

Breakups Before Marriage: The End of 103 Affairs

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Factors that predicted breakups before marriage, investigated as part of a two-year study of dating relationships among college students, included unequal involvement in the relationship (as suggested by exchange theory) and discrepant age, educational aspirations, intelligence, and physical attractiveness (as suggested by filtering models). The timing of breakups was highly related to the school calendar, pointing to the importance of external factors in structuring breakups. The desire to break up was seldom mutual; women were more likely than men to perceive problems in premarital relationships and somewhat more likely to be the ones to precipitate the breakups. Findings are discussed in terms of their relevance for the process of mate selection and their implications for marital breakup. ("The best divorce is the one you get before you get married.")

For all the concern with the high incidence of divorce in contemporary America, marital separation accounts for only a small proportion of the breakups of intimate male-female rela-

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tionships among American couples. For every recorded instance of the ending of a marriage, there are many instances, typically unrecorded, of the ending of a relationship among partners who were dating or "going together." Such breakups before marriage are of fundamental importance to an understanding of marital separation for two major reasons.

First and foremost, breakups before marriage play a central role in the larger system of mate selection. In an ideal mate selection system, all breakups of intimate male-female relationships might take place before marriage. Boyfriends and girlfriends who are not well-suited for each other would discover this in the course of dating and would eventually break up. In practice, however, the system does not achieve this ideal. Many couples who subsequently prove to be poorly suited for marrying each other do not discover this until after they are married. In many other instances, couples may be aware of serious strains in their relationship but nevertheless find themselves unable or unwilling to break up before marriage. Many future sources of marital strain may be totally unpredictable at the time that a couple decides to get married; individuals' needs and values may change over the course of time in ways that could not have been anticipated initially. Nevertheless, it is possible that the selection system could be made to operate more efficiently than it currently does. Although the psychic cost of a premarital breakup is often substantial, by breaking up before marriage couples might spare themselves the much greater costs of breaking up afterward.

Second, breakup before marriage may provide a revealing comparison against which to view marital breakup. Many of the psychological bonds of unmarried couples resemble those of married couples. Thus the requirements and difficulties of "uncoupling" in the two cases may show similarities (see Davis, 1973). On the other hand, breakup before marriage takes place in a very different social context from that of divorce. The ending of a dating relationship is relatively unaffected by factors that play central roles in divorces—for example, changes in residence, economic arrangements, child custody, legal battles, and stigmatization by kin and community. Thus the examination of breakups before marriage may be helpful in untangling the complex of psychological and social factors that influence divorce and its aftermath.

Breakups before marriage have remained largely unexplored by social scientists. Although there has been a great deal of research and speculation about mate selection (Rubin, 1973), this work

has rather thoroughly ignored the process of breaking up. One major investigation of breaking up before marriage is the study of broken engagements conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by Burgess and Wallin (1953) as part of their larger study of engagement and marriage.

In this paper, we report on breakups before marriage among a large sample of dating couples in the 1970s. Our data are primarily descriptive: How were those couples who broke up over a two-year period different from those who stayed together? What were the reasons for the breakups, as perceived by the former partners themselves? What were the central features of the breaking-up process: its precipitating factors, its timing, and its aftermath? We pay special attention to the two-sidedness of breaking up: the frequent differences in the two partners' perceptions of what is taking place and why, the pervasive role differentiation of breaker-upper and broken-up-with, and the possibility that there are important differences between men's and women's characteristic orientations toward breaking up before marriage.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

In the spring of 1972, for a longitudinal study of dating relationships (Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, Note 1), we sent a letter to a random sample of 5000 sophomores and juniors, 2500 men and 2500 women, at four colleges in the Boston area. The colleges, chosen with a view toward diversity, included a large private university (2000 letters) and a small private college, a Catholic university, and a state college for commuter students (1000 letters per school). Each student was sent a two-page questionnaire which asked if he or she would be interested in participating in a study of "college students and their opposite-sex relationships." A total of 2520 students (57% of the women and 44% of the men) returned this questionnaire. Of these, 62% of the women and 54% of the men indicated that they were currently "going with" someone. Those who said that they and their partner might be interested in participating in a study were invited to attend a questionnaire session—with their boyfriend or girlfriend—either at their own school or at Harvard.

The 202 couples who responded to our invitation, plus an additional 29 couples who were recruited by advertising at one of the four schools, constitute our sample (Hill, Rubin, & Willard, Note 2). At the time of the initial questionnaire, almost all participants (95%) were—or had been—college students. The

modal couple consisted of a sophomore woman dating a junior man. About half of the participants' fathers had graduated from college and about one-fourth of the fathers held graduate degrees. About 44% of the respondents were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, and 25% were Jewish, reflecting the religious composition of colleges in the Boston area. Virtually all of the participants (97%) were white; about 25% lived at home with their parents, another 35% lived in apartments or houses by themselves or with roommates, and 38% lived in college dormitories. Almost all of the participants—97% of the women and 96% of the men—thought that they would eventually get married, although not necessarily to their current dating partner.

At the beginning of the study, the couples had been dating for a median period of about eight months—a third for 5 months or less, a third between 5 and 10 months, and a third for longer than that. In three-fourths of the couples both persons were dating their partner exclusively, but only 10% of the couples were engaged and relatively few had concrete plans for marriage. Four-fifths of the couples had had sexual intercourse, and one-fifth were living together "all or most of the time." Sixty percent were seeing one another every day.

Data Collection

In addition to the initial questionnaire, a follow-up questionnaire was administered in person or by mail six months, one year, and two years after the initial session. At all points response rates were good. For example, in the one-year follow-up, two-thirds of the initial participants attended questionnaire sessions and another 14% returned short questionnaires in the mail. Four-fifths of the original participants returned the two-year mail questionnaire. To categorize a relationship as intact or broken after two years, we have reports from at least one member of all but 10 of the 231 couples. In all cases, boyfriends and girlfriends were asked to fill out the questionnaires individually. They were assured that their responses would be kept in strict confidence, and would never be revealed to their partners. They were each paid \$1.50 for the initial one-hour questionnaire session and \$3.00 for a somewhat longer session one year later. To supplement these data, a smaller number of individuals and couples were interviewed intensively. Of particular relevance to this paper is a series of interviews conducted in the fall of 1972 with 18 people whose

relationships ended after they began their participation in the study.¹

WHICH COUPLES BROKE UP?

By the end of the two-year study period, 103 couples (45% of the total sample) had broken up. (Of the remaining couples, 65 were dating, 9 were engaged, 43 were married, 10 had an unknown status, and one partner had died.) The length of time that breakup couples had been dating before ending their relationship ranged from 1 month to 5 years; the median was 16 months. On the basis of data obtained in the initial questionnaire, could these breakups have been predicted in advance?

Measures of Intimacy

Burgess and Wallin (1953) list "slight emotional attachment" as a major factor associated with the endings of premarital relationships. Our data indicate that in general those couples who were less intimate or less attached to one another when the study began were more likely to break up (Table 1). On the initial questionnaire, compared to couples who stayed together, couples who were subsequently to break up reported that they felt less close and saw less likelihood of marrying each other; they were less likely to be "in love" or dating exclusively, and tended to have been dating for a shorter period of time. The data also indicate, however, that many relationships which were quite "intimate" in 1972 did not survive beyond 1974. For example, over half of the partners in breakup couples felt that they were both in love at the time of the initial questionnaire. Whereas some of the couples who were to break up apparently never developed much intimacy in the first place, others had a high degree of intimacy that they were unable or unwilling to sustain.

The various measures of intimacy listed in Table 1 tend to be correlated with one another, and therefore are not independent predictors; however, some measures predicted survival (or breakup) better than others. The partners' "love" was a better predictor of the couple's survival than their "liking" for one another, as measured by scales previously developed by Rubin (1970, 1973).

¹We are grateful to Claire Engers and Sherry Morgan, who conducted most of these interviews.

TABLE 1
INITIAL INTIMACY RATINGS BY STATUS TWO YEARS LATER

Mean Ratings	Women's Reports		Men's Reports	
	Together	Breakup	Together	Breakup
Self-report of closeness (9-pt. scale)	7.9	7.3**	8.0	7.2**
Estimate of marriage probability (as percentage)	65.4	46.4**	63.1	42.7**
Love scale (max = 100)	81.2	70.2**	77.8	71.5**
Liking scale (max = 100)	78.5	74.0*	73.2	69.6
Number of months dated	13.1	9.9*	12.7	9.9*
Percentages				
Couple is "in love"	80.0	55.3**	81.2	58.0**
Dating exclusively	92.3	68.0**	92.2	77.5**
Seeing partner daily	67.5	52.0	60.7	53.4
Had sexual intercourse	79.6	78.6	80.6	78.6
Living together	24.8	20.4	23.1	20.4

Note. $N = 117$ together, 103 breakup for both men and women. Significance by t tests or chi-square for together-breakup differences.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

This distinction is in accord with the conceptual meaning of the two scales, with love including elements of attachment and intimacy, while liking refers to favorable evaluations that do not necessarily reflect such intimacy. In addition, the women's love for their boyfriends tended to be a better predictor of dating status (point-biserial $r = .32$) than the men's love for their girlfriends ($r = .18$). Thus the woman's feelings toward her dating partner may have a more powerful effect on a relationship and/or provide a more sensitive barometer of its viability than do the man's.

Finally, two important measures of couple intimacy were totally unrelated to breaking up: having had sexual intercourse or having lived together. These behaviors apparently reflect a couple's social values at least as much as the depth of their attachment to one another. Having sex or living together may bring a couple closer, but they may also give rise to additional problems such as coordinating sexual desires or agreeing on the division of household tasks.

Relative Degree of Involvement

In addition to "slight emotional attachment," Burgess and Wallin (1953) list "unequal attachment" as a factor underlying breakups. The hypothesis that equal involvement facilitates the

development of a relationship was spelled out by Blau:

Commitments must stay abreast for a love relationship to develop into a lasting mutual attachment. . . . Only when two lovers' affection for and commitment to one another expand at roughly the same pace do they tend mutually to reinforce their love. (1964, p. 84)

Our data provide strong support for Blau's hypothesis. Of the couples in which both members reported that they were equally involved in the relationship in 1972, only 23% broke up; in contrast, 54% of those couples in which at least one member reported that they were unequally involved subsequently broke up. It should be noted, however, that there was a significant association between reporting high intimacy on a variety of measures (e.g., those in Table 1) and reporting equal involvement.

Similarity and Matching

Probably the best documented finding in the research literature on interpersonal attraction and mate selection is the "birds-of-a-feather principle"—people tend to be most attracted to one another if they are similar or equally matched on a variety of social, physical, and intellectual characteristics and attitudes (Rubin, 1973). Evidence for such matching was found among the couples in our study. The significant correlations in the left-hand column of Table 2 make it clear that the partners were matched to some degree on a wide variety of characteristics, especially in the domain of social attitudes and values.

Although there is less empirical support for it, some researchers have put forth "sequential filtering" models of mate selection which propose that social and psychological similarities or dissimilarities are recognized and responded to in particular sequences. For example, Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) and Murstein (1971) propose that filtering (i.e., the elimination of mismatches) takes place first with respect to social background, physical, and other external or stimulus factors, and later with respect to important attitudes and values (Udry, 1971).

The intracouple correlations of the breakup and together groups in our sample reveal that couples were more likely to stay together if they were relatively well-matched with respect to age, educational plans, intelligence (measured by self-reported SAT scores), and physical attractiveness (measured by judges' ratings of individual color photographs). On the other hand, there was no suggestion of filtering during the period of study on such other presumably important characteristics as social class (indexed by father's education), religion, sex-role traditionalism,

TABLE 2
COUPLE SIMILARITY BY STATUS TWO YEARS LATER

Correlation of Partners'	All Couples (N = 231)	Together Couples (N = 117)	Breakup Couples (N = 103)
Characteristics			
Age	.19**	.38**	.13
Highest degree planned	.28**	.31**	.17
SAT, math	.22**	.31**	.11
SAT, verbal	.24**	.33**	.15
Physical attractiveness	.24**	.32**	.16
Father's educational level	.11	.12	.12
Height	.21**	.22*	.22*
Religion (% same)	.51%**	.51%**	.52%**
Attitudes			
Sex-role traditionalism (10-item scale)	.47**	.50**	.41**
Favorability toward women's liberation	.38**	.36**	.43**
Approval of sex among "acquaintances"	.25**	.27**	.21*
Romanticism (6-item scale)	.20*	.21*	.15
Self-report of religiosity	.37**	.39**	.37**
Number of children wanted	.51**	.49**	.57**

Note. Total N for SAT scores = 187, for physical attractiveness = 174. Physical attractiveness based on ratings of color photographs by 4 judges. Religion categorized as Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish; random pairing would have yielded 41% same religion.

Probability of difference between Together and Breakup correlations (one-tailed) for age is $p < .05$, for SAT math and SAT verbal is $.05 < p < .10$, for highest degree planned and for physical attractiveness is $.10 < p < .15$.

Significance levels indicated in the table are for chance probabilities.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

gence, and physical attractiveness) may continue to be important even after attitudinal and value filtering have occurred. Thus our data lend support to the operation of social and psychological filters in mate selection, but lead us to question the value of simple fixed-sequence theories of filtering (Levinger, Senn & Jorgensen, 1970; Rubin & Levinger, 1974).

THE PROCESS OF BREAKING UP

Brief synopses of two breakups, taken from among the sample we interviewed, may help to illustrate the process of breaking up. Neither of these cases is presented as typical, but the two illustrate several features that are characteristic of the aggregate findings.

Kathy and Joe had been going together during the school year when she was a sophomore and he was a junior. Both of them agree that Kathy was the one who wanted to break up. She felt they were too tied down to one another, that Joe was too dependent and demanded her exclusive attention—even in groups of friends he would draw her aside. As early as the spring Joe came to feel that Kathy was no longer as much in love as he, but it took him a long time to reconcile himself to the notion that things were ending. They gradually saw each other less and less over the summer months, until finally she began to date someone else. The first time that the two were together after the start of the next school year Kathy was in a bad mood, but wouldn't talk to Joe about it. The following morning Joe told Kathy, "I guess things are over with." Later when they were able to talk further, he found out that she was already dating someone else. Kathy's reaction to the breakup was mainly a feeling of release—both from Joe and from the guilt she felt when she was secretly dating someone else. But Joe had deep regrets about the relationship. For at least some months afterward he regretted that they didn't give the relationship one more chance—he thought they might have been able to make it work. He said that he learned something from the relationship, but hoped he hadn't become jaded by it. "If I fall in love again," he said, "it might be with the reservation that I'm going to keep awake this time. I don't know if you can keep an innocent attitude toward relationships and keep watch at the same time, but I hope so." Meanwhile, however, he had not begun to make any new social contacts, and instead seemed focused on working through the old relationship, and, since Kathy and he sometimes see each other at school, in learning to be comfortable in her presence.

David and Ruth had gone together off-and-on for several years. David was less involved in the relationship than Ruth was, but it is clear that Ruth was the one who precipitated the final breakup. According to Ruth, David was spending more and more time with his own group of friends, and this bothered her. She recalled one night in particular

religiosity, or desired family size. It may be surmised that any filtering on such factors had already taken place before the time of our initial questionnaire.

Methodological problems, most notably involving the effects of varying ranges of scores on the correlations that may be obtained within subgroups, dictate caution in interpreting Table 2. But it may at least be speculated that if there is any general sequence of filters in mate selection, it is different from the ones usually proposed. Whereas models like those of Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) and Murstein (1971) propose that couples are first filtered on social characteristics and stimulus factors and later on attitudes and values, our data suggest a more complex pattern. It appears that social and stimulus factors (including age, education, intelli-

--- Men (N = 206)
 — Women (N = 214)

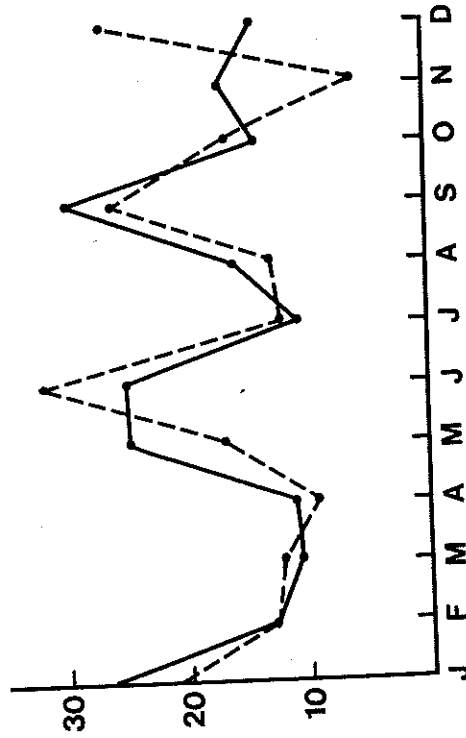


FIGURE 1.

Months of the year in which respondents' previous relationships ended. "Previous relationship" refers to the relationship each participant had with the person dated most intensively during the two years before dating the current partner (Hill, 1974).

easier to say, "While we're apart we ought to date others" than it is to say, "I've grown tired of you and would rather not date you any more." If one is able to attribute the impending breakup to external circumstances, one may be able to avoid some of the ambivalence, embarrassment, and guilt that may be associated with calling a relationship off.

The structuring of breakups by the calendar year was also related to another aspect of the breakup process. In the majority of breakups, like the case of Kathy and Joe, the ending was desired more by the partner who was less involved in the relationship (in this instance, Kathy). In a significant minority of cases, however, the breakup was desired more by the more-involved partner (like Ruth), who finally decides that the costs of remaining in the relationship are higher than he or she can bear. We found

when "they were showing *The Last Picture Show* in one of the dorms, and we went to see it. I was sitting next to him, but it was as if he wasn't really there. He was running around talking to all these people and I was following him around and I felt like his kid sister. So I knew I wasn't going to put up with that much longer." When she talked to him about this and other problems, he said "I'm sorry"—but did not change. Shortly thereafter Ruth wanted to see a movie in Cambridge and asked David if he would go with her. He replied, "No, there's something going on in the dorm!" This was the last straw for Ruth, and she told him she would not go out with him anymore. David started to cry, as if the relationship had really meant something to him—but at that point it was too late. At the time we talked to her, Ruth had not found another boyfriend, but she said she had no regrets about the relationship or about its ending. "It's probably the most worthwhile thing that's ever happened to me in my 21 years, so I don't regret having the experience at all. But after being in the supportive role, I want a little support now. That's the main thing I look for." She added that "I don't think I ever felt romantic [about David]—I felt practical. I had the feeling that I'd better make the most of it because it won't last that long."

The Timing of Breakups

If dating relationships were unaffected by their social context, it seems likely that they could end at most any time of the year. But the relationships of the couples in our sample were most likely to break up at key turning points of the school year—in the months of May-June, September, and December-January rather than at other times. This tendency, found for the 103 breakups, is illustrated most dramatically in reports of the ending of all respondents' previous relationships, for which there were more than 400 cases (Figure 1).

This pattern of breakups suggests that factors external to a relationship (leaving for vacations, arriving at school, graduation, etc.) may interact with internal factors (such as conflicting values or goals) to cause relationships to end at particular times. For example, changes in living arrangements and schedules at the beginning or end of a semester may make it easier to meet new dating partners (e.g., in a new class) or make it more difficult to maintain previous ties (e.g., when schedules conflict or one moves away). Such changes may raise issues concerning the future of a relationship: Should we get an apartment together? Should we spend our vacation apart? Should I accept a job out of state? Should we get together after vacation? If one has already been considering terminating a relationship, such changes may make it easier to call the relationship off. For example, it is probably

a strong tendency for the breakups desired by the less-involved partner to take place near the end or beginning of the school year or during the intervening summer months—71.1% April-September vs. 28.9% October-March. The breakups desired by the more-involved partner, in contrast, were relatively more likely to take place during the school year—59.1% October-March vs. 40.9% April-September ($X^2 = 5.68, p < .02$). The summer months are, of course, times when college student couples are most likely to be separated because of external factors—for example, returning to homes or jobs in different areas. It seems plausible that less-involved partners would be likely to let their remaining interest in the relationship wane during such periods of separation. Summer separations may also provide a good excuse for the less-involved partner to say good-bye. For the more-involved partner, on the other hand, the period of separation may, if anything, intensify interest in the relationship—"Absence extinguishes small passions and increases great ones" (La Rochefoucauld, quoted in Heider, 1958). The more-involved partner may be most likely to end the relationship in response to continuing pain and frustration. As in the case of Ruth, the final break may be precipitated by some "last straw" that occurs while the two partners are still together.

The Two Sides of Breaking Up

The central principle that *there are two sides to every breakup* has both substantive and methodological implications. Very few breakups are truly mutual, with both parties deciding at more or less the same time that they would like to discontinue the relationship. In the present study, 85% of the women and 87% of the men reported that one person wanted to end the relationship at least somewhat more than the other. Thus in the large majority of cases there are two distinct roles: "breaker-upper" (to be more literary about it, the rejecting lover) and "broken-up-with" (the rejected lover). Identifying these roles is crucial to understanding anything else about a breakup—its underlying reasons, the termination process itself, or its aftermath.

The impact of this role differentiation emerged particularly clearly in self-reports of the emotional aftermath of breaking up (reports available on one-year follow-up for 31 women, 36 men). Both women and men felt considerably less depressed, less lonely, freer, happier, but more guilty when they were the breaker-uppers than when they were the broken-up-with (for most differences, $p < .01$). For example, whereas Kathy reacted

to her breakup with relief, Joe felt deep regret. Indeed, there was a general tendency for the two partners' reactions to a breakup to be inversely related. The freer one partner reported feeling after the breakup, the less free the other partner reported feeling ($r = -.57, p < .05$; $N = 15$ cases with both reports). Similar inverse correlations—but of lesser magnitude—characterized the former partners' self-reports of depression, loneliness, and happiness.

A second sense in which there are two sides to every breakup is in the perceptions of the participants; the experience of breaking up is different for each of the two parties involved. For example, although members of couples agreed almost completely on the month in which their relationship finally ended ($r = .98, N = 77$), there was only slight agreement on the more subjective question of how gradually or abruptly the ending came about ($r = .24, N = 77$). When the former partners were asked to provide their attributions of the causes of the breakup, there was moderate to high agreement on the contribution of nondyadic factors but little or no agreement on factors characterizing the dyad (Table 3).

One systematic way in which partners' reports disagree concerns who wanted to break up. Although there is a high correlation between men's and women's reports of who wanted the relationship to end ($r = .85, N = 76$), there was a systematic self-bias in the reports. There seems to be a general tendency for respondents to say that they themselves, rather than their partners, were the ones who wanted to break up—51.3% "I," 35.5% "partner," 13.0% mutual in the women's reports; 46.1% "I," 39.5% "partner," 15.0% mutual in the men's reports ($N = 76$). Apparently it is easier to accept and cope with a breakup if one views it as a desired outcome (as precipitated by oneself or as mutual) than as an outcome imposed against one's will. A similar self-bias appeared in ratings of factors contributing to the breakup—both men and women cited "my" desire to be independent as more important than "partner's" desire to be independent.

For some purposes, therefore, it is difficult to speak confidently about *the* breakup, as if it refers to a single, objective set of events. Instead it seems necessary to attend separately to "his breakup" and to "her breakup," in each instance looking at the matter from the respective partner's point of view—see Bernard's (1972) discussion of "his marriage" and "her marriage." This distinction seems particularly necessary since our data suggest that there may be some systematic differences between men and women in their orientations toward breaking up.

TABLE 3
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ENDING OF A RELATIONSHIP
(Percentage Reporting)

	Women's Reports	Men's Reports	Partner Correlation
Dyadic Factors			
Becoming bored with the relationship	76.7	76.7	.23*
Differences in interests	72.8	61.1	.04
Differences in backgrounds	44.2	46.8	.05
Differences in intelligence	19.5	10.4	.17
Conflicting sexual attitudes	48.1	42.9	.33**
Conflicting marriage ideas	43.4	28.9	.25*
Nondyadic Factors			
Woman's desire to be independent	73.7	50.0	.57**
Man's desire to be independent	46.8	61.1	.55**
Woman's interest in someone else	40.3	31.2	.56**
Man's interest in someone else	18.2	28.6	.60**
Living too far apart	28.2	41.0	.57**
Pressure from woman's parents	18.2	13.0	.33**
Pressure from man's parents	10.4	9.1	.58**

Note. Data for these couples for which both man's and woman's reports were available ($N = 77$). Factors labelled "man's" and "woman's" above were labelled as "my" or "partner's" in the questionnaires. Percentages are those citing factor as "a contributing factor" or as "one of the most important factors." Correlations are based on 3-point scales.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

SEX DIFFERENCES IN BREAKING UP

Rubin (Note 3) has suggested that in respect to dating or premarital relationships in middle-class America today: (a) men tend to fall in love more readily than women, and (b) women tend to fall out of love more readily than men. Evidence for the first proposition has been reviewed elsewhere (Rubin, 1973; Note 3). To cite just one datum from the present study, on the initial questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate how important each of a variety of goals was to them as a reason for entering the relationship. Prevailing stereotypes about romantic women to the contrary, men rated the "desire to fall in love" as a significantly more important reason for entering the relationship than did women (4.1 vs. 3.6 on a 9-point scale, $p = .03$). We will review here some of the evidence relating to the second proposition.

Perceived Problems

When participants who had broken up were presented a list of common problems and asked to indicate which had contrib-

uted to the breakup (Table 3), women rated more problems as important than did men ($p < .003$). In particular, more women than men cited "differences in interests," "differences in intelligence," "conflicting ideas about marriage," "my desire to be independent," and "my interest in someone else." Men were only more likely to cite "living too far apart." Although these reports are retrospective and clearly susceptible to distortion, they suggest that women tended to be more sensitive than men to problem areas in their relationship, and that women were more likely than men to compare the relationship to alternatives, whether potential or actual. These tendencies seem consistent with the hypothesis.

Who Precipitates the Breakup?

If women indeed tend to fall out of love more readily than men, we would expect them to be more likely to play the role of breaker-upper and men to play the role of broken-up-with. Combining men's and women's reports of who wanted to break up and classifying a breakup as nonmutual if either partner described it so, we estimate that the woman was more interested in breaking up in 51% of the couples, the man in 42%, and the breakup was clearly mutual in 7%. The participants' reports (200-plus cases for each sex) of breakups in previous opposite-sex relationships (Hill, 1974) suggested a similar preponderance of female-initiated breakups. In an earlier study, Rubin (1969) found that 17 of 25 nonmutual breakups among dating couples at the University of Michigan had been initiated by women.

One possible explanation for this datum is that women might have been less involved in these relationships than the men. But that was not the case. Once the relationships had proceeded beyond their early stages, the women were by all indications at least as involved as the men. Combining the two partners' reports before the time of the breakup, women were categorized as the more involved partner in 45% of all couples and men as more involved in 36%; in 19% they were classified as equally involved.

As Blau (1964) has suggested, however, a relationship in which there is unequal involvement will not always be ended by the less involved party: "Whereas rewards experienced in the relationship may lead to its continuation for a while, the weak interest of the less committed or the frustrations of the more committed probably will sooner or later prompt one or the other to terminate it" (p. 84). Our data suggest that Blau's postulated patterns describe a substantial number of breakups precipitated

by women. Relationships were often ended by women when they were the less involved partner (67.6% of the 34 cases)—like Kathy in the first of the cases presented—and wanted to move on to better alternatives. Relationships were also likely to be ended by women when they were the more involved partner (37.2% of the 43 cases)—like Ruth in the second case—and finally abandoned the relationship when they realized that their commitment was not reciprocated. When breakups were precipitated by men, only the first of the two patterns was common. Relationships were frequently ended by men when they were the less involved partner (60.5% of the 43 cases), but rarely when they were the more involved (20.6% of the 34 cases). These data seem quite consistent with our generalization: Whereas many highly involved women sooner or later find it necessary and possible to terminate the relationship, men seem to find that more difficult.

Staying Friends

If men find it more difficult than women to renounce their love, we might also expect relations between former partners to be more strained after the woman has rejected the man than vice versa. Whereas a rejected woman may be able to redefine her relationship with her former boyfriend from "love" to "friendship"—which, as Davis (1973) notes, is often a euphemism for "acquaintance"—a rejected man may find it more difficult to accomplish such a redefinition. In such cases, staying friends is likely to be impossible. The data support this expectation. A couple was much more likely to stay friends when the man had been the one who precipitated the breakup (70%), or when the breakup was mutual (71%), than when the woman precipitated it (46%) ($X^2 = 5.83, p < .06$).

Emotional Aftermath

Our generalization would also suggest that breaking up would be a more traumatic experience for men than for women. Unfortunately, the data available to test this proposition are limited to the 15 couples in which we obtained reports of emotional reactions from both partners on the one-year follow-up. These data suggest that men were hit harder than women by the breakup. Men tended more than women to report that in the wake of the breakup they felt depressed, lonely, less happy, less free, and less guilty. Goethals (1973) presents a clinical discussion of sex differences in reactions to breaking up that seems consistent with these data. In our interviews, we were struck by a particular

reaction that appeared among several of the men but not among the women. Some men found it extremely difficult to reconcile themselves to the fact that they were no longer loved and that the relationship was over (Jim, in the first of the cases reported above, is illustrative). Women who are rejected may also react with considerable grief and despair, but they seem less likely to retain the hope that their rejectors "really love them after all."

Two Interpretations

The evidence provides converging support for the notion that women tend to fall out of love more readily than men, just as men may tend to fall in love more readily than women (Rubin, Note 3). Needless to say, these generalizations are offered as actuarial propositions; they take on importance to the extent that they are informative about aspects of the socialization of the two sexes for close relationships in contemporary America. Two aspects of sex-roles may help account for these tendencies.

Simple economics. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes about romantic and sentimental women, women may be more practical than men about mate selection for simple economic reasons. In most marriages, the wife's status, income, and life chances are far more dependent upon her husband's than vice versa. For this reason, parents in almost all societies have been more concerned with finding appropriate mates for their daughters than for their sons. In "free choice" systems of mate selection like our own, the woman must be especially discriminating. She cannot allow herself to fall in love too quickly, nor can she afford to stay in love too long with the wrong person (Goode, 1959). Men, on the other hand, can afford the luxury of being romantic. The fact that a woman's years of marriageability tend to be more limited than a man's also contributes to her greater need to be selective. Waller (1938) put the matter most bluntly when he wrote:

There is this difference between the man and the woman in the pattern of bourgeois family life: a man, when he marries, chooses a companion and perhaps a helpmate, but a woman chooses a companion and at the same time a standard of living. It is necessary for a woman to be mercenary. (p. 243)

Interpersonal sensitivity. Women are traditionally the social-emotional specialists in most societies, including our own, while men are the traditional task specialists (Parsons & Bales, 1955). The emphasis upon social-emotional matters in women's socializa-

tion may lead women to be more sensitive than men to the quality of their interpersonal relationships, both in the present and projecting into the future. One possible reflection of women's greater interpersonal sensitivity is the finding, replicated in the present study, that women distinguish more sharply than men between "liking" and "loving" components of interpersonal sentiments (Rubin, 1970). Because of greater interpersonal sensitivity and discrimination, it may also be more important for women than for men that the quality of a relationship remain high. Thus women's criteria for falling in love—and for staying in love—may be higher than men's, and they may reevaluate their relationships more carefully.

BREAKUPS BEFORE AND AFTER MARRIAGE

We have suggested that breakups before marriage are relevant to an understanding of marital breakup in two different ways. First, breakups before marriage provide an interesting comparison against which to view marital disruption. Second, breakups before marriage can serve to prevent marriages that would otherwise be likely to end in divorce. We will briefly consider our results from each of these two perspectives.

Comparisons with Marital Breakups

There are profound differences between the process of breaking up before marriage and the process of breaking up afterward. Some of the breakups of couples in this study took place quite casually—boyfriends and girlfriends went home at the end of the school year and simply never got back together again. Marriages seldom end so casually. Our interview data also made it clear that the experience of breaking up before marriage is generally less stressful than the experience of marital disruption (cf. Weiss, 1976). Such differences reflect fundamental differences between the social-psychological contexts of premarital breakups and divorce. Breakups before marriage take place in the context of a dating system in which coupling, uncoupling, and recoupling are approved and accepted elements. In this context it may be relatively easy for a person who has ended an old relationship to replace it with a new one. Marital disruption, on the other hand, remains a counter-normative phenomenon which is often stigmatized by kin and community. A marriage is typically ended only with considerable effort and stress, and the process of getting back into circulation and replacing a lost partner is likely to be

much more difficult for both parties.

Comparing breakups before and after marriage allows us to focus also on commonalities—features that may be intrinsic to the process of ending close relationships (Davis, 1973). One such similarity may be the two-sidedness of breaking up; although there are exceptions, it is probably rare for any sort of breakup to be entirely mutual. As a relationship weakens or deteriorates, the balance of attraction of the two partners is likely to become increasingly unequal. We have found that whereas equal involvement tends to be associated with the growth of a relationship, unequal involvement is associated with its decay. In this asymmetrical context, one party is likely to be the breaker-upper, the other to the broken-up-with. In addition, the finding that former partners often have very different perceptions of their breakup is probably true in the case of marital breakup as well. Given the fundamental asymmetries that characterize a weakening relationship, it may be inevitable for each party to see events differently, from his or her point of view. This difference in perspective leads to the recommendation that students of marital separation make every effort to obtain reports from both partners. Although this leads to complications in the interpretation of data, they are complications that seem to be an intrinsic part of the phenomenon being studied.

Another similarity between premarital breakup and divorce may be the possibility of sex differences in orientations towards breaking up. Just as we found that women cited more reasons for their breakups than did men, Levinger (1966) found that women cited more marital complaints than men in interviews of applicants for divorce. It is possible, however, that different processes underlie these findings since the kinds of problems cited were not the same. Just as we found some evidence that more women than men wanted to end their dating relationships, Goode (1956) found that women were more likely than men to first suggest getting a divorce. Although Goode hypothesized that the men were really the ones more interested in ending the marriage and that they drove their wives to seek a divorce, since he only obtained reports from the women, it was not possible to check that hypothesis.

Breakups as Preventors of Divorce

Breakups before marriage are highly relevant to divorce; as someone's grandfather used to say, "The best divorce is the one you get before you get married." A good deal of filtering

takes place in the mate-selection process—although, as we have noted, the process is probably more complicated than that suggested by fixed-sequence filter theories. A central question for students of divorce, however, is what prevents still further filtering of the sort that would prevent marriages that result in divorce.

For some (e.g., DeRougemont, 1949), "romantic love" is seen as the culprit, blinding lovers to all practical considerations. But although a large proportion of the couples in our sample felt that they were "in love" (Table 1), many nevertheless managed to seek out partners who were similar to themselves with respect to such factors as age, education, intelligence, and, especially, social attitudes and values (Table 2). Moreover, many of the couples who were "in love" subsequently decided to break up. The central obstacle is not, in our view, the overwhelming power of romantic love.

Two obstacles which seem to have greater importance are the difficulty one may have in terminating a relationship without access to appropriate facilitating factors (e.g., external excuses) and the difficulty some people—especially men—have in withdrawing from a relationship in which their commitment is not reciprocated. External factors, such as separations that are orchestrated by the school calendar (Figure 1), seemed to be helpful in facilitating breakups, both because they encouraged comparisons between the relationship and alternatives and because they helped to provide easier verbal formulas for breaking up. As Albert and Kessler (Note 4) have remarked, special rituals and formulas are often necessary to facilitate the ending of brief encounters between friends or acquaintances in such a way as to keep intact the esteem of both parties. The availability of such formulas—for example, the ability to say, "I'll see you in the fall" (even when the nature of the relationship may shift in the interim) rather than "I don't want to see you any more"—seems even more necessary to facilitate the ending of close relationships.

This dependence on facilitating circumstances suggests that it may be useful for couples to consider and to create their own occasions for redefining and discussing their relationships. One way in which a couple may be able to do this is by participating in a study such as the present one—which, we have discovered, had the effect of doubling as "couples counseling" (Rubin & Mitchell, 1976). Taking part in the study had the effects of clarifying participants' definitions of their relationships and of facilitating disclosure of feelings, issues, and concerns. Other attempts to facilitate such self-examination and confrontation,

whether through college courses, counseling programs, or the mass media, are of potentially great value.

An unwillingness to disengage oneself from a relationship in which one has invested heavily is probably a general human tendency. As Becker (1960) has noted, the investing of time and energy and the foregoing of alternative relationships commit one to remain in a relationship even if it turns out to be a painful one. Our comparison of men's and women's orientations toward loving and leaving suggests that this unwillingness to withdraw may be especially characteristic of men. More generally, the fact that one partner (regardless of sex) typically carries most of the burdens of breaking up makes the process especially difficult. The roles of breaker-upper and broken-up-with are probably common to all sorts of breakup, but this may not be an inevitable differentiation. Ideally, the two partners would be able to discuss and "have out" their differences, and to decide mutually to break up at some point before marriage if they anticipate severe strains or irreconcilable differences. How this ideal might be achieved is, of course, a difficult challenge. It is hoped, however, that continued research into the phenomenon of breaking up before marriage—and the dissemination of this research to young couples—may help to provide the sort of enlightenment that will ease the process for all.

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