 2009) and not based on university age students' concerns.

In the current study, university students

were asked, much like they were in the high school student study (Connelly & McIsaac, 2009) to provide the primary behaviors leading up to their recent breakups. Following group consensus, a 16-item scale was created consisting of behaviors that could be categorized as insecurity (Schoebi, 2008; Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998), control, and loss of interest (affiliation) behaviors. Although very little literature could be found on controlling behaviors (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Lemay & Clark, 2008) leading to relationship breakups, insecurity and loss of interest have been noted in studies on romantic breakups of high school students.

Two papers on these breakup behaviors are appropriately titled "Through the looking glass darkly? When self-doubts turn into relationship insecurities" (Murray et al, 1998) and "Walking on eggshells: How expressing relationship insecurities perpetuates them" (Lemay & Clark, 2008). In the "Looking glass darkly" paper, four experiments revealed that insecurity and low self-esteem contributed to self-doubt with heightened doubts about the partner's regard which, in turn, led to negative impressions of the partner (Murray et al, 1998). In the "Walking on eggshells" paper, the authors proposed a model on insecurity in relationships (Lemay & Clark, 2008). In that model they suggested that "when people are insecure about a relationship partner's acceptance, they often express emotional vulnerabilities to the partner, which causes them to believe the partner views them as highly vulnerable and insecure. In turn, this belief causes them to

doubt the authenticity of the partner's expressions of positive regard, which may perpetuate the experience and expression of insecurity that initiated the process." Following five different studies assessing this model, they concluded that relational insecurity may be perpetuated by the interpersonal cognitive consequences of just expressing insecurity.

A similar phenomenon has been proposed by Downey and her colleagues called rejection sensitivity (Downey et al, 2004). As described by these authors, rejection sensitivity is that "disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection." They have documented this phenomenon in many studies suggesting that for people high in rejection sensitivity, rejection cues automatically activate a defensive motivational system (Downey et al, 2004). Still another investigator has labeled this phenomenon interpersonal insecurity and has noted more negative affect in relationships with interpersonal insecurity (Schoebi, 2008).

Waning interest or losing interest or loss of affiliation was the most frequent reason given for romantic breakups in the study of high school students, (Connelly & McIsaac, 2009). The loss of affiliation such as "no time together, boredom and disinterest" were given by 44% of the students and loss of intimacy by 36% of the students.

The purpose of the present study was first to develop a scale on behaviors that university students believe lead to breakups. After a group of students reached consensus on those behaviors, a larger sample of university students was given the

Breakup Distress Scale and divided into high and low scoring groups based on that scale. The groups were then compared to determine which behaviors contributed to greater breakup distress.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The initial sample was 156 university students. Of this sample, 119 (76%) had experienced a breakup on average 3.5 months before this study and after a relationship that averaged 3.3 months duration. The students had experienced 2.9 breakups on average, 2.0 of them having been with the same partner. The breakup sample (N=119) was divided into high and low breakup distress groups based on a median split on the Breakup Distress Scale. No differences were noted between the two groups on demographic variables (ethnicity, age, and grade) except for gender. For the high and low distress groups respectively: 1) age averaged 24.2 and 24.4; 2) grade averaged 13.6 and 13.3; and 3) ethnicity was distributed Hispanic (75% and 80%), Caucasian (9% and 13%), African-American (6% and 2%) and other (10% and 5%) (all ps non-significant). The high Breakup Distress Scale score group had a proportionately greater number of females than the low distress group (86% vs. 68%,  $\chi^2=5.67$ ,  $p=.02$ ), and females had higher scores on the Breakup Distress Scale (M=10.2 vs. 7.1,  $F=6.41$ ,  $p=.01$ ).

### *Procedures*

University students were recruited for this anonymous questionnaire study from

psychology classes at a southeastern university. The students were given extra credit for their participation. During one of their class sessions, the students completed a questionnaire that was comprised of demographic questions, a Breakup Behaviors Scale, the Breakup Distress Scale, a Miscellaneous Distress Scale, and a Past Relationship Problems Scale.

### *Measures*

The *Breakup Distress Scale* (BDS) was adapted from the Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG) (Prigerson, Maciejewski, Reynolds, Bierhals, Newsom, Fasiczka et al, 1995). Based on that study, the internal consistency of the 19-item ICG was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.94$ ) and it was significantly correlated with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) total score ( $r = 0.87$ ). The Breakup Distress Scale was adapted from the ICG by referring to the breakup person instead of the deceased person, and by including only 16 of the 19 ICG items that were appropriate to breakups (Field et al, 2009). A different rating scale was also used, i.e. a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so) including: 1) I think about this person so much that it's hard for me to do things I normally do; 2) Memories of the person upset me; 3) I feel I cannot accept the breakup I've experienced; 4) I feel drawn to places and things associated with the person; 5) I can't help feeling angry about the breakup; 6) I feel disbelief over what happened; 7) I feel stunned or dazed over what happened; 8) Ever since the breakup it is hard for me to trust people; 9) Ever since the breakup I feel like I have lost the

Table 1. Mean scores for Breakup Behaviors Scale (Standard deviations in parentheses)

| <u>Items</u>                                       | <u>Groups</u>       |                      | <u>F</u> | <u>P</u> |
|--|---------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|
|  | <u>Low Distress</u> | <u>High Distress</u> |          |          |
| <u>Insecurity</u>                                  | 9.51 (4.32)         | 12.81 (3.71)         | 19.25    | .000     |
| Anger/Anxiety                                      | 1.70 (1.06)         | 2.19 (1.04)          | 6.25     | .01      |
| Jealousy   | 2.07 (1.14)         | 2.88 (1.12)          | 14.80    | .000     |
| Not being a priority                               | 1.86 (1.09)         | 2.61 (1.18)          | 12.71    | .001     |
| Being taken for granted                            | 2.22 (1.26)         | 3.02 (1.14)          | 12.68    | .001     |
| Being put down by partner                          | 1.62 (0.93)         | 2.12 (1.26)          | 5.68     | .02      |
| <u>Controlling behaviors</u>                       | 9.62 (3.52)         | 10.88 (4.09)         | 5.10     | .03      |
| Arguing  | 2.67 (1.20)         | 2.68 (1.17)          | NS       | NS       |
| Having to have last word                           | 2.02 (1.09)         | 2.15 (1.13)          | NS       | NS       |
| Being manipulated                                  | 1.66 (.92)          | 2.07 (1.14)          | 4.40     | .04      |
| Having to report to partner                        | 1.70 (1.00)         | 2.03 (1.16)          | NS       | NS       |
| Afraid to say no to partner                        | 1.52 (.99)          | 1.95 (1.17)          | 4.55     | .04      |
| <u>Disinterest</u>                                 | 11.55 (4.40)        | 13.25 (4.01)         | 4.70     | .03      |
| Friends you did not like                           | 1.61 (1.00)         | 1.71 (.97)           | NS       | NS       |
| Passion dying because of routine                   | 2.16 (1.23)         | 2.14 (1.17)          | NS       | NS       |
| Putting more effort into relationship than partner | 1.93 (1.00)         | 2.86 (1.17)          | 21.12    | .000     |

|                                 |              |              |      |     |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|------|-----|
| Not communicating               | 2.25 (1.27)  | 2.81 (1.06)  | 6.72 | .01 |
| Decreasing sexual activity      | 1.86 (1.12)  | 1.90 (1.06)  | NS   | NS  |
| Avoiding spending time together | 1.75 (1.05)  | 1.83 (1.04)  | NS   | NS  |
| <u>Total Score</u>              | 21.94(14.81) | 28.27(14.53) | 4.79 | .03 |

ability to care about other people or I feel distant from people I care about; 10) I have been experiencing pain since the breakup; 11) I go out of my way to avoid reminders of the person; 12) I feel that life is empty without the person; 13) I feel bitter over this breakup; 14) I feel envious of others who have not experienced a breakup like this; 15) I feel lonely a great deal of the time since the breakup; and 16) I feel like crying when I think about the person.

The Breakup Behaviors Scale (BBS) was comprised of 16 behaviors that a sample of university students' believed led to breakups. These behaviors were grouped into three categories including insecurity, control and disinterest (see Table 1 for the items).

Other brief rating scales were developed to address variables that might confound the students' breakup distress. These included past relationships problems and general distress related to dating, school and work.

The *Past Relationships Problems Scale* includes the items: 1) I gave my partner more material things than he/she gave me; 2) I helped/supported my partner more than he/she helped/supported me; 3) I cared about my partner more than he/she cared

about me; and 4) I thought our relationship was quite imbalanced and non-reciprocal. These were each rated on a Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree).

The *General Distress Scale* answers the degree to which students have been distressed about. 1) Dating; 2) Relationships in general; 3) My performance at school; 4) My job or finding a job and 5) My future. These were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much).

### Results

As can be seen in table 1, ANOVAs revealed that the high breakup distress score group had higher Breakup Behaviors Scale total scores. All of the insecurity items differentiated the groups including anger/anxiety, jealousy, not being a priority, being taken for granted and being put down by partner. Two of the five control items differentiated the groups including being manipulated and afraid to say no to the partner. Of the six disinterest items, two differentiated the groups including putting more effort into the relationship than the partner and not communicating. A correlation analysis on the relationships between the subscales

scores and the total Breakup Behaviors Scale scores revealed the following significant correlations: 1) insecurity,  $.71$ ; 2) control,  $.64$ ; and disinterest,  $.78$  (all  $p$  values  $<.05$ ).

Other scales also differentiated the groups including the high distress group having higher scores on 1) the Past Relationship Problems Scale ( $M= 6.16(2.92)$  vs.  $4.69(2.45)$ ,  $F = 8.30$ ,  $p<.005$ ) and 2) the General Distress Scale ( $M=7.86(3.99)$  vs.  $4.82(3.29)$ ,  $F = 19.47$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

### Discussion

The insecurity, control and disinterest items of the Breakup Behaviors Scale that differentiated the groups might be characterized as a kind of rejection sensitivity which has been defined as a tendency to anxiously anticipate, readily perceive and overreact to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Others have suggested that the behavioral manifestation of rejection sensitivity may be excessive reassurance seeking (Starr & Davila, 2008). Both rejection sensitivity and excessive reassurance seeking have been linked to actual interpersonal rejection and depression, often leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the expectation of being rejected leads to the person acting in such a way that ultimately results in rejection (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Rejection sensitive individuals may seek more reassurance, perceive rejection from others whether it is real or imagined and become depressed as the result of perceived rejection. Several of the items endorsed by those who had high breakup distress sound

like rejection sensitivity issues such as not being a priority, being taken for granted, being put down by the partner and putting more into the relationship than the partner. Other items on the Breakup Behaviors Scale that differentiated the high from the low breakup distress group have been reported elsewhere including anger/anxiety (Field et al, 2009) and jealousy, an issue that is frequently reported by university students (Zusman & Knox, 1998).

Similarly, depictions of past relationships as imbalanced, i.e. giving the partner more material things, helping the partner more, caring about the partner more than he/she cared about me and thinking that the relationship was quite unbalanced and non-reciprocal also sound like rejection sensitivity issues, although they could also be characteristics of the relationship. The high scores on the General Distress Scale including dating, relationships in general, performance at school, the job or finding a job and my future suggest that breakup distress led to real coping problems and performance issues.

Still another model that has been advanced for the problems reported on the Breakup Behaviors Scale is a phenomenon called relationship-contingent-self-esteem (Knee, Canevello, Bush & Cook, 2008). Although contingent-self-esteem has been examined most frequently in terms of academic grades determining self-worth (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003) these authors suggest that "few aspects of social life have as much potential to significantly affect one's self-esteem and well-being as a success or failure of romantic relationships." Analo-

gizing this to being at sea, others have suggested that “being involved in a romantic relationship can sometimes be like riding the waves of the open sea. Partners can negotiate the steering of the boat, the height and direction of the sails and how long they remain aboard, but rough waters may still affect one partner more than the other. Indeed, some partners seem devastated by a few small ripples, whereas others may seem relatively unscathed by a tidal wave. The degree to which one is affected by one’s relationship may involve the tendency to depend on that relationship for personal validation. If one is tied to the bow of the ship, for example, even small ripples may feel like tidal waves. The degree to which one’s sense of self is contingent on one’s relationship may transform everyday angulations into seemingly more major crests and troughs.” (Knee et al, 2008, pg. 608). This description is reminiscent of the paper titles already mentioned including “Through the looking glass darkly” (Murray et al, 1998) and “Walking on eggshells” (Lemay & Clark, 2008).

Paradoxically, the same negative breakup behaviors the students selected as reasons for breakup contributed to breakup distress. Further research is needed to determine the degree to which insecurity, controlling behaviors and loss of interest contribute to the breakups themselves as opposed to the breakup distress.

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