

# How do you tell someone you're letting go?

If you have never experienced relationship breakup, then there is a place reserved for you in the psychological equivalent of Madame Tussauds. Yet despite the ubiquity of the experiences of breakup, psychological understanding of the processes is quite insubstantial. Given the applications to clinical work, therapy, and the more abstract understanding of the human condition that many professionals seek to obtain, breakup seems to be an essential topic for the Society's 'year of relationships'.

Models of breakup have tended to be stage models, which depict the breakup as a relentless tragedy unfolding in a sequence of predictable and unavoidable steps. We move from discontent to argument to turmoil to exit and despair, followed in the lucky cases by reassertion of identity through successful replacement of the lost relationship. Although there is the occasional lonesome Eleanor Rigby or tortured Anna Karenina, there are more frequently successful serial monogamists moving on, sadder and wiser.

The main challenge for any theory of breakup – whether a stage theory or not – is how to capture the complexity,



**STEVE DUCK** with a new model of relationship breakup.

psychological impact and variegated nature of the experiences of breakup without falling into the trap of seeing the processes as an inevitable ski-jump down which the person must travel once the first steps have been taken. How does one reflect the everyday ambivalences and repentances that surround the venture, enshrouded as it usually is with uncertainty about eventual outcomes, and yet do psychological justice to the emotions and cognitions that engulf the individuals involved? And is it all about individuals or does the social network have a role to play that is more than a Greek chorus observing events with hand-wringing moralism?

## **The original model**

Nearly 25 years ago (Duck, 1982) I offered a model that saw relationship breakdown as a set of phases moving from intrapsychic (individualistic griping and brooding), right through dyadic discussions and social network consultation, to a 'grave-dressing' phase where all parties developed stories that would put the relationship into its eternal bed and depict the beginning and ending thereof in a public way, reminiscent of tombstone sketches of a life and death.

A typical story involves the report that the Person entered the relationship with some awareness of a problem in the Partner

that might be difficult to resolve but was willing to give it a try (Weber, 1983). After much effort it became clear that the Partner was essentially ossified in the problem, and the Person reluctantly decided to leave. Such stories, while clearly idealised representations, are both recognisably common and important psychologically, whether the Person was dumped or dumping. The Person acknowledges entering relationships as a thoughtful observer, reports self as a hard-working relater, willing to put in the shovel time necessary to sort things out, but being reluctantly overwhelmed by circumstances. Such a story has the advantage of representing the teller in a light that makes him or her attractive as a future Partner and so not only closes the present book but opens new pages for future relational inscription. In psychologically important ways, the story embodies a negotiable social self that is not contained in a story of breakup that portrays self either as a gullible fool or as a manipulative relational Svengali who may abuse future victims.

Upon reflection, the model feels as if the representation of human experience is faulty in its overlooking of the central roles of communication in everyday life and hence in the processes of relational management and breakdown.

## **WEBLINKS**

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International Association for Relationship

Research: [www.iarr.org](http://www.iarr.org)

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships:

[www.sagepub.com/journal.aspx?pid=47](http://www.sagepub.com/journal.aspx?pid=47)

Communication is not simply the transmission of unproblematic messages from A to B but involves interpretive activity, calculation, transformation of messages leaving the sender and reaching the recipient, and a number of other complexities of the type acknowledged by Bartlett (1932). Messages are adapted to audiences, can be reworded in future telling, have rhetorical and persuasive force and intent, and are subject to review and evaluation. Hence the roles of communication about such high-stakes activities as relationship breakups are multitudinous and multifarious.

### A new model

With Stephanie Rollie (Rollie & Duck, in press) I have recently modified the 1982 model to take account of such elements of the all-too-familiar everyday process of relational uncertainty and, perhaps, demise. The new model emphasises discussion and change in the communication patterns that attend the whole endeavour. Also included is a new set of processes where the Person resurrects a social self that can be traded in the marketplace of new relationships.

I will elaborate this model below, but must first emphasise that the incorporation of communication does not exclude psychology. Rather it attempts to translate psychological processes into a communicative framework that allows a clearer recognition of the mundane activities that constitute the 'quiet desperation' that Thoreau described as characteristic of human activity. We talk and chatter in ways that theory all too often eschews in favour of noble and abstract descriptions of human activity. But previous empirical studies (Duck *et al.*, 1991) have shown that such light talk serves several important psychological functions, such as self-validation, social comparison with other people, and emotional integration (i.e. ratification of one's own emotional responses to events).

Greater attention to the mundane has recently become a far more significant growth point for psychological theory than would have seemed possible when the first version of the breakup model was postulated. The casual remarks of friends create a psychological context for the activity of individuals. Although most of us think of the research on relationships as bounded by studies of self-disclosure and intimacy, Dindia *et al.* (1989) demonstrated that self-disclosure of inner thoughts and

feelings occurs only 2 per cent of the time in conversation and Duck *et al.* (1991) showed that everyday interactions are mostly pedestrian. However unless we want to argue that pedestrian interactions are just a waste of time, it seems most likely that we can find some aspects of

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### 'the model...is faulty in its overlooking of the central roles of communication'

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these processes that serve psychological needs. With this in mind, the new model supposes that everyday pedestrian interactions serve some purpose all the time, but become especially relevant during relational crises.

Let's consider the different processes in turn.

**Intrapsychic processes** The individual is burdened by resentment and feelings of being 'underbenefited' (Hatfield *et al.*, 1984). Such feelings not only provide a psychological engine for rumination but also affect communicative activity; in particular, they promote a social withdrawal, so that the Person can nurse perceived wounds and take stock of the Partner and the relationship. Social withdrawal is manifested by isolation from the usual audiences with which the Person normally communicates. Resentment of a Partner is not the only reason for doing this, since it is well established that people tend to withdraw from society/social interaction when they are depressed (Segrin, 2000) or have other emotional, psychological or personal issues (such as, grief, stress or chronic illness: Harvey *et al.*, 1995; Hobfoll & deVries, 1995; Lyons *et al.*, 1996). The new model supposes that such withdrawals would be measurable in terms of new patterns of communication as well as in the subject matter that the Person communicates. For example, people might spend less time talking to other people and more time brooding, less time talking about general topics and more time focused only on their relationship – in short getting more boring and self-focused.

**Dyadic processes** These occur once the Person declares the resentment to the Partner; the perceived problems with the relationship are then aired and disputed. In these processes the Person does not

necessarily know how it will all end, and indeed may be motivated to resolve the issues and avoid a breakup. It is with such hopes in mind that most couples seek marital therapy (Gottman, 1994). Unfortunately, the same studies show that shock and awe characterise these discussions and that the Person usually learns that the Partner also has concerns to air. There is also discussion of why the issues have not been aired before. In this phase people begin to spend a lot of anxious time talking specifically with their partner and specifically about 'Our Relationship', whereas previously they may have spent time with lots of other people and talked about a variety of topics (Acitelli, 1988; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). For this reason, the conduct of the relationship in the dyadic process is characterised by withdrawal from discussion with other people in the network as the partners hash things out between themselves.

The obvious ambiguity of outcomes here makes it hard to predict both directions and resolutions, but communication topics will be specific, dealing with attempts at comprehension or self-justification; reconstructing the past of the relationship; comparisons with social norms about desirable behaviour in relationships, and problem-solving along with proposals for increasing mutual satisfaction. In such evaluations of costs and benefits, feelings of guilt or anger are likely to surface; this process serves to discover some of the issues that motivated the Person in the intrapsychic processes and make them the subject of direct discussion. As Gottman (1994) has shown over several studies, partners bring such concerns to most dyadic discussions of marital problems.

At this point the couple (especially married couples) will become aware of the forces other than personal affection that bind them together ('Think about the children and the neighbours', 'What will our parents think?') and moral issues concerning duty and 'doing the right thing' will arise. Studies also suggest the relevance of social constraints such as legal contracts or the economic consequences that must also be considered (Johnson & Milardo, 1984).

**Social processes** A crucial psychological move now takes place: the distress in the relationship is made known

to outsiders. Any semblance of 'going public' makes it harder to deny that there really is a problem later, or to backpedal and reconcile. The network may reinforce issues of social commitment noted above (Johnson, 1982), but much depends on the sort of relationship that is involved. Confidants of older teens and young adults must surely see these relationships as more unstable than long-term marriages and, in younger groups, romantic relationships are socially recognised as testing grounds for the appropriateness of future long-term commitments (Duck, 1999). Older people in longer-term relationships, however, have been found to have lower expectations of being able to locate a replacement for the present partner and perhaps also have reduced motivation to find one (Dickson, 1995). For various obvious reasons, the consequences of a breakup in such cases are more severe and significant. Also, the realistic prospect of becoming targets of gossip enters into the picture.

Key psychological and communicative processes here focus on accounting,

attribution, and the creation of psychologically palatable stories about one's own and the Partner's role in the relationship decline.

**Grave-dressing processes** The end of the relationship does not end the relational

and personal work. People now have the new psychological task of reporting the relationship and the breakup in a socially satisfactory way that presents the reporter as acceptable and even desirable as a future Partner for new prospects.

Topics in grave-dressing are likely to be plausible stories about the betrayal of self by Partner, or else depict the difficulties of two honest folk working together on a relationship that requires more work than it is worth. In such cases, different audiences are addressed in different ways, with relevant narrative being specifically crafted for them. Masuda (2000) shows that there is not one narrative offered to all listeners.

**Resurrection processes** The new version of the model also considers the next steps in psychological and social life. When one relationship ends, most people want to replace it and are subject to the normative preference for partnership in adult life, except in those cases where older people choose to regard loyalty to their deceased lifelong Partner as the end of such partnership needs.

Resurrection processes offer the chance to review and adjust psychological beliefs about Self, Others, and Relationships that might hold up better in the future. The extent of the change that occurs in beliefs will no doubt depend on the Person's personality (for example their attachment style), the degree of trauma associated with the breakup, and the type of relationship involved.

A second process concerns reaction to unwanted history; it involves the reframing of aspects of past relational life that constitute albatrosses around the neck and whose redescription can remove their negative effect. Such redescription could, for example, reconstruct the nature and behaviour of the Partner and of Self in ways that better prepare the Person for future relationships. A familiar sort of topic in the discourse of people in this process is 'Things to Avoid', and people often declare that they will in future avoid anyone who looks like, acts like, or occupies the same sort of vocational position as the previous Partner. Also characteristic are 'Never again' stories where the speaker vows to have learned from the previous relationship and vows to avoid the same mistakes again. No more psychology students! Never again will I date a manual labourer! No more blondes for me!

The psychological process involved

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here is a belief that everything will now be made different, by avoiding people who have characteristics reminiscent of the ex-Partner. This indicates that the resurrection processes are psychologically reconstructive in that the person now espouses a new world view about relationships.

### Be prepared

There are a number of practical implications of this new model and the previous model (discussed in Duck, 1984, in respect of the previous model), and these can be extended and used by researchers, practising psychologists and people at large. For example, attention to the things that people say, the topics that they discuss and the ways in which they talk about their relationship not only offer indications about their stage in the process but also suggest interventions particular to that stage.

A person complaining about Partner can be seen to be only in the intrapsychic phase and encouraged to think about the strengths

of Partner and to reflect also about his or her own contribution to the problems or to imagine how Partner may be viewing the relationship – an attributional realignment. Persons attempting to enlist network support can be seen to be in the social phase, already committed to leaving and hence in need of advice about how to do it, for example, and wanting to be accepted as right about the whole thing and needing a face-saving way out.

The audience needs in short to do different things for people at the different stages. Researchers are in a good position to identify the specific communicative features and psychological processes that characterise each stage in order to make interventions more effective and supportive.

The new model emphasises the role of communication that can take place in everyday chatter and the significance of uncertainty about the eventual outcome that is built into the processes. Also emphasised is the psychological need to prepare oneself for the next step rather than to be

concerned only with what is going on at the moment. In this respect, the model offers a greater humanity to the people who never make it into Madame Tussauds.

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### DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Does psychology pay sufficient attention to the mundane in everyday life and what is accomplished by the mundane?

How do underlying psychological mechanisms and processes get voiced in everyday communicating?

Do stage theories of relational behaviour actually correspond to what occurs or are they too rigid a representation of the breakup process?

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