Choosing Compassionate Strategies to End a Relationship

Effects of Compassionate Love for Partner and the Reason for the Breakup

Susan Sprecher, Corinne Zimmerman, and Erin M. Abrahams
Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

Abstract. Past research has established that people choose from a variety of different strategies to end relationships. In Study 1, 47 disengagement strategies were rated on degree of compassion toward the partner. In Study 2, we examined people’s choice of breakup strategies (in a hypothetical breakup) at varying levels of compassion as a function of compassionate love for their partner and the manipulated reason for the breakup. Compassionate strategies were chosen more frequently when the reason for the breakup was external or dyadic, as compared to partner betrayal. Higher scores on the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) were associated with the greater likelihood of choosing compassionate strategies. An interaction between gender, compassionate love score, and reason for the breakup was also found.

Keywords: compassionate love, breakup strategies, close relationships, relationship dissolution

Introduction

The dissolution of close relationships is one of the most painful human experiences (Orbuch, 1992). It also is relatively common, particularly for unmarried adolescents and young adults experimenting with intimacy (Sprecher & Fehr, 1998). Prior investigations of relationship dissolution have focused on three major issues: (1) the predictors or causes of breakups, (2) the process involved in ending relationships, and (3) the consequences of relationship dissolution, including distress and coping (for reviews, see Fine & Harvey, 2006; Orbuch, 1992; Sprecher & Fehr, 1998; Vangelisti, 2006). The present research focuses on the second issue, the process of relationship dissolution, which has been an understudied topic (e.g., Vangelisti, 2006). More specifically, we extend prior research on the topic of the strategies that young adults use to end their romantic relationships by investigating the degree to which various strategies (and the choice of strategies to end a relationship) vary in degree of compassion for the other.

Compassion, Compassionate Love, and Breakups

In recent years in the social sciences and psychology, there has been a shift toward a focus on several positive human qualities and emotions, including altruism, empathy, and compassionate love (see Fehr, Sprecher, & Underwood, 2009; Post, Underwood, Schloss, & Hurlburt, 2002). Furthermore, in the study of close relationships more specifically, interest in compassionate love and related phenomena including caregiving love, agape, and communal responsiveness has increased in part because of their influence on relationship satisfaction and stability (Berscheid, 2006; Clark & Monin, 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Rusblit, Bissonne, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). However, almost nothing is known about the role of these positive human qualities (i.e., compassionate love) in the process of ending a relationship. Are people who experience more compassionate love for others (and the partner in particular) more compassionate in their strategies for ending a relationship?

Compassion love has been defined as

“feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need” (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; p. 630).

It is similar to sympathy and empathy (e.g., Batson, 2009), the latter of which has been identified as a major factor promoting prosocial behavior toward others (e.g., Davis, 1996; Dovidio & Penner, 2001). However, compassionate
love can be considered to be a more long-lasting, prosocial emotion experienced in both a relational context and for strangers (Fehr & Sprecher, 2009; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). It is an emotion focused on promoting the goodness and well-being of the other (Berscheid, 2006). Compassion and compassionate love are likely to be important factors in relationship breakups for many reasons. Specifically, the degree to which the disengagement process is compassionate is likely to determine whether the breakup has lasting detrimental effects on expartners; and people’s likelihood of choosing compassionate strategies to end a relationship is likely to depend on their degree of compassionate love for their partner.

**Breakup Strategies**

A breakup is not a single event, but a process that includes changes in affect, cognition, and behaviors (e.g., communication). Scholars have identified various phases people generally go through as they disengage from relationships (Baxter, 1984; Duck, 1982; Lee, 1984; Rollie & Duck, 2006). Phase models begin with a stage that involves an individual’s awareness of problems in the relationship and then evolve to a stage in which the partners communicate with each other, and sometimes with their social network, about their increasing disenchantment. The phase models also include a period when one or both partners, when they realize that the breakup is inevitable, actually engage in behaviors to terminate the relationship.

While very little research has been done to actually test the phase models, research has been conducted on the strategies that people use to end their relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982; K rahl & Wheelless, 1997; for a review, see Zimmerman, 2009). Breakup or disengagement strategies are defined as any verbal or nonverbal approach to disengaging from a relationship (Baxter, 1982; Zimmerman, 2009). Because most relationship breakups are nonmutual (e.g., Sprecher, 1994), breakup strategies are likely to be engaged in primarily by one partner in the relationship – the one who has greater desire for the relationship to end. Therefore, breakup strategies are typically examined from the perspective of the initiator of the breakup.

In early research, Baxter (1982) initially identified 35 disengagement strategies based on accounts by individuals who were asked to describe how they ended a relationship. In follow-up research, she asked people to indicate which strategies they would use in hypothetical breakup situations. Factor analysis of the breakup strategies yielded four factors:

1) withdrawal and avoidance strategies (e.g., avoid contact with the person);
2) manipulatory strategies (e.g., have a third party break the news);
3) positive tone strategies (e.g., prevent the person from having hard feelings), and
4) openness about the disengagement (e.g., openly express desire to break up).

It was expected that positive tone strategies would be most likely to be used. In her second experiment, and with an additional five strategies, Baxter (1982) examined situational variables that may affect the selection of disengagement strategies. Participants were asked to read one of four breakup scenarios and imagine that they were the person ending the relationship. The scenarios were either an external cause (i.e., changing employment opportunities) or one of three internal causes (self was to blame, other was to blame, or shared blame in the relationship ending). Internal causes were associated with the greater likelihood of using withdrawal strategies, relative to the scenario with an external cause. In follow-up research, Wilmot, Carbaugh, and Baxter (1985) found that strategies that were both verbal and direct (in contrast to nonverbal and indirect) were more commonly used in actual relationships to initiate breakups.

Independently, Cody (1982) also examined disengagement strategies and found that the breakups of more intimate relationships, relative to the breakups of less intimate relationships, were associated with the more frequent use of strategies labeled as positive tone, justification, and de-escalation. Banks, Altendorf, Greene, and Cody (1987) found that higher intimacy and greater social network overlap were associated with the use of positive tone strategies (see also research by K rahl & Wheelless, 1997).

Overall, the early research indicated that there may be a number of factors that influence the choice of strategies to end a relationship. Direct and positive tone strategies are more likely to be selected when a high level of closeness or intimacy exists in the relationship. Avoidance/withdrawal is less likely to be used when the cause is external. Despite the early groundbreaking research investigating the characteristics of relationship breakup strategies, and people’s choice of these strategies in different contexts, further investigation into breakup strategies is warranted. In particular, one novel contribution that we make to this area of research is to juxtapose the new emphasis in social sciences on positive human qualities, namely, compassionate love, with this more dark side of relationships, ending a relationship. This juxtaposition occurs in two ways. First, implicit in the early research by Baxter and colleagues is that some breakup strategies are more caring, thoughtful, positive, or compassionate than others – and yet this has not been examined directly. Therefore, one purpose of this research is to examine how various breakup strategies are rated on degree of compassion, from the perspective of the initiator of the breakup. We juxtapose compassionate love with the study of breakup strategies in a second way: With a recently created measuring instrument of compassionate love (e.g., Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), we examine whether compassionate love experienced in a relationship is related to the choice of strategies likely to be used to end the relationship and more specifically the choice of compassionate strategies. This is important to examine because how people cope and react to a breakup, particularly when initia-
ed unilaterally, is likely to depend on the degree to which the partner initiating the breakup is compassionate in the ending process. A second contribution of this study is to consider additional strategies used to end relationships that have become possible with new communication media that did not exist in the 1980s when the earlier research was conducted.

In Study 1, we examine the degree to which each of Baxter's (1982) breakup strategies, and a few additional ones that reflect new communication media, are perceived to be compassionate. In Study 2, we examine how choice of compassionate strategies to end (hypothetically) a relationship is affected by the degree of compassionate love experienced for the partner and by the reason for the breakup.

Study 1

In prior studies of breakup strategies (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982), the assumption was that strategies vary in their sensitivity or caring of the partner. However, this is an empirical question that has not been examined directly. Study 1 examines the degree to which various disengagement strategies are perceived to be compassionate. We included the disengagement strategies identified by Baxter (1982) as well as additional strategies that can occur online (e.g., e-mail, instant messages) or via other distant communications. According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project report (Madden & Lenhart, 2006), 9% of all single adults have broken up at least once with someone using online communication. Young adults and teenagers are probably even more likely to terminate relationships online (Lenhart, Lewis, & Rainie, 2001). We expected to find that the behaviors included in Baxter's (1982) original positive tone strategies are perceived to be more compassionate relative to other strategies, such as withdrawal-avoidance techniques or online communication.

Method

Participants

Participants were 135 undergraduate students (52 men and 83 women) from a large U. S. Midwestern state university recruited from an introductory social psychology class. The mean age of the sample was 20.59 years (SD = 2.73), 50% reported currently being in a dating relationship.

Materials and Procedure

During class time, participants were provided with a list of 47 breakup strategies (see Appendix with the items and descriptive data) and asked to rate each strategy as to the degree to which it would be a compassionate way to end a relationship. 40 items were adapted from Baxter (1982) (e.g., “Keep our conversations brief whenever we talk.” “Pick an argument with my partner as an excuse to break up.”). Six items were added to reflect other breakup strategies that can be done using the Internet and other forms of distant communication (e.g., “Use e-mail or Instant Messenger to tell my partner how I feel.”) and one of Baxter's (1982) items was rewritten to refer to e-mail. Furthermore, one item (i.e., “Tell a third party to break the news”) was added based on data from a pilot sample.1

The instructions stated that romantic relationship breakups are not always mutual, and that one person may want it more than the other. A asked to imagine themselves as the initiator of a breakup, participants rated each behavior in terms of how compassionate or considerate it would be as a strategy to end a relationship (1 = extremely inconsiderate/not compassionate to 7 = extremely considerate/compassionate).

Results and Discussion

As expected, the items varied considerably in the degree to which they were rated as compassionate, with mean ratings ranging from 1.17 to 6.36 (mean across the items = 3.21, SD = 1.60). Strategies such as “Honesty” and “Find a time to talk face to face” were rated as the most compassionate. Conversely, items such as “Ask a third party to break the news” and “Threaten my partner if he or she didn’t accept the breakup” were rated as least compassionate.

To examine whether the factor scales corresponding to the constellation of breakup strategies identified by Baxter (1982) differed in the degree to which they were rated to be compassionate, we created a mean compassionate rating for each of Baxter’s four conceptual factors: avoidance/withdrawal (8 items), manipulative (4 items), positive tone (4 items), and openness about the breakup (3 items). In this study, the four indices had a Cronbach’s α ranging from .63 (positive tone) to .82 (avoidance/withdrawal). A repeated measures ANOVA on the four indices yielded a significant overall difference across the indices.

In the pilot study, 120 undergraduate students rated a portion of the items used in Study 1 and were given the opportunity to add additional items that were not represented in the list. Many of their suggestions overlapped with existing items, but one new item was indeed added based on their responses.

To select these items, we considered the factor analysis results from both Study 1 and Study 2 of Baxter (1982). Our inclusion criteria were (1) mean factor loading across the two studies of at least .45; (2) minimum factor loading of .40 in both studies; and (3) no secondary significant factor loading. A majority of the factor loadings for the final items (87%) included were above .50. The Appendix indicates which items were included in each index. We should note that many items in the original list were not included in one of the four factors.

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in the compassion ratings, $F(3, 133) = 695.04, p < .001 \eta^2 = .84$. The positive tone ($M = 5.67, SD = .87$) and openness ($M = 5.79, SD = .94$) indices had higher mean compassion ratings than the avoidance/withdrawal ($M = 2.83, SD = .90$) and manipulatory ($M = 1.77; SD = .80$) indices. Follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated no significant difference between positive tone and openness, though significant differences were found between each other pair. We also examined the mean to our seven distant communication items ($\alpha = .79$) and found a low mean compassionate score to these items ($M = 1.92; SD = .74$). This score was significantly ($p < .001$) lower than scores on positive tone, openness, avoidance/withdrawal, but significantly ($p < .001$) higher than the score on manipulatory strategies.

These results confirm that breakup strategies varied in the degree to which they were perceived to be compassionate. As expected, the breakup strategies classified as positive tone and open (Baxter, 1982) were rated as more compassionate than strategies that could be described as avoidant or manipulatory. Those strategies that involved the use of avoidance via distant communication (e.g., instant messaging) were also rated as low on compassion. In Study 2, we examine factors that influence choice of compassionate breakup strategies.

### Study 2

Modeled after Baxter’s (1982) research, our second study involved a hypothetical scenario in which participants were asked to imagine ending a relationship and to rate the likelihood of using each of the breakup strategies that had been rated in Study 1 for degree of compassion. We were interested in examining which strategies would be most commonly selected and how choice of compassionate strategies is influenced by the degree to which compassionate love is experienced for the partner and the reason for the breakup.

Compassionate individuals who desire to break up with their partner have the simultaneous (but somewhat incompatible) goals of ending the relationship and not doing further harm. The association between individuals’ empathy or compassionate love for a partner and the choice of strategies for ending a relationship has parallels with Batson’s (2002) research on the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Batson’s research showed that people who are empathic with a person in need do not escape the situation if there is an opportunity to help and relieve the other’s distress. Conversely, people who are less empathic focus on reducing their own personal distress, which may include escaping and avoidance. In a similar vein, when ending a relationship, a person can choose either being selfish and escaping quickly, or taking the time to be thoughtful toward a partner who is likely to be in distress. People who experience compassionate love for others (and the partner in particular) are likely more other-oriented or compassionate in how they choose to end a relationship. We chose compassionate love as the other-oriented emotion to examine as a possible influence on use of compassionate strategies because compassionate love can be enduring, experienced without the presence of the other or salience of the other’s distress, and likely to be experienced in a relational context. We acknowledge, however, that there are other distinct, pro-other orientations or emotions, including sympathy, empathy, and perspective-taking, that could also influence the choice of breakup strategy in similar way to compassionate love (e.g., Batson, 2009; Batson, Early, & Savarani, 1997).

The research by Baxter (1982) also emphasizes situational factors (e.g., the reason for the breakup) as affecting choice of breakup strategies. As noted previously, an external reason (e.g., moving) is likely to be associated with being compassionate in the termination process (Baxter, 1982). However, a partner’s betrayal may test anyone’s ability to be compassionate. A relationship that ends due to a partner’s infidelity may lead to all but the most compassionate to be selfish in choice of breakup strategies. Therefore, we expect that the degree of compassionate love for the partner may interact with the reasons for the breakup (a situational variable) by having its greatest influence in the situation of betrayal. We also explore possible gender differences in expressed choice of breakup strategies, including in interaction with the type of reason for the breakup and degree of compassionate love. Past research indicates that women are more likely to initiate breakups (e.g., Sprecher, 1994) and identify and talk about problems in their relationships (e.g., Duck & Wood, 2006). In addition, men and women may experience the type of upset that could lead to breakups over different issues (e.g., men may become more upset than women over an infidelity betrayal; see Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004).

In sum, our hypotheses and research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: Overall, what strategies are most frequently selected for ending a relationship?
- H1: Individuals higher in the propensity to experience compassionate love will choose more compassionate strategies than those who are lower in compassionate love.
- H2: A breakup that is characterized as occurring for an external reason (moving for a job) will be associated with the choice of breakup strategies that are more compassionate compared to breakups that are characterized as ending because of a partner reason (betrayal) or a dyadic reason (differing values); a partner betrayal will be associated with the choice of the least compassionate disengagement strategies.
- H3: The effect of compassionate love on the likelihood of choosing compassionate strategies to end a relationship will likely depend, at least in part, on the reason for the breakup. Those high in compassionate love may be less affected overall by the reason for the breakup and may want to respond compassionately regardless of the reason for the breakup. Therefore, we predict that there...
be a larger difference between those high and low in compassionate love in the case of partner betrayal relative to the other reasons.

– RQ2: Are there gender differences in the degree to which compassionate strategies are selected? And does the influence of compassionate love and reason for the breakup on choice of breakup strategies depend on gender?

Method
Participants
Participants were 198 undergraduate students (94 women and 104 men) from a large Midwestern state university in the United States who participated for optional research credit. The mean age of the sample was 19.45 years (SD = 1.54). Participants had to be in a dating relationship of at least 4 weeks’ duration. The mean relationship duration was just under 17 months with a range of 1 month to 96 months. 21% reported that they were casually dating their partner, 57% reported seriously dating their partner, 5% reported dating their partner, and 3% were engaged.

Materials and Procedure
Participants completed a questionnaire in small-group settings. They first completed the Compassionate Love scale and then responded to a breakup scenario.

Compassionate Love Scale
The specific-other version of the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; Study 3) was used to assess participants’ current feelings of compassion, caring, and empathy for their partner. Sample items of the 21-item scale include “I feel a selfless caring for . . .,” with the blank in each statement referring to one’s current partner. A 7-point Likert response scale followed each item, where 1 = not at all true of me to 7 = very true of me. The mean and median to the scale, respectively, were 5.65 (SD = .76) and 5.71, and reliability was good (Cronbach’s α = .94). Because no gender differences in compassionate love were found in this study, t(196) = −1.19, p = .236, the same median split was used to categorize men and women as either “high” or “low” in level of compassionate love in the analyses.

Breakup Scenarios
Participants were presented with a survey that directed them to “please read the following breakup scenario imagining that the situation is about you and your current partner.” Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three hypothetical breakup scenarios. The scenarios represented three different causes for dissolution: (1) external, (2) related to the partner, and (3) related to the dyad. In the external-locus problem scenario (moving), both partners were moving away. In the partner-locus problem scenario, the situation involved an instance of the partner engaging in sexual infidelity (cheating). In the dyad-locus problem scenario, the situation involved important moral differences that could not be resolved (different values). Participants were asked to imagine that this particular situation were to occur in their current relationship, and to assume that they have decided to end the relationship.

Breakup Strategies
Participants were instructed to indicate their likelihood of using each of 47 breakup strategies in response to their assigned breakup scenario, using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = not at all likely to 7 = extremely likely.

Results and Discussion
Preliminary Analyses
There was variability in the mean likelihood ratings for the 47 strategies that roughly corresponded to the compassionate love ratings obtained in Study 1. That is, overall, compassionate strategies were expected to be more commonly used, and less compassionate strategies were expected to be less likely to be used. The strategy that was rated as most likely to be used was “Find a time when we can talk face to face” (M = 6.01, SD = 1.49). The breakup strategies that referred to using distant forms of communication (e.g., text-messaging) had low likelihood ratings.

To further examine the relative likelihood of different disengagement strategies, we compared scores on Baxter’s (1982) constellations and the added distant communication. First, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was per-
formed on likelihood scores to determine if the factor structure described by Baxter (1982) could be replicated. Six factors emerged including four that were similar to those reported by Baxter and a final one that referred to distant communication, including (1) positive tone (8 items, α = .85), (2) openness (3 items; α = .75), (3) manipulatory strategies (9 items; α = .85), (4) avoidance/withdrawal strategies (8 items; α = .91), and (5) strategies using avoidance via distant communication (4 items; α = .82). A comparison of the mean likelihood scores (on a 7-point scale) indicated a significant difference in the scores on the factors. The openness items were most likely to be used (M = 5.32, SD = 1.34) followed by the positive tone strategies (M = 4.80, SD = 1.19) and avoidance/withdrawal (M = 3.68, SD = 1.53). Less commonly experienced were manipulatory strategies (M = 2.70, SD = 1.12) and avoidance via distant communication (M = 1.77, SD = 1.17). A strategy was included to be part of a factor if it had a structure coefficient of scores, with the exception of between openness and positive tone (this difference was significant at p < .01).

Tests of Hypotheses

Our main research hypotheses concerned the effects of the reason for the dissolution and the level of compassionate love for a partner on the likelihood of choosing compassionate breakup strategies. Therefore, a new dependent variable was calculated to give more weight to breakup strategies that were considered more compassionate (as rated in Study 1) and less weight to less compassionate strategies. This variable was computed using the standardized mean compassion score for each strategy from Study 1 (Z-scores are presented in the Appendix) and multiplying this Z-score by the participant’s rating of likelihood of using that strategy. An average weighted likelihood score was then computed for each participant, which would represent a participant’s total mean level of engagement in compassionate breakup strategies. A higher score indicated a higher overall likelihood of selecting compassionate strategies, whereas a lower score indicated that the strategies chosen were those rated lower on compassion. Weighted likelihood scores ranged from –.82 to 2.26 with a mean of 1.08 (SD = .58).

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a 2 (Level of compassionate love: high vs. low) x 3 (Reason for breakup: cheating, moving, different values) x 2 (Gender) ANOVA. Consistent with our first hypothesis, there was a significant main effect for Level of compassionate love, F(1, 186) = 21.54, p < .001, η² = .10. As expected, those with higher levels of compassionate love selected more compassionate strategies (M = 1.30, SD = .52) than those with lower levels of compassionate love (M = .99, SD = .53).

Consistent with our second hypothesis, there was a significant main effect for Reason for breakup, F(2, 186) = 45.91, p < .001, η² = .33. A Scheffé post hoc analysis indicated that those in the cheating scenario (M = .65; SD = .58) selected less compassionate strategies than either those in the moving scenario (M = 1.35; SD = .36) or the different values scenario (M = 1.24; SD = .51), p < .001. However, the difference between the latter two conditions was not significant.

We were also interested in exploring the effect of gender. We found that the main effect of gender was not significant (p = .71): Neither gender was more compassionate than the other in their approach to ending relationships. However, a three-way interaction (including gender) was found to be significant, F(2, 186) = 4.06, p = .019, η² = .04. As can be seen in Figure 1, the pattern that was predicted for our third hypothesis was found for women. Women who were higher in compassionate love selected more compassionate strat-

Figure 1. Mean weighted likelihood scores as a function of gender, scenario and level of compassionate love (CL). Scores for men are shown in the upper panel, scores for women in the lower panel. See text for further explication.

Footnotes:

6. The EFA used Promax rotation to allow for correlated factors. A strategy was included to be part of a factor if it had a structure coefficient with an absolute value of .50 with that factor and that was the strongest structure coefficient with any of the factors. Further details of the factor analysis can be obtained by writing the first author.

7. As would be expected, there was a correlation between compassionate love score and weighted likelihood score (r = .21, p = .003). However, length of current relationship was not significantly correlated with either the compassionate love score (r = .12) or the weighted likelihood score (r = -.003).
egies for the cheating scenario compared to those who were lower in compassionate love (p < .001). Men’s level of compassionate love, however, did not affect how they responded in the cheating scenario. In addition, no differences were found between those high and low in level of compassionate love for women in both the moving and different values condition and for men in the moving condition (however, the difference was significant, p = .002, for men in the different values condition).8

General Discussion

The dissolution of premarital relationships is a common and often painful experience (e.g., Sprecher, 1994). The current research focused on a specific aspect of the dissolution process, namely, the behavioral strategies that one might engage in to end a romantic relationship. Study 1 results indicated that breakup strategies vary in their perceived degree of compassion and in predictable ways (i.e., Baxter’s positive tone and openness strategies were rated as more compassionate than other types of strategies). Study 2 indicated that strategies that were rated to be more compassionate (in Study 1) were expected to be more likely to be used to end a relationship.

However, not everyone is equally compassionate in their choice of breakup strategies; furthermore, certain situations can lead to more compassionate behavior. Consistent with the pattern predicted by our first hypothesis, compassionate love for the partner influenced the likelihood of choosing compassionate strategies. Overall, those who scored higher on the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) were more likely to choose compassionate strategies relative to those who scored lower. This finding, that scores on the Compassionate Love Scale predicted behavioral intentions, provides not only support for our prediction, but also validation of the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

In support of the second hypothesis, more compassionate breakup strategies were chosen when the breakup was described as occurring for an external-locus (i.e., moving) or dyadic-locus (i.e., different values) reason relative to a partner-locus reason (i.e., cheating). We offer two possible explanations for the choice of less compassionate strategies in the case of a partner betrayal. The first involves the special case of infidelity. Previous research found that partner infidelity as a reason for a breakup is more distressing than most other reasons (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2006; Sprecher, 1994). Second, individuals may be less compassionate because the partner is more at fault for the breakup in the cheating scenario (see Footnote 5). In the other scenarios, in contrast, both partners may be perceived as equally responsible (different values) or neither partner may be perceived as responsible (moving). The idea that strategies may vary as a function of perceived fault is consistent with prior research (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982). Whether it is the special case of infidelity or the general issue of attribution of fault, the current findings confirm that the reason behind the breakup affects the likelihood of using compassionate strategies to end a relationship.

We had also predicted that the degree to which compassionate love for partner interacts with choice of breakup strategy depends on the reason for the breakup. More specifically, we reasoned that people who are high in compassionate love may be less affected by the reason for the breakup, so that differences between those high and low in compassionate love may be amplified in the case of infidelity (partner betrayal). Support for this prediction was found only for the women: Women high in compassionate love chose more compassionate strategies than those low in compassionate love when reacting to a betrayal. This is also consistent with research on betrayal, which has found that empathy experienced by the victim may be important in the process of forgiving the transgressor (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). However, not consistent with our predictions, men (regardless of their compassionate love) chose less compassionate strategies for the cheating scenario compared to the other two scenarios. The failure of men’s level of compassionate love to influence their reactions in the cheating scenario may be due to their overall and dominant tendency to become upset at partner infidelity, often explained from an evolutionary perspective (e.g., Buss, Larson, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992).

When the scenario involved an external reason for which neither partner was to blame (moving due to employment), there was no difference in the compassion of strategies chosen by men or women, or by those high or low in compassionate love. In this case, all participants chose relatively compassionate strategies.

An unexpected finding was that, for the scenario involving a dyadic reason for the breakup (different values), men high in compassionate love for their current partner were more likely to choose compassionate strategies relative to men who were lower in compassionate love; yet no significant differences were found for women based on compassionate love. Perhaps men low in compassionate love were less concerned with ending a relationship in a compassionate way when important values and attitudes were in conflict, but this speculation would require further empirical work to verify.

Taken together, these results indicate that, in breakup situations, men and women may be differentially affected by the circumstances leading to the breakup, and that one’s level of compassionate love for the partner determines the likelihood of choosing more or less compassionate strategies to end the relationship.

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8 In analyzing simple effects, α was set at p < .008 to control for type I error.
Future Directions

This pair of studies, while contributing to our knowledge base about disengagement strategies, was limited in various ways. Although an experimental design (i.e., hypothetical vignette as in Study 2) has the advantage of control over the reasons for the breakup, people’s beliefs about how they would react in a particular hypothetical situation may not correspond with how they would actually behave if they were faced with the situation. Therefore, we encourage future research to examine how compassionate love is associated with breakup strategies used in actual terminations. We also encourage research to examine the specific aspects of other-orientation that may contribute to choosing compassionate strategies to end relationships. Batson (2009) has discussed several distinct phenomena associated with empathy, including becoming aware of how the other is feeling, imagining how one would feel in such a situation, imagining how the other would feel, feeling distress at another’s suffering, and feeling the other’s suffering. In addition, in real breakups, there may be conditions leading up to the breakup that affect how compassionate a person is in the final steps of exiting the relationship. As noted by Duck (1982) and others (e.g., Lee, 1984; Rollie & Duck, 2006), before a person actually terminates the relationship, he or she likely goes through other phases including ruminating about the relationship problems, discussing these problems with the partner, and reaching out to the social network for support. Therefore, how compassionate a person is at any particular stage of the breakup likely depends on the prior phases, including how the partner responds to an attempt to discuss problems and how friends and family react to the pending breakup.

Conclusions

A relationship breakup can be a trigger for depression and other psychosocial problems across the life course from adolescence to old age (e.g., Monroe, Rhode, Seeley, & Levinsohn, 1999). Social skills training exists for entering relationships and relationship skills courses exist for helping couples enrich and maintain their relationships. However, there is no emphasis on skills for exiting relationships, particularly premarital relationships. We encourage more research on the characteristics of compassionate breakups and applications of this knowledge to the real-world of relationship exiting.

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References


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Susan Sprecher
Department of Sociology & Anthropology
Department of Psychology
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790
USA
E-mail sprecher@ilstu.edu

Appendix

Mean compassion ratings and standardized Z-scores (Study 1), mean likelihood scores and index (Study 2) for each of the breakup strategies from most to least compassionate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compassion ratings</td>
<td>Likelihood ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a time when we can talk face to face about my desire to break up.</td>
<td>6.36 (1.10)</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell my partner that I didn’t regret the time we had spent together in the relationship.</td>
<td>6.18 (1.92)</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honestly convey my wishes to my partner.</td>
<td>6.12 (1.02)</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally explain to my partner in person my reasons for desiring to break up.</td>
<td>6.02 (1.06)</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Study 1 Compassion ratings</td>
<td>Study 2 Likelihood ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize to my partner the good things gained from the relationship in the past.</td>
<td>5.80 (1.18) 1.62</td>
<td>4.91 (1.84) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to prevent us leaving on a sour note with one another.</td>
<td>5.79 (1.15) 1.61</td>
<td>5.57 (1.70) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to prevent my partner from having any <em>“hard feelings”</em> about the breakup.</td>
<td>5.52 (1.16) 1.44</td>
<td>5.14 (1.82) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid blaming my partner at all costs, even if my partner were to blame.</td>
<td>5.30 (1.48) 1.31</td>
<td>3.37 (1.88) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid hurting my partner’s feelings at all costs.</td>
<td>5.23 (1.69) 1.26</td>
<td>4.63 (2.02) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openly express to my partner my desire to break up.</td>
<td>5.22 (1.35) 1.26</td>
<td>5.03 (1.75) OC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to put my partner in a “good frame of mind” before breaking the news to him/her.</td>
<td>4.74 (1.69) .96</td>
<td>4.12 (1.86) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to convince my partner that breaking up was in both our interests.</td>
<td>4.36 (1.47) .72</td>
<td>4.61 (1.82) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take total blame for why the breakup was needed, even if I thought I wasn’t the only cause.</td>
<td>4.30 (1.71) .68</td>
<td>3.33 (1.91) PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrain from asking favors of my partner.</td>
<td>4.28 (1.43) .67</td>
<td>4.55 (1.99) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop subtle “hints” that things had changed between us.</td>
<td>4.28 (1.35) .67</td>
<td>4.44 (1.87) MUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce overt displays of liking and affection toward my partner.</td>
<td>3.44 (1.34) .15</td>
<td>4.14 (1.85) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procrastinate in saying or doing anything in the hopes that things would improve.</td>
<td>3.23 (1.45) .04</td>
<td>3.56 (1.91) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradually break up over time instead of suddenly changing things.</td>
<td>3.22 (1.62) .01</td>
<td>2.97 (1.83) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose little about personal activities and interests whenever we talked.</td>
<td>3.19 (1.45) .01</td>
<td>2.87 (2.01) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devote more time to other people and activities.</td>
<td>3.10 (1.31) .06</td>
<td>4.38 (1.68) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally explain on the phone to my partner my reasons for desiring to break up.</td>
<td>3.04 (1.51) .10</td>
<td>3.10 (1.81) UCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain our conversations on superficial level.</td>
<td>2.95 (1.42) .16</td>
<td>3.39 (1.70) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtly discourage my partner from sharing aspects of his/her personal life with me.</td>
<td>2.84 (1.55) .23</td>
<td>3.33 (1.96) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cease doing favors for my partner.</td>
<td>2.83 (1.30) .24</td>
<td>3.79 (2.10) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to find reasons for the breakup other than things about our relationship (e.g., a job offer, graduation, etc.)</td>
<td>2.70 (1.31) .32</td>
<td>3.11 (1.91) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote new relationships for my partner to make the breakup easier.</td>
<td>2.52 (1.37) .43</td>
<td>2.04 (1.54) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid scheduling future meetings with my partner whenever possible.</td>
<td>2.50 (1.39) .44</td>
<td>3.51 (1.98) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep our conversations brief whenever we talk.</td>
<td>2.44 (1.26) .48</td>
<td>3.79 (1.99) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wait it out” until conditions were conducive to a breakup (e.g., until vacation time).</td>
<td>2.39 (1.19) -.51</td>
<td>2.91 (1.71) M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ease into” the breakup by saying it was just a “temporary thing.”</td>
<td>2.27 (1.36) -.59</td>
<td>2.62 (1.79) M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick an argument with my partner as an excuse to break up.</td>
<td>1.98 (1.88) -.77</td>
<td>2.46 (1.69) MUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give hints of my desire to break up to people who know my partner.</td>
<td>1.97 (1.18) -.77</td>
<td>2.26 (1.58) M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to make my partner look selfish in refusing to break up.</td>
<td>1.91 (1.06) -.81</td>
<td>2.10 (1.45) MUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use caller ID to avoid calls on my cell phone from my partner.</td>
<td>1.86 (1.07) -.84</td>
<td>1.82 (1.08) UCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to make my partner feel guilty if s/he wanted to keep me in the relationship.</td>
<td>1.81 (1.02) -.87</td>
<td>2.58 (1.68) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain on instant messenger my reasons for desiring to break up.</td>
<td>1.79 (1.07) -.89</td>
<td>1.83 (1.42) ADADC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform my partner of my feelings in an email.</td>
<td>1.76 (.97) -.90</td>
<td>1.62 (1.24) ADADC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use e-mail or instant messenger to tell my partner how I feel.</td>
<td>1.68 (1.08) -.95</td>
<td>1.83 (1.52) ADADC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block my partner from seeing me on instant messenger.</td>
<td>1.67 (1.04) -.96</td>
<td>1.94 (1.55) UCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally “leak” my desire to break up to someone I anticipate would inform my partner.</td>
<td>1.66 (1.99) -.97</td>
<td>2.23 (1.54) M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the relationship more costly for my partner by being bitchy, demanding, etc.</td>
<td>1.65 (1.01) -.97</td>
<td>2.42 (1.77) MUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid contact with my partner as much as possible.</td>
<td>1.65 (1.06) -.97</td>
<td>3.32 (2.11) AW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text message my partner to tell him/her how I feel.</td>
<td>1.64 (1.04) -.98</td>
<td>1.88 (1.60) ADADC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally blame my partner for causing the breakup, even if I thought s/he weren’t totally to blame.</td>
<td>1.54 (.98) -1.04</td>
<td>2.35 (1.65) UCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become unpleasant to my partner in the hopes that s/he would make the first move.</td>
<td>1.53 (.79) -1.05</td>
<td>2.62 (1.80) MUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threaten my partner if s/he didn’t accept the breakup.</td>
<td>1.27 (.73) -1.21</td>
<td>1.34 (1.82) UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a third party to break the breakup news to my partner.</td>
<td>1.17 (1.64) -1.27</td>
<td>1.18 (1.61) UC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Subjects responded to each item on a 7-point scale from not at all compassionate to very compassionate (Compassion ratings) and not at all likely to very likely (Likelihood ratings). PT = positive tone; OC = open confrontation; AW = avoidance/withdrawal; M = manipulatory; ADC = avoidance via distant communication; UC = unclassified; N = item not used by Baxter (1982). *Index refers to the factor that an item loaded on in Study 2 and Baxter (1982). A subscript is used to refer to factor loadings from Baxter (1982) when they did not match Study 2.