SEQUENCES IN SEPARATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING ENDINGS OF THE PERSONAL (ROMANTIC) RELATIONSHIP

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A multi-parameter framework is proposed for examining 'break-ups' of the pre-marital romantic dyad. The model delineates five stages in dissolution: Discovery of Dissatisfaction (*D*), Exposure (*E*), Negotiation (*N*), Resolution (*R*) and Transformation (*T*). Termination scenarios may be specified by Stage, Operator, Content and Latency parameters. Utility of the framework is explored in a retrospective study of 112 break-ups. Subjects reporting (*E*) and (*N*) Stages (engagement on issues) view their relationships as more intense and enduring and themselves as more intimate with and similar to their partners than subjects reporting omission of these stages. The time span of termination (*D* to *T*) is shown to correlate positively with attraction towards and agreement with partner, as well as with loneliness and fear during dissolution. Patterns of decision (at *R*) and follow-through (at *T*) are linked to perceived qualities of the dyad: two scenarios, the 'scale-down' and the 'inconsistent break', are characterized by high strength of the couple bond and considerable feelings of confusion during the termination period.

While ample novels and popular songs attest to the experience of 'break-up', relatively little has been accomplished in the scientific portrayal of the ending of romance. Actual studies of pre-marital break-up are limited in number, descriptive in nature and hint at the possibility of an analytical framework (e.g. Burgess & Wallin, 1954; Davis, 1973; Hill et al., 1976). The most sophisticated effort to relate a topography of dissolution events (Duck, 1982) reaffirms the quest for developmental schemas conceptualizing termination. The call is twofold: for multivariate models capable of accounting for patterned differences in dyadic disengagement (Kressel et al., 1980), and for empirical data (cf. Baxter, 1980).

The present study provides a framework for the analysis of romantic break-ups. A five-stage model depicts dissolution in terms of stage configuration, agents of action at each stage (Operators),

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issues and terms presented (Content), and time length between stages (Latency). The framework is applied to the consideration of four dimensions of termination: engagement/avoidance, duration, conclusiveness, and consistency.

Genesis of a framework: stages

Development of a model began with case study analysis of twenty-four terminations. In a methodology similar to that reported by Braiker & Kelley (1979), retrospective phenomenological reports were gathered on individual (cognitive-affective), relational, and extra-dyadic events in the break-up process. Two methods were simultaneously employed in arriving at components of a termination model. (1) Subjects were asked to connect factors of their break-up in chronological order and to divide the termination period into meaningful phases and turning points. (2) A version of 'analytic induction' (Bulmer, 1979) was utilized to compare events of break-up described in journal entries of sixteen of the subjects. A preliminary model based upon methods (1) and (2) was subjected to successive modification (boot-strapping) in order to yield a progression of stages which most accurately reflected major events described by the majority of subjects. Extensive effort was given to determining a sequence which was simple enough to be broadly universal, yet sufficiently complex to depict the range of phenomena reported by our subjects. In the final effort, five stages accomplished that task. Each stage identified a critical event in termination and could be characterized by a unique set of individual, dyadic and extra-dyadic processes (see Table 1).

The *Discovery of Dissatisfaction (D) Stage* begins at the point when one or both partners experience a significant degree of discontent concerning the relationship: a problem, conflict or dissatisfaction is recognized as reaching the threshold where it conceivably threatens continuance of the dyad (cf. Duck, 1982). At the *Exposure (E) Stage*, the dissatisfaction is brought out in the open and expressed to the partner. The *Negotiation (N) Stage* begins at the point when serious discussion occurs concerning the issues of dissatisfaction. The *Resolution (R) Stage* takes place when one or both partners reaches a decision concerning the relationship and action to be taken (cf. Davis, 1973; Federico, 1979). The *Transformation (T) Stage* occurs when a change actually takes place

TABLE 1

Romantic break-ups: stages in dissolution

Stage	Dyadic processes	Individual behaviours	Extra-dyadic interface
Discovery of Dissatisfaction (D) Recognition of significant problems, conflicts or dissatisfactions	— Covert couple tensions — Dyadic interference exceeds facilitation — Efforts to maintain dyadic equilibrium in the face of undisclosed conflict	— Assessment of strengths & weaknesses of partner & relationship — Dissatisfied partner: coping with mounting discontent & frustration — Decision about whether to expose/confront	— Peers/family members may catalyze/influence sense of dissatisfaction — Romantic prospects may provide reason/-reinforcement for dissolution
Exposure (E) Dissatisfactions brought up to partner	— Deliberate confrontation or 'leaked' information — Break in facade of solidarity: increased tension	— Expression of affect: shock, relief, anger, hurt — Attempts to protect self or partner by minimization, decoy issues, etc.	— Efforts to explain dissatisfactions to peers, or — Attempts to conceal conflict from significant others
Negotiation (N) Discussion of issues of dissatisfaction and course of action	— Creation of shared norms for negotiation — Bargaining, escalation, efforts to placate — Meta-relational dialogue. joint assessment of dyad & consequences of termination	— Effort to formulate/articulate one's views & needs — Evaluation of partner's point of view — Coping with stress/ambivalence while working out reasonable options	— Consultation with peers & family members; professional aid (e.g. therapy) occasionally sought — Available support network considered and entered into 'break-up' equation
Resolution (R) Decision reached concerning relationship	— Single partner unilateral decision, or — Joint resolution by compromise/ integrative agreement	— Attempts to maintain 'integrity' & personal balance despite impending relational change: coping with fear, anger, confusion	— Outside friends frequently given new attention & importance in anticipation of transition in primary relationship
Transformation (T) Actual changes executed in relationship	— Parting rituals, e.g. 'farewell addresses' — Changes in frequency/duration/ nature of encounters with partner	— Mourning/recovery from affective trauma — Reflection/reconceptualization of relationship	— External support networks sought as 'shock absorbers' — Peers given 'full testimony': rise and fall of the dyad

in the nature of the relationship. For instance, partners living together will physically separate; dating couples will eliminate, or reduce the number of, their encounters.

Operator, content and latency

Three additional parameters complete the analytical framework (see Figure 1). At each stage, the partner(s) serving as agent(s) of action are designated as *Operator(s)*: hence one or both members of a couple may discover they are dissatisfied (*D* Stage Operator); either may initiate and maintain discussion on the issues (*E* and *N* Stage Operators). One or both may 'set the terms' at the Resolution (*R*) Stage; both may follow these terms or one may be compelled to act as 'enforcer' (*T* Stage Operator).

Issues and terms in the break-up are specified by the *Content* parameter. At *D*, *E*, and *N* Stages, this parameter refers to the issues of dissatisfaction experienced, brought up and subsequently discussed. At the Resolution (*R*) Stage, the Content parameter is used to specify the terms of decision. Negotiating partners may choose to reconcile and repair the relationship, attempt a trial separation or simply end the relationship and cease meeting one another. At the Transformation (*T*) Stage, content refers to the actual actions taken. Where this action corresponds to terms agreed upon, *R*–*T* consistency is said to exist.

The final parameter, *Latency*, is used to specify time length between stages as well as the entire time span of termination (*D* to *T*). A case study illustrates the sequence of stages.

> It was one month after Jennifer and Kao had been spending serious 'steady' time with one another that Jennifer began to sense crucial differences in their background (*D*: Jen–operator). Jennifer, a native Californian from a wealthy politician's family, found Kao's first generation immigrant outlook far out of step with her own values. She experienced mounting frustration in communicating with him, but did not reveal her feelings until a month later (*E*: Jen–operator). In the days following her disclosure, Kao drew both of them into late night conversations concerning their differences (*N*: Kao–operator). Before they could firmly decide on a course of action, however, Jennifer, concluding that there was little future in the relationship, decided to end it and not see Kao again (*R*: Jen–operator). Since Kao did not call after this point, it was assumed that he was cooperating with her decision (*T*: mutual).

FIGURE 1
Sequences in separation: the framework of analysis

	Discovery	*Exposure*	*Negotiation*	*Resolution*	*Transformation*	
STAGES	Significant problems or dissatisfactions noted	Discontent is voiced/partners bring up the problem	Issues are discussed, worked on, talked through	A decision is reached/action planned/terms resolved	Actual changes occur in the relationship/ action is taken	Events/Agents
OPERATORS	Partner(s) realizing they are dissatisfied	Partner(s) responsible for issues disclosure	Partner(s) initiating/maintaining discussion	Partner(s) making decision/setting the terms	Partner(s) co-operating on/ enforcing decision	Events/Agents
E.g.	'I was the one who became discouraged with things...'	'He brought up the problem...he was angry and "had to talk".'	'We both made sure to talk about it... well, argue anyway...'	'I made the decision because he couldn't... I had to — he wouldn't.'	'We both knew it was best. He co-operated. It was mutual...'	
CONTENT	The *issues* of dissatisfaction— Recognized... Brought up... Negotiated... (These may be similar or different)			The *terms* of resolution— Decided upon... Carried out... (Terms and action may vary)		Issues/Terms/Timing
E.g.	A partner is unfaithful or inconsiderate; the relationship suffers from poor communication or divergent partner values; there is peer or job pressure...The issues are shared/not shared/shared in a different form.			Partners decide to break off slowly and carry it off; a trial separation agreed on is not 'pulled off'; a decision to repair things is not followed up.		
LATENCY	The absolute and relative *time* lengths between stages					Issues/Terms/Timing
E.g.	'I first began getting real "uptight" in December — Christmas, I recall.I didn't tell her for 3 months...slow, you know. From there, we talked about it until the beginning of June. She made a decision two weeks later — June 15. The first week of July was our last time together: the final break.'					

While the selection of accompanying parameters was accomplished inductively, our efforts were equally informed by a consideration of past research. Specification of Content, for instance, provided a structure for earlier speculations on the choices (i.e. *R* Stage terms) that separating couples make (Davis, 1973) as well as the dissatisfactions (*D* stage issues) that draw them apart (cf. Kelley, 1979). Distinctions between rejector (*R* Stage Operator) and rejectee, as well as the stipulation of which partner(s) becomes dissatisfied first (*D* Stage Operator), had been shown to relate substantially to post-termination adjustment (Brown et al., 1980; Hill et al., 1976). Time duration had been suggested as a factor in conflict patterning and a potential determinant in preference for resolutional styles (LaTour et al., 1976). In short, the emergent framework was both a product of inductive inquiry and a synthesis of variables posited by earlier investigators.

Scenarios and formats

The four parameters — Stage, Operator, Content and Latency — may be used to specify a theoretically infinite number of termination scenarios. In our data, scenarios possessing all stages (i.e. *D-E-N-R-T*) are designated as 'Simple Format' (17 percent of the cases). Not all terminations follow this pattern. For instance, in some, issues of dissatisfaction are never brought out (*D-E̸-N̸-R-T*, cf. Baxter, 1980) or are brought out but never discussed at length (*D-E-N̸-R-T*). These we have labelled as 'Omission Formats' (26.8 percent). In a small number of omission cases, the force of external circumstance prescribes a termination (*D-E̸-N̸-R̸-T*) where neither partner desires to end the relationship, that is, Davis's (1973) 'zero-sided subsidence'. 'Extension Formats' (25 percent) occur when, for instance, different facets of dissatisfaction are exposed gradually and discussed over an extended period (*D-$\overline{E}$-$\overline{N}$-R-T*), or when the couple makes one decision about the relationship, acts on it, but then makes a second or third decision before finally terminating (*D-E-N-$\overline{R}$-$\overline{T}$*) — a pattern similar to Kressel et al.'s (1980) 'enmeshed couple'. Complex scenarios or 'Mixed Formats' (31.2 percent) include combinations of the above and are generally the product of long, highly convoluted terminations (e.g. (*D-E̸-N̸-D-$\overline{E}$-$\overline{N}$-$\overline{R}$-$\overline{T}$*).

Validating the framework: dimensions of termination

From the beginning we have been anxious to determine whether the present framework allows sufficient discrimination between break-ups. Can terminations specified by its parameters be linked in meaningful ways to dyadic conditions before and after dissolution, and to subjects' affective reactions to that process? In particular, we asked: (a) What factors differentiate scenarios where partners openly discuss dissatisfactions versus those where limited engagement on issues occurs? (b) What connection might the length of the dissolution process have with the nature of partner relationships prior to dissatisfaction? (c) Which couples are more likely to decide on 'scaling-down' the relationship versus suddenly cutting off all contact? (d) What differentiates terminations where partners abide by their decisions from those where they vacillate on terms? A retrospective study employing questionnaire and interview was used to examine these questions.

Method

Subjects

Fifty-six males and 56 females, comprising halves of 112 different heterosexual, pre-marital romantic couples, participated in the study for course credit or pay. Subjects were from one of four Southern California campuses, including a large public university, two state colleges, and one inner-city campus. All had experienced break-up of their relationships within the last five years; 81% reported termination in the prior two years. Mean age for both subjects and partners was 21.5 (SD = 5.7). The subjects represented diverse ethnic groups (Caucasian 52%, Asian 19%, black 16%, Hispanic 8%) and religious groups (Protestant 38%, Catholic 32%, Jewish 20%). A third (34%) had dated casually prior to the reported relationship; half (54%) had gone steady; a small proportion (7%) had been engaged or lived with someone. The relationships they described for the present study had a mean duration of 14.7 months with a range of 2 weeks to 7 years. They varied in commitment from 'minimum couple identity' (5%), to exclusive steady dating (35%), considering marriage (46%), and engaged or living together (14%).

Survey

A 24-page questionnaire was given to subjects to assess their romantic relationship and the post-termination period. It was administered prior to the interview to (a) minimize the possibility of experimenter biasing, and (b) to gather information about 'before' and 'after' circumstances of the relationship prior to extensive examination of the termination phase itself. The survey contained questions regarding individual demographic factors (such as age) and dyadic variables (such as duration of the

romantic relationship and nature of the pre-romantic involvement: strangers, acquaintances, friends). Nine-point bipolar adjective scales elicited subject ratings on the intensity, co-operativeness, and socio-emotional (as opposed to task) orientation of the relationship. Intimacy with, dependence on, similarity to, and attraction towards former partners were each reported on 9-point (low to high) scales. Agreement with partners on areas of philosophy, recreation and friendships (Burgess & Wallin, 1954) was rated on scales from 1 (never) to 9 (always). Nine-point (low to high) affect scales, derived from Hammond et al. (1977), elicited reports of feelings during and immediately following break-up: happiness, confusion, loneliness, inadequacy, depression, hurt and anger. Feelings of caring for the partner and of being cared for by the partner were similarly assessed. Three forced-choice options asked subjects to indicate the nature of their meetings with former partners directly after break-up (none at all, accidental or on purpose), the present nature of their relationship (strangers, friends or friends/lovers), and present feelings towards the former partner (negative, neutral or positive).

Interview

Following administration of the questionnaire, trained interviewers employed a semi-structured protocol to gather information regarding the termination period. Interviewers were, to the degree possible, randomly assigned to subjects. While receiving extensive instruction on components of the stage model, interviewers were naive as to the dimensions of termination under investigation as well as to expected outcomes of the study.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one in private rooms and tape-recorded whenever subjects (90%) consented. In the first part of the interview, experimenters asked subjects simply to talk at length about their break-up, the events leading up to it and the termination process itself. The purpose of this was to give subjects an opportunity to relate, in an unstructured manner, their perceptions of the termination. This also ensured that subjects would present details of the dissolution prior to receiving any information on the stage model which might selectively bias recall.

In the second part of the interview, experimenters explained, using visual handouts, the details of the model. Subjects were told about Stage, Operator, Content and Latency parameters. Then, with the interviewer acting as a neutral consultant, subjects were asked to reconstruct their termination chronologically using parameters of the model. For each stage, subjects reported whether it was present, absent or repeated, who was the responsible Operator, and when the stage occurred. For *D*, *E* and *N* Stages, subjects were asked to indicate the problems or conflicts experienced, brought up and discussed. Subjects described the terms of break-up (*R* Stage) and what they perceived to have actually transpired at the (*T*) Stage. Experimenters systematically 'mapped' all information on the parameters of termination as indicated by subjects. Total time for questionnaire and interview averaged 1½ hours.

It was assumed that subjects gave accurate presentations of their own subjective view of the break-up; therefore, except in instances later noted, subjects' reports on the parameters of their termination were accepted without 'interpretation' by the study team. One possible question relates to the 'categorical reliability' of the framework, that is, would individuals hearing or thinking about a certain break-up describe it in the same way using parameters of the framework? To examine this

issue, pairs of raters were given transcribed segments of the 'free' interview data from all subjects. Based upon the subjects' descriptions of their break-up, raters were asked to independently construct 'maps' of the dissolutions specifying all parameters of the model. In 85 percent of the cases, raters' maps demonstrated perfect agreement on all components; in another 11 percent of the cases, raters agreed on all but one component of the framework.

Results

Engagement and avoidance: openness on issues in the early termination period

Our analysis began with the prediction that subjects reporting structurally similar sequences would display distinct patterns with regard to their experience of termination. Table 2 depicts the 112 terminations broken down by four formats noted earlier. The format variable demonstrates significant main effects both for caring towards partner during break-up ($F(3,108) = 3.18$, $p < 0.03$) and perceived caring by partner immediately following ($F(3,83) = 2.82$, $p < 0.04$). Thus format appears substantially related to feelings about and perceptions of one's partner during termination. This effect is also present in the post-termination period: format demonstrates a significant association both with present feelings towards former partner ($\chi^2(6) = 13.38$, $p < 0.04$) and 'meetings with' partner immediately after break ($\chi^2(6) = 14.63$, $p < 0.02$). Proportionally fewer 'Omission format' subjects report meeting with former partners after the break-up; similarly, proportionally fewer have positive feelings towards their partner.

One way to interpret these latter results is within the context of engagement versus avoidance of conflict. The crucial factor distinguishing Omission formats from Simple and Extension sequences is the absence of stages centred on the communication of dissatisfactions: the former lack, at the minumum, a Negotiation (*N*) Stage. Commonly it is assumed that engagement during conflict leads to more satisfactory outcomes between partners (Peterson, 1983). Engagement allows couples increased access to perceptions of the other, a seeming prerequisite to conflict resolution (Knudson et al., 1980). Research in divorce finds willingness by partners to communicate a central factor distinguishing couples (Kressel et al., 1980): patterns of open and frequent communication are thought to be more amenable to therapeutic intervention and eventual 'positive' resolution than patterns of disengagement or avoidance (Minuchin, 1974).

TABLE 2
Patterns by format: feelings of caring, post-break meetings, and present feelings towards partner

	Means (and standard deviations) for feelings of caring	
Scenario format[a]	**Towards partner during break[b]**	**By partner after break[c]**
Omission (30)	5.27 (2.21)[b]	4.77 (2.07)
Simple (19)	5.74 (1.91)	6.08 (1.44)
Extension (28)	6.86 (2.14)[b]	6.12 (2.01)
Mixed (35)	6.37 (2.06)	6.18 (1.85)

	Proportion of cases per format reporting post-break meetings		
	None at all	**Accidental**	**On purpose**
Omission (30)	0.53*	0.37	0.10**
Simple (19)	0.37	0.42	0.21
Extension (28)	0.25	0.39	0.36
Mixed (35)	0.29	0.23	0.48

	Proportion of cases reporting present feelings towards partner		
	Negative	**Neutral**	**Positive**
Omission (30)	0.27	0.53	0.20*
Simple (19)	0.26	0.16	0.58
Extension (28)	0.22	0.32	0.46
Mixed (34)	0.23	0.21	0.56

Notes

Parenthetic figures following format indicate number of subjects responding.

a. Omission Formats (*D-E-N-R-T*), (*D-E-N-R-T*), (*D-E-N-R-T*). Simple Formats (*D-E-N-R-T*). Extension Formats (*D-E-N-R-T*), *D-E-N-R-T*). Mixed Formats (Miscellaneous and Multiple Component Scenarios).

b. Subjects rated caring feelings towards partner during break from (1) low to (9) high. Superscripted means indicate a significant difference, $p < 0.05$ (Tukey HSD Test).

c. Subjects answered 'how much partner cared for them immeditely after break' only if they had reasonable evidence as to partner's feelings. *N* per format is hence reduced: Omission (23), Simple (15), Extension (25), Mixed (28).

*Observed values significantly deviate from a model of independence using Haberman's (1973) method of adjusted residuals, $p < 0.05$/**$p < 0.01$.

The prediction for our subjects would be that those avoiding consideration of conflictual issues would fare worse in closing scenes of their relationship and experience less constructive post-separation adjustments. If, as is often popularly assumed, positive feelings and willingness to see partner are any index of 'adaptive' post-break adjustment, then our data support the prediction (see next section, however, for alternative explanations).

To further test whether the avoidance of discussion might be related to feelings of caring between partners, scenarios from the two 'caring' analyses were collapsed to two categories — those possessing all stages (including several of the 'Mixed' formats) and those lacking (*E*) or (*N*) Stages. When all stages were present, the mean reported caring towards partner during break-up was 6.35 ($SD = 2.05$); perceived caring by partner immediately after averaged 6.15 (1.85). For subjects reporting absence of (*E*) or (*N*) Stages, these figures were 5.51 (2.31) and 4.92 (2.00) respectively. Both differences were substantial: 'towards' $t(110) = 1.92$, $p = 10.057$, 'by' $t(85) = 2.73$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, for subjects reporting little or no communication concerning issues of dissatisfaction, there were likely to be lower feelings of caring. The case of Daniel and Renee illustrates a typical Omission format:

> Daniel and Renee met in March at the party of a mutual friend. Both quickly 'fell' for one another and within three weeks were going out regularly and sleeping together. In mid-June, Daniel reports, he began to be 'physically bored' with Renee (*D*). Two days later, he decided, without mention to her (~~*E*~~-~~*N*~~), to break off the relationship (*R*). They saw each other only once more following this at which time Daniel informed Renee of his decision. While not understanding the rapid change of events, Renee grudgingly acquiesced to the separation (*T*).

The correlates of low communication

In accounting for the relationship between absent discussion stages and post-break attitudes, it is important to consider several factors that may mediate the two. In particular, though it is easy to presume that a lack of communication on issues is responsible for the lower reported magnitude of caring during break-up, it is also probable that Omission formats originate out of relationships that are themselves less conducive to feelings of caring: within our sample, for instance, the number of reported termination stages is positively correlated with duration ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.0001$) and intensity ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$) of the relationship, and intimacy with partner ($r =$

0.31, $p < 0.001$). Omission formats, possessing the lowest number of reported stages, are more likely to be associated with shorter, less intense relationships. Thus it is not only the case that Omission subjects avoid discussion during the break-up process; overall, their relationships are likely to be less committed and more superficial. The lack of communication during break-up may be viewed, from one angle, as characteristic of an ongoing relationship that is less likely to produce strong partner bonding in the post-termination period.

Does it matter how long it takes to consider problems?

One additional way to view the openness to communicate, particularly for subjects reporting (*E*) and (*N*) Stages, is the time it takes partners to reach discussion of issues. We predicted that the relative time duration for subjects to reach the Negotiation Stage might be related, as an index, to the overall quality of their relationship. Kressel et al. (1980) had previously identified this time length — from conscious consideration of separation to the 'first serious' mutual discussion — as a marker period for divorcing couples. Those who did not enter serious discussion for a long period were described as 'disengaged' couples, a pattern associated with lower overall intimacy and communication. Our results tend to confirm this finding for pre-marital couples. The factor, $N_L = (D - N_1/N_1 - T_f)$ was used to denote the relative time length to reach negotiation with our subjects reporting an (*N*) Stage (time span from Discovery of Dissatisfaction to the first reported Negotiation Stage divided by the time span from that point to the final Transformation Stage). We found that those with a shorter 'negotiational latency' ($N_L < 1/2$), when compared with longer latency counterparts ($N_L > 1/2$), reported significantly longer durations ($t(70) = 2.37$, $p < 0.02$) for their romantic relationship ($< 1/2$) $M(SD) = 21.00$ (19.44) months versus ($> 1/2$) $M(SD) =$ 11.35 (9.70). Those with shorter negotiational latency also reported greater similarity with partners, $M(SD) = 5.39$ (1.94) than did longer latency subjects, $M(SD) = 3.85$ (1.71), $t(70) = 3.38$, $p <$ 0.001. Thus those subjects reaching negotiation in a relatively shorter length of time were more likely to be in enduring relationships where they felt themselves similar with their partners.

Two possible explanations exist for this finding. Subjects in these more enduring, well-matched relationships may find it easier (or perhaps more urgent) to bring up dissatisfactions quickly; alternatively, the pattern of rapid consideration of problems may have accounted for the greater durability of their relationship over time.

Overall, our results suggest a pattern of avoidance characterized by an absence of discussion on issues of discontent: these terminations yield a lower report of positive feelings in the termination and post-break period and may be associated with relationships which are less intense and intimate. This is contrasted at the far end of the spectrum with partners who reach negotiation relatively soon, whose relationships have lasted longer, and who view themselves as more compatible with their partners.

Duration as a critical dimension: the time span of termination

While investigators have attempted to define the 'termination period' for divorcing couples (e.g. Federico, 1979), little has been done to specify a similar interval, and its relevance, for the pre-marital dyad. Following our framework, we decided to define an absolute time span of termination lasting from Discovery of Dissatisfaction to the final reported Transformation Stage ($D_1 - T_f$). We predicted that this time would be related to the nature of the relationship prior to the onset of dissatisfaction.

The average time length reported for this period was 30.25 weeks ($SD = 53.03$). This duration was positively correlated with how lonely the subjects felt during ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) and how fearful they felt immediately after break-up ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). The time span was also positively related to the overall duration of the relationship ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.0001$) and the subjects' attraction to partner ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). When cases were arbitrarily divided (Table 3) between those with a shorter time span (< 4 weeks) and those with a lengthier termination period (⩾ 4 weeks), subjects in the 'shorter time' category indicated significantly less agreement with former partners in areas of philosophy ($p < 0.05$), friendships ($p < 0.01$) and recreation ($p < 0.01$).

These results suggest that shorter time spans of termination are likely to be found with shorter relationships where there is less

TABLE 3
Termination time span: relationship to partner agreement on philosophy, friends and recreation

Time span	Mean ratings on areas of agreement[a]		
	Philosophy[b]	Friends[c]	Recreation[d]
$(D_1 - T_f) <$ 4 weeks	2.71* (2.18)	3.21** (2.06)	2.50** (1.67)
$(D_1 - T_f) \geq$ 4 weeks	3.84* (2.24)	4.52** (2.18)	3.88** (2.12)

Notes
N per condition: less than 4 weeks (24); greater than or equal to 4 weeks (88). Parenthetic expressions are standard deviations.
a. Agreement is rated on a (1) Never to (9) Always scale.
b. $t(110) = 2.21$.
c. $t(110) = 2.65$.
d. $t(110) = 2.94$.

*Means across time span conditions significantly differ, $p < 0.03$/**$p < 0.01$.

similarity with and attraction to partners; break-ups, not surprisingly, are associated with less negative affect. One straightforward implication of this is that the time span of termination may be a partial indicator of the difficulty of break-up between partners. In shorter, less well-meshed relationships where break-ups represent a less comprehensive loss, this time period is short. In longer and more compatible relationships, dissatisfactions may require a longer period to attenuate connections between partners. Even where a dissolution is imminent, partners in these better suited pairs may hang on longer in attempts to salvage a worthwhile relationship.

Closing scenes: conclusiveness and consistency on terms

(a) Conclusiveness

The distinction between 'scaling-down' one's romantic relationship and simply cutting off all contact — 'full-break' — has been noted by other investigators (Burgess & Wallin, 1954; Davis, 1973; Duck, 1982). Yet little has been done to determine what kinds of relationships are associated with each form of termination, and

what the long-range aftermath of such separations are. Within our framework, 'scaling-down' and 'full-break' represent two options of content at the (*R*) Stage. An example of the former is the case of T.C. and Betty:

> T.C. and Betty had been high school sweethearts for 3 years before coming to the university. In his second quarter at college, T.C. became heavily involved in a pre-medical major, leaving little time for Betty who after a month complained that she was feeling ignored (*D–E*). Not having lost all interest in her but feeling particularly preoccupied, T.C. openly discussed with Betty their separate needs (*N*) and made the decision (*R*) that they should have a less exclusive relationship. ('We can still spend time and be close, but I want you to meet other people, also.') Betty, though disappointed at this suggestion, cooperated and during the ensuing six months dated several other men along with T.C. when he was available (*T*). Eventually, she and T.C. became just 'good friends' as she began feeling deeply committed to a new male acquaintance who had shown great interest in her.

Our data, based on subjects selecting 'scale-down' ($n = 40$) and those deciding on 'full-break' ($n = 50$) at their first major decision point indicate that 'scale-downs' experience their break-ups as significantly more confusing, $M(SD)_{\text{scale}} = 5.58\ (2.48)$ vs. $M(SD)_{\text{full}} = 4.34\ (2.85)$, $t(88) = 2.16$, $p < 0.03$. Burgess & Wallin (1954) speculate that couples attempting to 'taper down' often nurture hopes of a full scale romantic recovery, thus conceivably setting up repeated opportunities for confusion and broken expectations.

On the basis of this, why should individuals select to scale-down their relationships? One hypothesis suggests that the couples may be experiencing a high degree of ambivalence as to whether they should actually break-up (see Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Scaling-down is a manifestation of this ambivalence, a way to get from being attached to being unattached that leaves space for contradictory feelings. While we have little evidence directly confirming the ambivalence hypothesis, a portion of our data (Table 4) suggests that it is highly reasonable: couples opting for 'scale-down' view their relationships as more intense ($t(88) = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$), more co-operative ($t(88) = 1.95$, $p < 0.05$), and more socio-emotional- (as opposed to task-) oriented ($t(88) = 2.13$, $p < 0.05$) than couples opting for 'full-break'. They rate themselves as feeling more intimate with ($t(88) = 2.68$, $p < 0.01$) and dependent on their partners ($t(88) = 2.25$, $p < 0.05$). Thus individuals from our survey who opted for scaling-down had stronger positive feelings towards their partner and the relationship. Placing this

against the suggestion of break-up, partners are likely to experience a high degree of ambivalance — at least more so than their 'full-break' counterparts who show less enthusiasm for their relationships.

TABLE 4
Scale-down and full-break terminations: characteristics of the dyad and nature of the pre-romantic and post-dissolution relationships

	Mean ratings for dyadic characteristics[a]				
R Stage terms	**Intensity**	**Socio-emot. orientation[b]**	**Co-oper-ativeness**	**Dependence on partner**	**Intimacy**
Scale-down	6.62*	7.18*	7.17*	5.23*	7.75**
	(1.79)	(1.53)	(1.74)	(2.08)	(1.45)
Full-break	5.78*	6.33*	6.33*	4.22*	6.80**
	(2.04)	(2.11)	(2.26)	(2.12)	(1.83)

	Proportion reporting pre-romantic relationships[c]		
	Strangers	**Acquaintances**	**Friends**
Scale-down	0.30	0.20	0.50^{+}
Full-break	0.52	0.26	0.22

	Proportion reporting post-dissolution relationship[c]		
	Strangers	**Friends**	**Friends & lovers**
Scale-down	0.20	0.60^{++}	0.20
Full-break	0.50	0.31	0.19

Notes
Cases are inspected here on the basis of the first *R* Stage decision. Not included are cases for which the terms at R_1 are something other than 'scale-down' or 'full-break'. For 34 percent of the ninety cases a second *R* Stage was reported. Subjects per *R* Stage group: scale-down (n = 40); full-break (n = 50).

a. Numbers in table represent means; parenthetic expressions indicate standard deviations. Ratings were made on 1 (low) to 9 (high) scales.

b. Rated from 1 (formal task-oriented) to 9 (informal socio-emotional).

c. Both pre-romantic and post-dissolution items are forced-choice questions.

*Means for *R* Stage groups significantly differ, $p < 0.05$/**$p < 0.01$.
$^{+}$Observed values significantly deviate from a model of independence using Haberman's (1973) method of adjusted residuals, $p < 0.02$./$^{++}p < 0.01$.

Yet a second explanation involves the nature of the couple's relationship before and after romance. Table 4 indicates that there is a significant association between resolutional terms and both the

pre-romantic relationship (χ^2 (2) = 7.94, $p < 0.02$) and post-termination relationship (χ^2 (2) = 9.48, $p < 0.01$). For both cases proportionally more scale-downs are likely to be friends with former partners. For the post-termination relationship, this may be intuitively obvious: 'full-break' parties, after their initial period of complete separation, often opt to remain 'strangers'. But the pre-romantic findings are striking: they suggest that 'scale-down' individuals may choose this option because friendship has proven to be a valuable and viable avenue in the past. Obviously some combination of the above explanations is also possible: couples who have been friends prior to romance have a substantial base upon which to build an intense relationship. They may in turn experience a high level of ambivalence at the possibility of termination and opt to disengage incrementally to a level (i.e. friendship) they know to have been secure.

(b) Consistency

Fluctuation in desires for disengagement (Duck, 1982) and in approaches to confronting one's partner (Baxter & Philpott, 1980) have been noted at several stages of the dissolution process. When it comes to the final scenes, not all couples can immediately break off a relationship. Some oscillate between withdrawal and intense reconciliation (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Where one partner is reluctant, that is, 'one-sided subsidence' (Davis, 1973), achieving consistency on break-up terms may prove a formidable challenge. Bringing one's partner down — 'cooling out the mark' — may involve several tries to achieve the desired break. The pattern of inconsistency is illustrated by the case of Lester and Evie:

> One year after Lester and Evie began going steady, Lester realized that he had been getting low amounts of 'affection and response' from Evie (*D*). Less talkative than her, he refused to open up about his discontent. However, Evie sensed his withdrawal and pressed him in the following weeks to talk about what was happening (*E*). While Lester was still hesitant to discuss his feelings, the couple did engage in a number of serious 'over dinner' conversations of the problems in their relationship (*N*). Both made decisions apart from one another to end the relationship (R_1) and subsequently informed one another. However, in the ensuing months, the couple took turns being sentimentally affectionate and begging the other not to end the relationship (T_1). Just as one was ready for the separation, the other would convince him/her that they 'could not live without them'. Finally, Evie, upon meeting another guy, decided to end the relationship with Lester once and for all (R_2). This time, while Lester pursued her vigorously, she refused to speak to him and the couple eventually stopped seeing one another (T_2).

Within our framework consistency is viewed as present when partners enact at (*T*) what has formally been decided at (*R*). From the data we are able to piece together a picture of what the consistent and inconsistent breaks are like, and the form of relationship with which both are likely to be associated.

TABLE 5
Consistency on terms of break-up: dyadic characteristics during romance and reported affect in the immediate post-termination period

	Dyadic characteristics[a]		
R–T consistency[b]	**Intensity**	**Socio-emot. orientation**[c]	**Intimacy**
Consistency present	4.99**	6.60*	7.11*
	(2.05)	(1.93)	(1.76)
Consistency absent	6.20**	7.50*	7.87*
	(1.61)	(1.57)	(0.90)

	Affect post-termination[a]			
	Loneliness	**Confusion**	**Hurt**	**Anger**
Consistency present	4.17**	3.84*	4.17**	3.37**
	(2.67)[e]	(2.83)	(2.96)	(2.71)[f]
Consistency absent	5.70**	5.07*	5.96**	5.07**
	(2.67)	(2.60)	(2.65)	(2.83)[d]

Notes

Subjects per consistency group: present (n = 73); absent (n = 30). Nos. represent mean ratings; standard deviations are indicated parenthetically.

a. Ratings performed on 1 (low) to 9 (high) scales.

b. 'Consistency present' refers to those cases where terms set at the Resolution (*R*)Stage are carried out at the Transformation (*T*) Stage. In cases of more than one *R–T* occurrence, where subject report indicated mixed follow-through (some terms followed, some ignored) consistency was judged by an 80 percent criterion by 2–4 raters employing consensual evaluation. If rater teams unanimously agreed that '4/5' of the terms at (*R*) Stages were executed at subsequent (*T*) Stages, the case was said to possess *R–T* consistency. Cases lacking an (*R*) Stage are omitted from the analysis.

c. Rated from 1 (formal task-oriented) to 9 (informal socio-emotional).

d., e., f. Cases missing data on this variable (d = 1, e = 2, f = 3).

*Significant difference between conditions, $p < 0.05$/**$p < 0.01$.

Table 5 indicates that subjects reporting *R–T* inconsistencies feel significantly more lonely ($t(99) = 2.64$, $p < 0.01$), hurt ($t(101) = 2.88$, $p < 0.01$) and angry ($t(97) = 2.80$, $p < 0.01$) immediately after

break-up than subjects reporting consistent follow-through on terms. Crucially they are also more confused ($t(101) = 2.05$, $p < 0.04$). The explanation for these emotions may rest in the inconsistency of the process itself, promoting discordance and negative affect. The higher magnitude of emotions may also be due to factors in the couple's relationship. To test the latter possibility, we examined relational characteristics of the two groups: those subjects indicating $R-T$ inconsistencies rated their relationships as having been significantly more intense ($t(101) = 3.13$, $p < 0.002$) and socio-emotional in orientation ($t(101) = 2.27$, $p < 0.03$). Their relationship lasted longer ($M = 20.37$ vs. 13.71 months, $t(101) = 1.98$, $p < 0.05$) and they felt more intimate with their partners ($t(101) = 2.23$, $p < 0.03$) than did their $R-T$ consistent counterparts. These results suggest that inconsistency at the $R-T$ Stages may be related to the difficulty in breaking off a relationship which is perceived as deep and committed. The opposite possibility, employing dissonance theory, is that couples struggling to break off the relationship may afterwards view it as having been more intense and feelings-oriented. Whichever interpretation is correct, it is clear that subjects associate inconsistency in follow-through with more difficult terminations and more involved relationships.

What is the connection between consistency and conclusiveness ('full-break' versus 'scale-down') dimensions? While the two as operationalized in the present analysis are statistically independent (χ^2 (1) = 0.30, $p < 0.50$, $\phi = 0.086$), they are similar in their association with relationships which are comparatively intense, intimate and emotionally oriented; both involve significant degrees of confusion in the termination period. The simplest hypothesis is that both represent strategies to mitigate the trauma of break-up. 'Scaling-down' suggests an a priori approach which anticipates and tries to moderate expected pain; inconsistent breaks may reflect some couples' efforts — after the decision — to delay final disappointments and dismantling of attachments.

General discussion

Findings presented here provide strong evidence for the notion that parameters of termination (i.e. Stage, Operator, Content and Latency) are related to distinct conditions in the dyad prior to and following break-up. While it may be the case that disengagement is 'messy, uncontrolled, and uncertain' (Duck & Miell, 1984),

retrospective reports of our subjects suggest that the dissolution process nevertheless abounds in regularities. These regularities include a high correspondence between reported dimensions of termination (e.g. duration, conclusiveness) and assessments of dyadic quality (e.g. intensity, intimacy), affect during break (e.g. confusion, fear) and post-break behaviour (e.g. meetings with partner).

One consideration is that certain patterns noted here may be in part a result of subjects 'reframing' their memories of past events. In this regard it is helpful to distinguish between relational processes as they actually transpire (objective process), as they are experienced by partners at the time (contemporaneous perception) and as they are later culled from memory (retrospective report). While meaningful relationship theory continues to derive from the latter 'post-process' data, distortions in recall of affect-laden events (cf. Weiss, 1975), egocentric biases in single-partner reporting (Ross, 1981) and the proclivity for reconstructing break-ups after the fact (Duck, 1982) suggest the necessity for comparing retrospective findings with data sought contemporaneously from both partners (Duck & Sants, 1983).

The present study elected to consider only one dimension of dissolution at a time: analysis was confined in this way to illustrate salient effects of single factors within the process. However, future investigations may want to explore interactional effects as well. A pertinent question, in the latter regard, involves the extent to which all dimensions examined (i.e. engagement, duration, consistency and conclusiveness) are associated. Using a multiple chi-square analysis of major case groupings in the study, no significant associations were found (closest chi-square to association, $p > 0.1$; maximum $\phi = 0.175$). Thus the dimensions as conceived here, beyond being conceptually distinct, are also statistically unrelated. This suggests the possibility of a broad range of scenarios incorporating different combinations of the dimensions.

An important question involves the relationship between the present framework and (a) models of relational growth and (b) other schemas of disengagement. The connection between models of decline and schemas for inception of the dyad has yet to be clearly established. Though some have suggested that stages of disengagement mirror in reverse order stages of relational growth (Altman & Taylor, 1973), compelling evidence runs against this notion (Duck &

TABLE 6
Comparative schemas of conflict and dissolution

Romantic pre-marital dyad: sequences in separation (Stage framework)	**Close relationships: conflict model (Peterson, 1983)**	**Personal relationships: disengagement/dissolution (Duck, 1982)**	**Marital dyad: stages of psychic divorce (Kressel et al., 1980)**
	Early stages		
Discovery of Dissatisfaction	*Initiating events* e.g. criticism, illegitimate demand, rebuff, cumulative annoyance	*Intra-psychic phase* — Assess adequacy of partner's performance — Assess relationship and alternatives	*Pre-divorce decision period* — Increasing marital tension; break in appearance of marital solidarity
Exposure	*Avoidance and engagement*	*Dyadic phase* — Confront partner — Negotiate in 'our relationship' talks	
	Middle stages		
Negotiation	*Direct negotiation* with possibility for escalation	— Assess joint costs of withdrawal	
		Social phase — Negotiate post-dissolution state	*Decision period* (proper) — Marital fighting — Decision by at least one partner to separate
Resolution	End stages	— Create face-saving/blame-placing stories	
	Termination — Options: separation,		
Transformation	domination, compromise, integrative agreement	*Grave-dressing phase* — 'Getting over' activity — Retrospection: post-mortem attribution	*Mourning period* *Re-equilibrium period*

Lea, 1983). Our findings here suggest only that there may be situational similarities in the two processes (for instance, as in the case of 'scale-down' breaks, where individuals who were friends prior to romance tended to be friends following break-up). Obviously a definitive step in research would involve tracking individual dyads through both processes, development and decline, in order to establish form and degree of correspondence between the two.

While the present set of stages was developed inductively, certain components of the sequence clearly resemble concepts delineated by other investigators. Thus, for instance, our Exposure Stage parallels Peterson's (1983) Engagement/Avoidance Stage of conflict resolution. Our Resolution Stage corresponds roughly to Kressel et al.'s (1980) 'Decision Period Proper' during divorce.

The fact that there are similarities across models (see Table 6) might imply that dyadic disengagement is a singular process, described in its variant forms (i.e. divorce, breakdown of friendship) by an isomorphic sequence of events. Caution is warranted in accepting such a conclusion, however. While at the level of stage description some forms of dissolution appear similar, distinct differences are likely to exist for specific parameters of termination. Divorce, for instance, differs significantly from pre-marital break-up in content areas of dissatisfaction (Burgess, 1981). Schemas of relational termination also vary according to the populations examined, the proportion of 'empirical data' to theoretical speculation employed in arriving at the model, and the specific questions engaged by the investigator. Peterson's (1983) schema provides a synopsis of the social psychological literature on development of dyadic conflict and subsequent paths such conflict may take. Kressel et al.'s stages are the product of extensive clinical work with distressed spouses; the sequence is thus empirically based, intervention-oriented and most directly applicable to a consideration of marital dissolution. Duck's topography is a comprehensive theoretical attempt to delineate an investigative framework in dissolution; its chief contribution is in providing a 'generic map' of crucial goals, concerns and researchable issues at each of four tenably distinguishable stages in the dissolution process.

The present model draws its design from examination of the romantic, particularly pre-marital dyad. A flexible stage sequence identifies individual, dyadic and extra-dyadic processes in dissolution, and allows for specification of omitted, repeated and extended versions of these events. The resultant framework provides the basis

for classification of a wide range of terminations; components of the model may be used to reference stage-specific behaviour as well as scenario-specific themes in termination. A major difference distinguishing the framework from related models is the identification of specific parameters in dissolution. In the present analysis these factors (Stage, Operator, Content, Latency) demonstrate empirical utility in relating the structure of romantic dissolutions to (retrospectively perceived) affect during termination and conditions in the dyad, pre- and post-break. A further study applies the present framework to an investigation of individual factors (e.g. reasons for dissatisfaction, gender of Operators) in the dissolution process (see Lee & Wurf, in prep.).

In the long run, prognostic questions of post-separation adjustment may be answered more accurately when predictive parameters of dissolution are known. Knowledge of what stage of termination a couple is at may aid in the selection of appropriate counselling interventions (see Coleman, 1977). In addition, valuable light may be shed on theoretical issues such as those noted above. The present framework is a first step in these directions.

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