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When "I Do" Becomes "I Don't": Exploring Communication Behaviors and Dialectical Tensions in Broken Engagements

Abstract

Communication behaviors and precipitating events were studied in accounts provided by 109 heterosexual individuals living in the United States who had experienced at least one broken premarital engagement. Participants' responses to an exploratory survey designed by the researcher were thematically analyzed in order to determine the causes of broken engagements, communication strategies used in sharing the disengagement narrative, advice given and received, and the presence of relational dialectics (both tensions and coping strategies). Data revealed that broken engagements more closely mirror divorce than dating breakups, engagements are more likely to be broken by women than men, and disengagement more often occurs prior to 30 years of age. Additionally, three new dialectical tension pairs were discovered: Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty. Implications for future research are also discussed.

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When “I Do” Becomes “I Don’t”: Exploring Communication Behaviors
and Dialectical Tensions in Broken Engagements

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the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Chelsea A.H. Stow

November 2016

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CHAPTER ONE: RATIONALE

Growing up, many people imagine what their romantic life partner might be like: tall, dark, and handsome? A committed companion and capable parental figure? Someone whose strengths complement our own? Whatever the reasons for entering a long-term romantic relationship, the Centers for Disease Control estimate that well over 2,000,000 marriages occur each year in the United States alone (CDC, 2015). Consequently, numerous research studies have been devoted to coupling: how individuals “come together” through initial encounters, dating casually or exclusively, weddings and other rituals, and in marital and family dynamics. However, just as relationships grow together, they also come apart. Today, the divorce rate for heterosexual couples in the United States hovers between 40-50% (American Psychological Association, 2016), thus illustrating a painful reality most people are familiar with: not all of our romantic relationships will endure.

Between dating break-ups and divorce, one important trend has become more common over the last twenty years: broken engagements. According to Pamela Paul (2003), it is difficult to track

how many engagements are broken each year, and people in the always-upbeat wedding industry are reluctant to even discuss the issue. However, in an online poll of 565 single adults conducted [in August 2003] by Match.com [and]... TIME, 20% said they had broken off an engagement in the past three years, and 39% said they knew someone else who had done so (“Calling it Off”).

In 1990, it was estimated that as many as 100,000 engagements were dissolved annually in the United States (Bradsher, 1990). However, recent research estimates that over 15% of engaged couples – three times the proportion in the previous study – now break their engagements each year (Safier & Roberts, 2003). A significant increase in the number of broken engagements over the past two decades can easily be seen: from 100,000 in 1990 to well over 300,000 today. But why is this number rising?

In addition to answering this important question, the growing phenomenon of broken engagements is a valuable area of study for several reasons. First, research commonly merges the premarital engagement and dating stages, instead of treating each as a unique relational period. Although dissolution occurs frequently among dating couples (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), relational termination is usually harder for couples at a higher level of commitment like engagement because of the development of deeper psychological bonds often seen in marriage (Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004). In short, engaged individuals generally experience a higher number of significant mental and emotional “turning points” than people in dating relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986) because dating is most often used as an exploratory tool while engagement is more focused on preparation for marriage (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976); when an engagement is broken, these turning points must be cognitively renegotiated. As one anonymous blogger notes:

I still could not believe what I had imagined my life to be... was no longer going to be my life. Our first home. Our little babies. Christmases. Holidays. Growing old together. It was just not going to happen... I don't know if I will ever forget that feeling [when he called off our engagement, like] the rug had been taken out

from under me. Nothing was what it was supposed to be (“My Broken Engagement,” 2011a).

Of course, that is not to say that the end of a dating relationship is not difficult – merely that there are several important differences between dating and engagement dissolution. Additionally, while the psychological bonding process of engagement may serve to make relational dissolution more difficult (Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981), we know that broken engagements still occur, and in greater numbers now than ever before; indeed, the number of romantic associations ended only months, weeks, days, or even hours before the marriage ceremony continues to rise (Safier & Roberts, 2003). Engaged couples are no longer “just dating” but are also not yet married, and thus do not fully or neatly fit within either category.

In order to better understand broken engagements, more academic research needs to be conducted. To date, few scholarly studies have been done on “disengagement,” leaving ex-fiancé/es little credible, research-based insight on this process. While the support and advice of friends, family, and the anonymous internet community is often invaluable, the fact remains that there is a gap in the literature. As the aforementioned blogger laments,

When my engagement initially ended, I had nowhere to turn. I Googled “broken engagements” and what I was supposed to do... [but] there was nothing to be found. I only saw articles discussing whether or not you should return the ring or what to do about out-of-town guests. There was nothing telling ME that I would be okay or that I would hurt [for a while]... There. Was. Nothing. However, through word of mouth, I learned a broken engagement was commonplace. It happens much more frequently than we like to think about. I was just a normal statistic (“My Broken Engagement,” 2011b).

Unfortunately, the grieving blogger is correct: despite the fact that broken engagements occur “more frequently than we like to think about,” academic support for those experiencing a broken engagement is minimal. There is one notable exception: Safier and Roberts’ 2003 text, *There Goes the Bride: Making up your Mind, Calling it Off, and Moving On*, effectively combines the personal experiences of 62 “almost brides” with scholarly sources. However, this book is overtly targeted at women, leaving “almost grooms” (and others affected by a broken engagement, like children) unrepresented. Considering the more than 300,000 broken engagements each year, more work needs to be done.

In addition to a paucity of research on broken engagements, much of the work on the engagement period itself has been framed through an economic lens (Farmer & Horowitz, 2004; Nelson & Otnes, 2005; Otnes, 1993). On one hand, the wedding industry is very lucrative, with total sales exceeding \$100 billion dollars annually in the United States alone (Gardyn, 2001). Additionally, by the time of their broken engagement, many couples have already jointly invested in property (e.g., a house, car, or pet); raised children together (from their own relationship and/or previous relationships); and/or participated in long-term financial planning (e.g., designating the other as a life-insurance beneficiary, or opening a bank account together). However, broken engagements also encompass numerous mental, emotional, relational, and communicative variables that do not easily fit into a financial or mathematical “proposer/respondent” formula (Emmers & Hart, 1996; Krahl & Wheelless, 1997; Lee, 1984; Montemurro, 2002; Olwig, 2002; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). For example, former partners must use facework in the

telling and retelling of why their wedding has been called off, navigate the potentially painful process of extricating themselves from intertwined social and/or familial networks, and must work through any mental or emotional challenges associated with relabeling (“single,” “ex-fiancé/e,” etc.). In short, studies need to be conducted that more effectively address the messiness and interpersonal dynamics of broken engagements.

This project aims to shed light on the communication processes involved in, and the reasons behind, broken engagements. Additionally, since “few experiences in life are capable of producing more emotional distress, anguish, and suffering than... the dissolution of an important relationship” (Simpson, 1987, p. 583), a theoretical perspective is needed that best captures the conflicting emotions and tensions during engagement (Montemurro, 2002) and accounts for how engaged couples communicate about and cope with those tensions. For example, if one person has been cheating on the other and their engagement ends as a result of this indiscretion, one or both parties may simultaneously feel relief that the relational offense has been addressed *and* also feel sadness that the life and trust they built together are gone. Similarly, grief research illustrates how individuals often feel multiple seemingly-contradictory emotions at the same time, and notes the troubles encountered in sharing thoughts and emotions with others who have not gone through the same experience (Golish & Powell, 2003).

In an article on the difficulties of marriage, one *Psychology Today* author amusingly quipped: “The problem [with marriage] is that we have this mold in the shape of a fairytale, and we’re all trying to cram our sloppy, oozy lives into it, but there’s always some spilling out the sides...” (Fridkis, 2012). This statement, and the experience

of a broken engagement, fit well with the theoretical perspective of Relational Dialectics. According to Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011), life has no formulas but rather, is messy and full of multiple competing demands that push and pull on us from all sides. How do we address or deal with such tensions? In this study, specific dialectical tensions felt by individuals going through a broken engagement are identified, and coping mechanisms are also explored.

Last, there are many unresolved questions about broken engagements. For what reasons do individuals or couples call off an engagement? Do their reasons align with the divorce literature, thus generating support for adages like “the best divorce is the one you get before you get married,” or are the causes of broken engagements unique and different? Are such problems preventable, or mere illustrators of a toxic relationship that needs to be terminated? What about individuals who have experienced chronic relational dissolution in the form of multiple broken engagements?

These questions, and several others, are at the heart of this exploratory project, which aims to uncover the experience of a broken engagement through analysis of formerly-engaged individuals’ own words. Some of the subjects to be discussed are how and why broken engagements occur, as well as the communication issues and dialectical tensions that arise during this unique relational dissolution process. After reviewing relevant literature, outlining research questions, and detailing the methodology and extensive results of this project, the dissertation concludes with a discussion on what was learned about the nature of broken premarital engagements and why this information is important. Study limitations and implications for future research are also provided.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section explores relevant research on broken engagements and romantic relationship dissolution, including divorce, before addressing how and why Relational Dialectics is the best theoretical framework for this phenomenon. Finally, the research questions grounding this project are outlined and explained; research questions are situated at various places throughout the chapter (with corresponding research), and are also grouped together in a subsection for easy reference.

Understanding Broken Engagements

In 2005, the Centers for Disease Control estimated that around 2,230,000 marriages occur each year in the United States (CDC, 2006). Consequently, many research studies in the field of communication have been devoted to exploring romance including initial encounters, dating, weddings, marital and family dynamics, and divorce. Unfortunately, one life stage that has been relatively ignored in scholarly communication research is the premarital engagement period for heterosexual couples. Although several studies have been conducted regarding specific events that may occur during a couple's engagement, such as "popping the question" (Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004; Vannini, 2004), wedding showers (Berardo & Vera, 1981; Braithwaite, 1995; Montemurro, 2005), and bachelor/ette parties (Montemurro, 2003; Montemurro & McClure, 2005), the engagement period itself is often merged with another relational

stage or ignored completely. Either way, premarital engagement has been overlooked as a site for communicative study.

Historically, the engagement period represents “an important step in an intimate relationship... [as] couples shift the nature of their rapport from casual or steady dating to projection toward marriage” (Vannini, 2004, p. 170). Although unique to each couple and family, the engagement period marks an emotional and physical turning point; as such, this time period includes not only the planning and performance of rituals but also preparations for the transition to the marriage itself, including the development of psychological bonds often seen in marriage (Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004). Thus, the pre-marriage process is considered a rite of passage which “culturally marks a person’s transition from one life stage to another and redefines [his or her] social and personal identity” (Nelson & Otnes, 2005, p. 89).

Engagement also serves as a sort of “trial run” before the marriage itself. Unfortunately, limited research alludes to the relationships that are “weeded out” during the “trial marriage” phase (Kline, Stanley, Markman, Olmos-Gallo, St. Peters, Whitton, & Prado, 2004), including broken premarital engagements. A quick search through several academic databases reveals that the phrase “broken engagement” is more likely to be used in reference to relations between the United States and foreign countries; failed business mergers or transactions; differences between various philosophers; and the healthcare system rather than romantic relationship dissolution. When studied at all, formerly engaged couples are most often combined with casual daters and/or exclusive

daters as participants in a serious non-marital relationship that has terminated, despite the fact that engagement marks a “general movement [away] from the self-centeredness of casual relationships toward a ‘we’ orientation not usually shared by those in dating relationships” (Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988, p. 444).

In terms of romantic relationships, a broken engagement occurs when one or both parties end a premarital engagement at any time before the couple’s wedding or marriage ceremony/reception. An engagement may be temporarily suspended if the couple decides to “take a break” and remains together or gets back together at a later time, but the engagement and subsequent relationship may also be ended permanently. Researchers have noted that while disengagement occurs frequently among dating couples (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), relational termination is often harder for couples at a higher level of commitment like engagement because of the communicative behaviors and rituals of bonding and “coupling” which serve as barriers to easy dissolution (Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981). Similarly, Vaughan (1986) noted that “given all the constraints, it’s a wonder we ever end relationships [but] nonetheless, we do” (p. xvii).

While agencies like the United States Census Bureau do not formally track the number of broken engagements each year, researchers can compare the number of marriage licenses issued in metropolitan areas to the number of marriage licenses returned during a given period to yield a reasonable approximation of the number of engagements broken annually (Bradsher, 1990). As previously noted, it is estimated that at least 15% of all romantic, heterosexual engagements (around 300,000 couples) are called off each year – and despite obstacles to relational dissolution, the number of

broken engagements continues to increase (Safier & Roberts, 2003). Further, approximately 300,000 couples means at least 600,000 people plus their families, child(ren), and friends are also impacted in some way by the broken engagement; this figure represents a population that merits scholarly attention.

But why are we seeing so many broken engagements? On one hand Lavner, Karney, and Bradbury (2012) noted: “From *Much Ado about Nothing* to *Runaway Bride*, images of premarital doubts are [abundant] in Western society” (p. 1012). Following this line of reasoning, more individuals may choose to break their engagements because of an increase in societal acceptance and/or because of the influence of popular culture. Another argument has been advanced by Michael and Harriet McManus (2008), founders of the group Marriage Savers, who note that it’s better to have a broken engagement than a tragic divorce. The writer’s own father often quips that “the best divorce is the one you get before you get married,” a reference to the benefits of calling off a relationship with someone prior to entering a binding agreement. As an article in *TIME Magazine* states,

As the first children-of-divorce generation to reach marrying age, today’s twenty- and thirtysomethings would much prefer a broken betrothal to a “broken home.” Breaking an engagement is difficult, but rather than face it with shame, many almost-unhappily-marrieds see it as a wise, even courageous act. Such “disengaged” individuals have become increasingly visible and vocal (Paul, 2003, “Calling it Off”)

on the internet and social media. Indeed, a quick trip to www.theknot.com and www.indiebride.com, two of the top wedding websites with over 2 million visitors per month, reveals discussion boards for ex-fiancé/es to share their stories. Websites like these also provide “armchair advice” for the formerly-engaged on everything from proper

etiquette in returning gifts or rings to dealing with the emotional aftermath of a broken engagement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a “secondary market” has even sprung up over the last five years as a way to help ex-fiancé/es (or their families) recoup some of their financial losses while also benefitting other couples still headed for the altar. As reported by Casserly (2013),

When veteran bridesmaid Lauren Byrne’s best friend cancelled her destination wedding in the Spring of 2011, she couldn’t help but be miffed over the money she’d shelled out for her friend’s big day. But while the flight to St. John and the bridesmaid dress had set her back hundreds of dollars, Byrne, 31, really felt for the bride. The average wedding in the U.S. costs \$27,000 these days. Her friend’s heart was broken – but so was her bank account. “We joked at the time that it would be great if another friend of ours could just buy her whole wedding,” [Byrne] says. The location was great, the caterer was set, and the nonrefundable deposits were paid in full. With a little research she found that, *on average, 250,000 engagements are broken each year* – so why shouldn’t one bride’s loss be another’s thrifty gain?... “The thing about this is that weddings aren’t going to go out of style...” [Byrne] says. “*And neither is calling off weddings...*” (“Broken Engagement? Sell Your Wedding on a New Secondary Market”; emphasis added).

And thus, a business was born. Today, Bridal Brokerage boasts over 2,500 members, and averages at least one sale per day. While this might seem like a simple case of supply and demand, the point is that the “supply” (broken engagements) is not something that is simply trending on Groupon. Mainstream support is apparent, but unfortunately, scholarly research on broken engagements is noticeably absent. Therefore, this project aims to offer some insight into this phenomenon, both for the academic community and for the increasing number of disengaged individuals.

Romantic Relationship Dissolution

As previously noted, there are a limited number of academic studies focused on broken engagements. Through extensive investigation, the researcher found only two relevant projects specifically focused on calling off a premarital engagement: one autoethnographic article by Hermann (2007), and one semi-scholarly book (partly self-help, with some credible resources scattered throughout) called *There Goes the Bride: Making up your Mind, Calling it Off, and Moving On* by Safier and Roberts (2003). Hermann's article centered on the dialectical tensions experienced during the process of romantic disengagement and is referenced later; however, Safier and Roberts' work cast some light on the broken engagement experience of 62 "almost brides." In this book, the authors explored how to determine whether or not an individual simply has "cold feet" (i.e. nerves) before their wedding or a more serious condition deemed "frozen footsies," a metaphor for the realization of underlying issues that will inevitably cause one's romantic relationship to fail somewhere down the line. The book also provides a variety of resources to aid the reader in etiquette (primarily returning gifts and rings), grieving the relationship, (re)building self-esteem and self-confidence, and how to begin again.

Through in-depth interviews, Safier and Roberts' (2003) "almost brides" shared a variety of reasons their engagements ended: infidelity, lack of commitment, unproductive conflict, loss or transference of affection, dislike of and/or regular interference by a third party (namely, family or close friends), abuse (physical, emotional, and/or alcohol), different values or goals, low relational happiness, and problems with money or children. Additionally, several respondents indicated that they, their partner, or both had sensed

relational dissolution was looming but stayed in denial until a particular line was crossed, while the remaining “almost brides” expressed shock at how the engagement ended “out of the blue.”

Aside from these meager resources, research on broken engagements has not been done by the academic community. However, significant time and effort has been dedicated to general romantic relationship dissolution, which offers a good starting point. Numerous studies have been conducted on romantic relationship growth and decline in an effort to understand what makes a romantic association (un)successful. While it can be argued that almost anything could potentially lead to relational termination, several common factors have been identified. Longitudinal studies show that predictors of marital disruption more frequently include elevated communication-based risk factors (e.g. poor conflict management skills) and lower protective factors (e.g. lower levels of positive communication or relationship reinforcement) (Markman, 1979); frequency of conflict, as well as how a couple fights (Carrere & Gottman, 1999); poor communication, unhappiness, loss of love, incompatibility, mental illness, and gender role disputes (Amato, 2010); low fondness for partner, high negativity, limited “we-ness,” regular chaos, inability or unwillingness to “glorify the struggle” of past relational experiences, marital disappointment, and the absence of positivity in problem-solving (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992); the number of perceived relationship problems, as well as low levels of love and trust (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012); and physical aggression, minimal interaction, and regular thoughts of divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Similarly, research by Stanley, Markman, and others has followed couples for over 30 years in order to identify what factors most often contribute to decline or distress in order to help prevent these problems in other romantic relationships. From this program of research, the following items have consistently emerged as common reasons for or predictors of later divorce: lack of commitment, infidelity or extramarital affairs, too much conflict or arguing, getting married too young, financial problems, substance abuse, domestic violence, health problems, lack of support from family (parents, siblings, and grandparents), religious differences, and little or no premarital education (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013, p. 134). Further, inherent within several of these items is one or both partners' inability or unwillingness to work through the associated issue. Although these elements have often been present in the relationship for a long time, these studies also reported that many individuals often experienced a physical, emotional, and/or mental turning point or "final straw" regarding that particular issue which ultimately pushed them to finally end the relationship with their romantic partner (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013).

Additionally, one factor commonly listed as a reason for divorce is an individual's age at marriage; this factor is unique in that one's age at the time of their union will always remain the same whereas money, health, and conflict often change with time. Through an analysis of data collected between 2006-2010 from the National Survey of Family Growth, Wolfinger (2015) found that prior to around 30 years old,

each additional year of age at marriage reduces the odds of divorce by 11 percent... even after controlling for respondents' sex, race, family structure of origin, age at the time of the survey, education, religious tradition, religious

attendance, and sexual history, as well as the size of the metropolitan area that they live in... For instance, someone who marries at 25 is over 50 percent less likely to get divorced than is someone who weds at age 20. Most youthful couples simply do not have the maturity, coping skills, and social support it takes to make marriage work. In the face of routine marital problems, teens and young twenty-somethings lack the wherewithal necessary for happy resolutions (“Want to Avoid Divorce? Wait to Get Married, But Not Too Long”).

Additionally, studies have consistently shown “marital timing [affects the] quality of the marriage itself,” noting that “investigations conducted at different times have demonstrated that early marriage increases marital instability” (Booth & Edwards, 1985, p. 67). To illustrate, participants in Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, and Markman’s study (2013) who believed they “married too young” reported being an average of 23.3 years old at the time of their union, citing the connection between their age at marriage and their inability to make “mature objective decisions regarding their marriage” (p. 136) as a reason for later relational termination. Further, many of these same scholarly research projects only examined the woman’s age in opposite-sex couple studies conducted on the relationship between age at marriage and divorce; however, no such limitation was imposed in the current project as the researcher attempted to recruit as many male participants as possible in order to see what emerged.

On a related note, the “Trial Marriage” theory or “Starter Marriage” philosophy both illustrate that non-marital cohabitation during dating and/or engagement, and even an individual’s first marriage, are often seen as “involving lower investment” and are being used by younger generations as a preparatory tool for “the one that counts.” Thus, young adults may be entering early engagement and/or younger-age-at-first-marriage scenarios with the understanding that they will later break up in order to “improve their

chances of success” in a subsequent relationship (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988; Kline, Stanley, Markman, Olmos-Gallo, St. Peters, Whitton, & Prado, 2004; Kulu & Boyle, 2009; Paul, 2003).

Along these same lines, another important factor for consideration is cohabitation. Copen, Daniels, and Mosher (2013), researchers for the Centers for Disease Control, reported that “48% of women interviewed in 2006-2010 cohabited with a partner [before their] first union, compared with 34% of women in 1995” (p. 1), although other research estimates that this figure may be as high as 50-60% (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Due to the increase in couples who cohabit prior to marriage and the relational outcomes linked with living together premaritally, significant research has been dedicated to the “cohabitation effect” over the last twenty years. Although the aforementioned report by the Census Bureau estimates that as many as 32% of all couples who cohabit and later marry remain married after 4 years, a consistent association has been found between premarital cohabitation and a lower quality of communication, lower marital satisfaction, more domestic violence, and a greater likelihood of divorce for heterosexual couples (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004). Premarital cohabitation has also been linked to a lower happiness trajectory over 16 years of marriage, especially for men (Birditt, Hope, Brown, & Orbuch, 2012).

Lastly, research by Sprecher and others (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998) found that the majority of romantic relationship terminations are not mutual. Additional studies discovered that women tend to have “a more nuanced

view” of their relationships (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) and a “greater sensitivity” to relationship problems than men (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981). Additionally, research by Amato and Previti (2003) and Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury (2012) found that women are more likely than their male partners to start divorce proceedings while Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) confirmed that women are more often seen as the initiator of the breakup in dating relationships, as well. It is plausible that more women will also be the ones to end their premarital engagements, as opposed to male-initiated termination or disengagement by mutual agreement.

Further, while more women might report “pulling the trigger” to officially end their engagements, it is also likely that a higher number of participants – regardless of gender – will report that their romantic relationship needed to be terminated because of words or behaviors attributed to one’s ex-fiancé/e. According to Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, and Markman (2013), in examining

participant elaborations of infidelity, substance abuse, and domestic violence in their marriages, we found that 76.9%, 72.2%, and 77.8%, respectively, described these events in terms of their partner engaging in these negative behaviors, and only 11.5%, 11.1%, and 0%, respectively, volunteered that they engaged in the behavior themselves (p. 137).

While it is certainly possible these figures are accurate and fewer individuals completing the survey in Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, and Markman’s (2013) study participated in these activities, it is equally possible (if not more so) that the self-serving bias is at play. That is, respondents naturally share “their side of the story” and are more inclined to

relate information in such a way to make themselves look good (or at least better than their ex-partner), and/or to spin a tale in such a way that makes the participant look like they were a victim of circumstances beyond their control. Research by Gray and Silver (1990) supports this assertion by noting that individuals were more likely to point to their partner's actions, behaviors, personality, or character traits/flaws as responsible for their breakup rather than to attribute blame to themselves.

In short, scholars have concluded that factors present in the premarital stages of a couple's relationship do contribute to the quality of their marital relationship over time. Simply put, the premarital period plays an important role in our romantic relationships. However, while the relational dissolution literature is important, it is unclear how the reasons for a broken engagement are similar to or different from the reasons for divorce or other relational termination. Since the motivating factors or events behind calling off one's premarital engagement have not been studied, the following research questions are proposed: *(RQ1) What events and signs during the engagement period contribute to the dissolution of the relationship?* and *(RQ2) For what reasons do individuals typically break an engagement?*

Conducting Exploratory Research

Exploratory research is conducted when problems are in a preliminary stage (Babbie, 2007) – that is, when a problem has not been well-studied or clearly defined (Singh, 2007). According to Schutt (2017), exploratory research

seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to

learn “what is going on here?” and to investigate phenomena without explicit expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information or that take the field of inquiry in a new direction (p. 14).

As a result, breaking ground on a given subject is necessary to gain insight into why, how, and/or when something occurs (Shields & Rangarjan, 2013). Further, when a “topic has not been examined in prior research, exploratory research [should be] conducted... to investigate” (Keaveney, 1995, p. 71) foundational questions which may help establish structure for future studies and provide “the basis of more conclusive research” (Singh, 2007, p. 64). Due to the limited amount of work done on this subject, broken engagements are a prime candidate for an exploratory research design.

Theoretical Framework: Relational Dialectics

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) was initially advanced as a meta-theoretical perspective to counter theories primarily driven by scientific laws (like most exchange theories) and as a means of ordering the experiences of friends and lovers. RDT is based around work by Mikhail Bakhtin and was first presented by Leslie Baxter in various projects throughout the 1980s, but was primarily addressed through a groundbreaking book, *Relating*, coauthored with Barbara Montgomery in 1996. Interpersonal communication scholars needed a theoretical perspective that could better account for the disarray and complications of everyday life (Montgomery, 1993) and thus, RDT was born. In recent years, Baxter has shifted RDT more toward its dialogic roots and even named “version 2.0” of this theory Relational Dialogics (2010). However, while Relational Dialectics and Relational Dialogics share important ground, these separate

“branches” of the theory tree do diverge in a few important ways. Therefore, Relational Dialectics will serve as the theoretical lens for this project.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) posits that life is messy and has no formulas, so partners must

try to balance the effects of forces acting to simultaneously bring them together and pull them apart. These forces manifest as discursive struggles known as *dialectics [or tensions]*, and every relationship is defined by a unique set of interrelated dialectics (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014, p. 528; emphasis added).

Another major premise of RDT is that “social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3; italics in original). In this perspective, “contradictions” are conceptualized as unified opposites instead of as independent, non-negotiable states. The phrase “dialectical tension” is often used to describe the seemingly-contradictory states found in interpersonal relationships, or the “dynamic interplay of opposing forces” (Toller, 2005, p. 47); these states appear to compete with one another, but instead, cannot exist without the presence of the other (“both/and” rather than “either/or”).

Although the word “contradiction” holds some taboo in modern society (i.e., who wants to contradict oneself?), it is still an accurate description of human experience. RDT assumes that relationships are built on the interplay of influences called centripetal and centrifugal forces, which push and pull individuals and relationships in multiple directions at the same time; centripetal forces represent tensions of unity, homogeneity, and centrality (pull) while centrifugal forces reflect tensions of difference, dispersion, and decentering (push). Words are placed on a continuum with seemingly-opposite poles to

demonstrate that we reach understanding by examining the push/pull relationship *between* these concepts in specific contexts, a “simultaneity of sameness and difference out of which knowing becomes possible” (Baxter, 2004, p. 109). That is, we understand openness only through its relationship with its other, closedness. The assumption that “phenomena can be understood only in relation to other phenomena” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14) is known as totality. Common dialectical pairs will be addressed shortly.

Next, although RDT is built on centripetal and centrifugal forces, it is not assumed that partners necessarily seek a *resolution* of the opposition between said forces. More traditional and linear theories assert that partners seek to end, remove, or ignore the more negative aspect of a tension pair – whichever pole that is perceived to be for that particular relationship – in order to achieve “balance.” Interestingly, it should be asked how equilibrium can be reached when partners are required to pick from “either-or” options, which would strongly sway the pendulum in only one direction. No, RDT does not “move from thesis (e.g. separation) to antithesis (e.g. integration) to a resolution of the opposition in some form of synthesis” (Baxter, 2004, p. 118). Rather, this theory uniquely employs a “both/and” perspective: instead of a permanent center, RDT presumes a shifting equilibrium “that can be reset when circumstances change” (Planalp, 2003, p. 90).

For example, this author experienced a range of emotions at a recent funeral: happiness, sadness, anger, relief, certainty, uncertainty, and shock (among others). How can all of these emotional states exist in the same space, at the same time? And when we

speak about the loss of loved ones, do we speak from only one perspective at a time – either anger, or relief? Not necessarily. First, this author was happy and relieved that her relative was no longer in pain from a head injury and various medical conditions. The author felt certainty about where her relative’s spirit had gone, because of the author’s beliefs about the afterlife. However, the author was also shocked and upset to see her relative so debilitated in hospice, and was angry at the disrespectful behavior of specific family members over trivial items like furniture and money from the relative’s estate. Further, the loss of such a powerful figure in the author’s life brought sadness and uncertainty; what will life be like without this relative’s continued physical presence?

Therefore, all of these emotional states – and more – coexist within the author, and offer varying shades to dialogues with others. In addition to death or mourning, research on other life transitions such as the birth or adoption of a child, weddings, and divorces have found support for the coexistence of seemingly-contradictory emotions (Roberts, 1988). To summarize, an “either/or” viewpoint falsely limits our choices to options that are not entirely representative of lived experience, and also lends an air of permanence; however, a “both/and” perspective allows for change, confusion, and coexistence.

Returning to the idea of dialectical tensions, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argued for the presence of six dialectical tension pairs in relationships (three internal pairs and three external pairs), although many other tensions exist. Internal dialectical pairs occur between individuals in a relationship, from friends to family to romance, and include autonomy/connection, novelty/predictability, and openness/closedness. First,

autonomy/connection illustrates our need for interdependence with or connection to other human beings, but also our need for privacy and “alone time.” The novelty/predictability dialectic captures the need for change to keep the relationship alive, but also the need for stability to provide a sense of security for the couple. Finally, the openness/closedness dialectic refers to the “simultaneous needs for both candor and discretion as the partners interact with each other” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995, p. 178).

While these tension pairs are experienced between individuals within a relationship, external tensions also exist between a couple and one or more members of their social network: seclusion/inclusion, conventionality/uniqueness, and revelation/concealment (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). To begin, seclusion/inclusion mirrors the autonomy/connection dialectic already described and highlights the need for a couple to withdraw together from social circles at certain times and to engage socially as a couple at other times. Next, conventionality/uniqueness reflects the desire to conform to social norms or to create an identity specific to that relationship. Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) notes that this tension pair is often seen in rituals like weddings or holiday celebrations, where a romantic couple simultaneously feels drawn to continue the patterns and traditions they grew up with or have seen done by others (conventionality) while also trying to make that event or situation distinctly “their own” (uniqueness). Last, the notion of revelation/concealment highlights the struggle between and simultaneous needs for both honesty and privacy as a couple “as the partners interact... with third parties outside the boundaries of their relationship” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995, p. 178).

Further, other researchers have offered additional tension pairs relevant to this project (as these dialectics relate to the dynamics of romantic partnerships, specifically) like tradition/creativity, conflict/consensus (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002), excitement/obligation (Montemurro, 2002), certainty/uncertainty, and expression/non-expression (Baxter, 2004). Again, although the concept-pairs described here might seem mutually exclusive, proponents of the Relational Dialectics perspective argue that individuals and relationships experience both ends of these spectrums, therefore creating tension between the push and pull of these unique forces (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). When an individual or couple attempts to deny the existence or experience of one of the tension poles, for example, a serious imbalance is created that must be addressed through coping mechanisms described later in this section. Building on this theoretical foundation, the following research question is posed: *(RQ3) Which dialectical tensions are present in participants' written accounts of how and why their engagement was terminated?*

Next, traditional stage or linear models argue for a systematic, evolutionary process of change wherein a couple steadily progresses toward more disclosure, more intimacy, more certainty, and more closeness. Several models also propose the termination of relationships in the same way, or a gradual stepping away from one's partner until full uncoupling has been reached. RDT, on the other hand, argues that dialogue "is an indeterminate and emergent process... [taking] interactants to places unforeseeable... and in unscripted ways" (Baxter, 2004, p. 117). That is, relationships do not always progress in a linear fashion but are better understood by the messiness of backward, forward, up, and down – in no prepared order, just "taking it as it comes" from

real life situations and interactive dialogue (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Thus, RDT views change as natural and inevitable, an ongoing interplay between contradictory forces that follow no prescribed formulas but instead, carve their own paths; interpersonal relationships are always changing, thus revealing the underlying tension between stability and flux.

Additionally, RDT does not presume a teleological end point. “Dialogism rejects teleological change in favor of indeterminacy” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 31) because change is not always change for the better or even change for the worse in a relationship. Change more simply represents moving “a relationship to a place different from the places it has been before” (Baxter, 2004, p. 117). A relationship is as much about integration as it is separation and experiencing distance, conflict, or other elements of “the dark side” of communication can bring “growth, change, and vitality” (Baxter, 2007, p. 120) instead of relational demise. This is not to say that relational termination is not a viable option, but rather, this perspective incorporates valuable and important differences from systemic or linear models.

Baxter also addressed the notion of the aesthetic moment within RDT. Although relationships are in constant flux, there are fleeting moments of perceived completeness or wholeness – when things “just feel right.” The aesthetic moment is achieved through dialogue, in which “fragments of disorder are temporarily united... and a momentary sense of unity [is felt] through a profound respect for the disparate voices of dialogue” (Baxter, 2004, p. 118). This fleeting, occasional feeling of completeness is achieved through appreciation for the other as a whole being, response-worthy participation, and

answerability (Emerson, 1997). The idea that change is constant may feel a bit depressing or overwhelming; individuals also desire and need occasional stability. Thus, in alignment with the rest of the theory, the aesthetic moment reminds us that there will be moments of peace, where everything falls into place and participants can sit back and breathe – before the cycle begins again.

Finally, it is important to understand how people deal with the various tensions that both enable and constrain them. It is tempting to refer to the following approaches as ways to reach resolution, but instead, “coping strategy” is a better term as these methods are simply reflections of how people manage dialectical tensions. Overall, eight communicative responses (sometimes called “praxis patterns”) for dialectical tensions “have been identified with some frequency: denial, disorientation, spiraling alternation [also called spiraling alteration or spiraling inversion in the literature], segmentation, balance, integration, recalibration, and reaffirmation” (Yoshimura, 2013, p. 11). While these coping strategies can be seen separately, they can also be realistically combined based on (dys)functionality; to illustrate, Yoshimura conducted a factor analysis of qualitative data provided by Baxter and Montgomery (1997) and came up with a “clean, four-factor structure” pairing Denial-Disorientation, Segmentation-Alternation, Balance-Integration, and Recalibration-Reaffirmation based on foundational similarities. For the current project, the researcher will see what emerges through thematic analysis of the data to determine whether coping strategies should be combined or treated separately.

Denial represents “an effort to subvert, obscure, or deny the presence of a contradiction by legitimating only one dialectical force to the exclusion of countervailing

ones” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 162). For example, if an individual knows their romantic partner is angry with them but also knows that he or she will not address the offending issue while others are around, the person may try to prolong a guest’s visit or stay out with friends longer than planned (privileging inclusion and denying seclusion). Disorientation can be understood as a “fatalistic attitude in which the contradictions are regarded as... negative or harmful” (Bochantin & Cowan, 2008, p. 149). Individuals experiencing disorientation often feel overwhelmed and positive action stagnates or disappears as they ponder, “What’s the point? Nothing I do will make a difference.” Spiraling Alternation occurs when relational partners hop back and forth (or alternate), first prioritizing one dialectical pole and then the other; for example, a couple may spend multiple days on end with one another (connection), tire of one another’s company or feel the need to get “away,” and then swing the pendulum the other direction to overly-focus on autonomy or alone time. Segmentation involves compartmentalizing topics/activities based on context. A common example can be found in the workplace, as individuals are often expected to keep their personal lives separate from work, or to “keep work at work and home at home”; thus, if one experienced a terrible personal loss, one would still be expected to do his or her job and will often compartmentalize, or tuck away, the emotions about this loss (as best as he or she can) while in the workplace. Similarly, in long-distance romantic relationships, partners may decide their individual lives will take priority on week-days (while they are apart) and that their romantic relationship will be the focus on the weekends (when they are together) (Gerstel & Gross, 1984).

In contrast, when parties enact Balance, they strive to reach a compromise between two needs. Sahlstein provided an excellent example of Balance:

Marital partners experiencing a contradiction between autonomy and connection can meet each other halfway by spending time together but [also] accomplishing independent goals (e.g., one spouse is reading while the other is watching television) (2006, p. 150).

In this scenario, the couple is still technically spending time together, but also engaging in separate activities at the same time; neither autonomy nor connection is fully realized. Integration refers to “the attempt to respond simultaneously to both polarities by neutralizing responses that favor either pole (called ‘moderation’) or by utilizing ambiguous or indirect communication (called ‘disqualification’)” (Kim & Yun, 2008, p. 301). In this method, an attempt is made to satisfy both parties by co-creating methods to address any concerns that have been raised. In Recalibration (sometimes referred to as reframing), partners actively work to change the way they think about tensions so these elements no longer seem like opposites. Individuals using recalibration approach dialectical tensions as a natural part of the relational growth and maintenance processes, and truly strive to see where the other person is coming from. Finally, Reaffirmation occurs when partners accept and celebrate seemingly-contradictory poles as part of their relationship. In this method tensions are seen as healthy, necessary to keep life interesting, and as devices to help move a relationship forward (Bochantin & Cowan, 2008, p. 149).

In summary, RDT asserts that social life is the product of a continuous interplay between competing forces that push (centrifugal) and pull (centripetal) on us at all times

(Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Our personal webs of meaning, relationships, and even our self all emerge from dialogue, inexplicably interweaving all life with communication. The RDT approach does not assume an “ideal end-state in relational management” (Kim & Yun, 2008, p. 300); that is, the goal of studying and experiencing dialectical tensions is not necessarily to resolve this tension but to understand the process of and reaction between tensions of functionally opposite states. In short, RDT is a complex relational theory that discards specific formulas to better address the messiness of everyday life. Based on this theoretical grounding, the following research question is posed: *(RQ4) Which dialectical coping strategies emerge from participants’ written accounts of how and why their engagement was terminated?*

Connection between RDT and Relational Dissolution

Unfortunately, much of the literature on premarital relationships views engagement through an economic lens. For example, Farmer and Horowitz (2003) discuss engagement as a “costly social institution” that should be analyzed as a game with a proposer and a respondent, with the end goal of being able to successfully predict “a good match.” Otnes and Lowrey (1993) conducted a consumer-driven study, and reported the most important and meaningfully significant artifacts used in weddings in order to help wedding specialists reach a higher profit. Additionally, McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston (1993) determined that women from rural areas tend to marry at a younger age than metropolitan women to lessen the economic strain on their immediate family. This emphasis on economics – a very linear approach, overall – could stem from the fact that love only entered the equation as an influencing factor in marriage during the

last 150 years in American society (Coontz, 2005). However, while the consumerism of weddings is undeniable, an economic focus obscures what actually goes on *relationally* in broken engagements; the interpersonal and communicative aspects of engagement and marriage should not be ignored.

Despite its youth as a meta-theoretical perspective, a number of research studies in the field of interpersonal communication have used RDT as a guiding framework. RDT has frequently been used in studies on premarital relationships (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Hermann, 2007; Montemurro, 2002), marital and in-law relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Pawlowski, 1998; Prentice, 2009), parenting and children (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Stamp, 1994; Toller, 2005), stepfamily relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), abuse (Sabourin & Stamp, 1995), non-normative families (Erbert & Alemán, 2008; Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006), conflict (Erbert, 2000), long-distance romantic relationships (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006), grief (Toller, 2005), mediated relationships (Kim & Yun, 2008), and school or the workplace (Kellett, 1999; Prentice & Kramer, 2006), among others. Although RDT has not been applied to broken engagements in scholarly research, studies on life transitions and relational dissolution illustrate the applicability of this theory to this phenomenon.

First, Baxter and Erbert (1999) examined significant life transitions from a dialectical perspective, which speaks directly to the current project. Baxter and Erbert

explored six tension pairs: autonomy/connection, novelty/predictability, openness/closedness, seclusion/inclusion, conventionality/uniqueness, and revelation/concealment. The researchers concluded that the dialectics of autonomy/connection and openness/closedness are significant across a variety of life transitions, including making a serious commitment like engagement or marriage. Additionally, Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) provided an ethnographic account of the marriage preparation process for 112 American couples studied over a 10-year period, to better understand how rituals (like weddings) “can hold both sides of a contradiction at the same time... for instance, a wedding ceremony has within it both loss and mourning and joy and celebration” (Roberts, 1988, p. 16). Leeds-Hurwitz argued strongly for the idea of “wedding as text,” meaning that the wedding tradition and other preparations for marriage can and should be viewed as a ritualized performance full of centrifugal and centripetal forces; it stands to reason that these forces would also be present during the engagement period for a couple that later decides to call off their impending marriage.

In addition to addressing the importance of communication for a romantic couple, Leeds-Hurwitz highlighted several dialectical tensions found in the process of preparing for marriage: tradition/creativity, conflict/consensus, and culture/communication (2002, p. 229). Individuals involved in a wedding performance must struggle with these competing forces, and the ethnographic accounts of Leeds-Hurwitz’s 112 couples reflect how families and individuals cope with and negotiate these tensions. Previous research has also indicated that many brides feel the additional dialectical tension of excitement/obligation during the engagement period (Montemurro, 2002). Again, it is plausible that

individuals who experience a broken engagement will also find themselves faced with dialectical tensions like these as they prepare for marriage.

Similarly, Kelly and Kaplan (2003) noted that the period of preparation for marriage (whether “formally” engaged or not) is a tribute to both internal and external contradictions. Internally individuals, romantic couples, and their families must navigate a maze of expectations (Waller & McLanahan, 2005); externally, these persons must also negotiate the social and/or familial pressures felt throughout the engagement process (Schuster, 1997; Snizek, 2005) and afterward. Also, as multiple emotions or tensions are present at the same time within individuals and relationships (Montemurro, 2002), the experience of a broken engagement and the struggle with such tensions cannot be adequately addressed by the application of an economic model like Social Exchange.

In addition to the applicability of this theory to life transitions, other scholars have employed RDT to better understand relational conflict and dissolution (although the termination of a relationship could certainly be considered a life transition in and of itself). To begin, the tension between connection and autonomy is central during romantic relationship disruption and termination, as this process “is inherently a change from a particular kind of [togetherness] to [separateness... from one’s ex]” (Sahlstein & Dun, 2008, p. 38). Research by Sahlstein and Dun (2008) noted the presence of antagonistic and non-antagonistic struggles in romantic breakups, where “one person aligns himself with one pole of the contradiction and another person aligns himself with the other” for the former and “when relational partners jointly struggle with how to manage dialectics” for the latter (p. 40). This study is important because it illustrates the choice to struggle

with negotiating tensions either independently or together, even as a relationship ends. This project clearly showed how romantic partners do not follow one set path, but rather, take a variety of avenues to relational dissolution; as a result, RDT provides a strong framework to help us make sense of the messiness of breakups.

Next, Fox, Osborn, and Warber (2014) argued that the influence of technology, including social media sites like Facebook, make romantic disengagement harder than it used to be. For example, these researchers found that it is tempting to visit a former romantic partner's page from time to time to see how they are doing; who they are posting pictures of/with; and if they appear to be struggling with the same issues (and/or to the same level of intensity) as the viewer. Further, there are often social consequences associated with "unfriending" someone, even an ex-partner, due to the perceived ripple effects on the former couple's shared networks. In short, technology can make it harder to move on with one's life:

Even in the wake of a terminated relationship, partners may be forced to deal directly with a discursive struggle between [potentially unwanted] integration and [desired] separation, as well as differences in [both] online and offline practices, because of the maintained connection through Facebook (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014, p. 532).

Research by Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith (2013) supports the assertion that exposure to one's former partner via social media sites (like Facebook) obstructs the process of healing and moving forward.

Graham (2003) also used RDT to explore how post-marital couples navigated the dialectics of divorce, and found that relational termination often produced different

results depending on the couple's level of connectedness. For example, couples who shared children, property, or extensive history grappled with "the need to develop a 'separate togetherness' or... the process of 'uncoupling without unfamilizing'" (Graham, 2003, p. 194). Graham's research is an important reminder that relational dissolution does not always mean romantic partners will never see each other again, although that is certainly the case for some. In select situations, individuals struggle through the transition from a romantic association to a tentative friendship and in others, former partners may even get back together romantically (Masheter, 1994; Masheter & Harris, 1986). Additionally, dating partners seeking to blend their families must learn to effectively manage the dialectics of forming bonds with potential stepchildren while also maintaining the desired level of closeness with their own children and new romantic partner; individuals or families who are unable to successfully negotiate these interdependent relationships and simultaneous dialectics will not endure (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990).

Whatever the case, partners and families experiencing relational dissolution must work through the dialectics of uncoupling to negotiate "a new normal." Uncoupling is a typically-painful process where individuals extricate themselves from an important relationship, and as such can be one of the most stressful times in an individual's life (Vaughan, 1986). As "few experiences in life are capable of producing more emotional distress, anguish, and suffering than... the dissolution of an important relationship" (Simpson, 1987, p. 583), a theoretical perspective is needed that best captures the messy, relational elements found in everyday life and which accounts for the disarray often

found in our interpersonal relationships (Montgomery, 1993) – and certainly in broken engagements. Therefore, Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) Relational Dialectics Theory will be used in this project to more fully capture the dynamics and tensions present during the broken engagement process.

Communication Strategies and Advice

While the first three research questions focused on exploring the broken engagement process, the latter research questions are geared toward understanding how a formerly-engaged person copes with or makes sense of the broken engagement experience; information on coping strategies in RDT has also already been provided. Moving on, Doering (2010) argued that while the breakup of a romantic relationship may “become [a turning point] in the unfolding of individuals’ selves and biographies” (p. 71), teaching its participants important life lessons and shaping one’s future relationships, it is also important to consider how people describe their relational termination to others.

Recently disengaged persons

have to explain their new status and the reasons for their transition into singlehood. Everyone in their personal environment who learns about the breakup will wonder the reasons. For personal and social concerns, individuals must construct narratives that plausibly explain the breakup without losing face (Doering, 2010, p. 71).

With this in mind, it is important to consider how individuals experiencing a broken engagement explain their disengagement to other people, both in their immediate social circle and beyond. Thus, the following research question is appropriate: *(RQ5) What communication strategies are used to explain the termination of an engagement?*

In addition, research by Bastian, Jetten, and Ferris (2014) suggests that sharing a painful situation with others may have some positive consequences; for example, repeating a painful narrative can act as a sort of “social glue” and may promote bonding and cooperation between those who have had similar experiences, even among strangers. Bastian’s team concluded that

dysphoric rituals [situations generating dissatisfaction, distress, or anxiety] prompt considerable reflection, which in turn generates richer representations of the episodes and their significance. When these experiences are shared, they not only make the events more salient but also enhance the salience of [others]... Sharing pain is therefore an especially powerful form of shared experience (2014, p. 2084).

A similar undercurrent can be found in the boom of face-to-face and online support groups. Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help

through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain. When people find affiliation with others they feel are “like” them, they feel a connection... [a deep] understanding based on mutual experience... [which is often a source of] “mutual empowerment” (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001, p. 135).

People in cancer support groups, for example, are able to talk about the impacts of chemotherapy or radiation on their physical and mental health with others who truly understand, because those individuals have either had a similar experience in the past or are going through the same thing now. In applying this line of reasoning to the current study (the idea that people are more willing to listen to someone who has also had a broken engagement), the sixth and final research question is advanced: *(RQ6) What advice do disengaged individuals offer others considering a broken engagement?*

Research Questions

Though situationally located throughout the literature review, the research questions for this study are also included here for easy reference. Based on the lack of scholarly studies on broken premarital engagements and building from this foundation of literature, six research questions are offered for this applied dissertation project and are separated along two main lines: first, the exploration of broken engagements and dialectical tensions (RQ 1-3), and second, a deeper look at how disengaged persons make sense of and cope with this relational loss (RQ 4-6).

RQ₁: What events and signs during the engagement period contribute to the dissolution of the relationship?

RQ₂: For what reasons do individuals typically break an engagement?

RQ₃: Which dialectical tensions are present in participants' written accounts of how and why their engagement was terminated?

RQ₄: Which dialectical coping strategies emerge from participants' written accounts of how and why their engagement was terminated?

RQ₅: What communication strategies are used to explain the termination of an engagement?

RQ₆: What advice do disengaged individuals offer others considering a broken engagement?

Through a detailed analysis of heterosexual participants' written accounts, this exploratory project aims to shed some light on an understudied and growing phenomenon: broken premarital engagements. A discussion of the results and implications for future research are also offered, in order to keep this necessary and valuable conversation moving forward.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study employed a mixed-methods survey design to assess the reasons behind and process of broken premarital engagements for heterosexual individuals. Recruitment, participants, participants' ex-partners, demographics, measures, procedures, and coding methods are described in this section; a discussion of the results for this project and suggestions for future research are provided in the following chapters.

Participants

Individuals from around the United States were invited to participate in a study focused on broken engagements, and were recruited through a variety of methods: word-of-mouth, snowball sampling through email and flyers, a message sent to the Communication Research and Theory Network (CRTNet) list-service, and through undergraduate courses at a private Western university. Interested participants were encouraged to first contact the researcher via email or phone, and each person was sent a short flyer describing the relevant details associated with this study (Appendix A); individuals who knew someone eligible to participate could also request a copy of the informational flyer. After reviewing the details of the project and after all questions had been addressed by the researcher, potential participants were then given a link to the survey itself. As noted later in this section, all recruitment materials were reapproved

annually by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's academic institution for the duration of the study.

All participants were required to have experienced at least one broken heterosexual engagement (defined as calling off the proposed marital union any time between official engagement and the wedding ceremony), be at least 18 years old, and currently live in the United States. The amount of time which had passed since the engagement was broken was not limited for two main reasons: the population necessary for study participation is hard to find (and even once discovered, may not want to share their story), and because this research aims to understand the experience of broken engagements (and thus, factual recall of minor details is not emphasized). The original data collection period for this project was only supposed to last 3-6 months; however, because the desired population for the study is narrow and therefore difficult to locate, the data collection period was extended in order to reach more people. Overall, a total of 129 participants responded to the survey between 2010 and 2012.

Of the 129 questionnaires received, 109 (84.50%) provided usable data. Twenty surveys were discarded due to data fabrication (i.e., several participants indicated they had been involved in a broken engagement, only to later write "I have never been engaged" and reveal they were just trying to get extra credit for a class), duplication (i.e., one individual responded to the survey more than once, and provided contact information each time), or minimal information (i.e., some only answered the eligibility-based questions and did not respond to the demographic and/or open-ended questions to provide meaningful data for analysis). In the end, the remaining sample met all of the listed

requirements for participation, including but not limited to having experienced at least one broken heterosexual engagement ($M = 1.17$, $SD = 0.43$) and by providing usable data on their questionnaire.

The final sample ($n = 109$) consisted of 24 males (22% percent) and 85 females (78% percent). At the time the survey was completed, participants ranged in age from 18 to 64 years old ($M = 31.75$, $SD = 11.00$). Respondents largely self-reported as White (77.50%) and Christian (19.70% Catholic, 42.70% Protestant), with the remaining participants representing other racial groups (Hispanic, 5%; Black, 4.20%; Asian, 5%; Other, including biracial, 8.30%) and religious preferences (Agnosticism, 12%; Atheism, 4.30%; Buddhism, 4.30%; Islam, 2.50%; Judaism, 2.50%; Mixed/Spiritual beliefs, 4.30%; Other, 7.70%). Participants were fairly well-educated, with the completion of their Master's Degree (19%), Doctoral Degree (15.70%), Bachelor's Degree (15.70%), or some graduate work (5%) frequently marked; all other participants indicated they had completed high school or earned a GED (7.40%), received an Associate's degree or technical certificate (5.80%), or had completed some undergraduate credits (31.40%).

Participants largely reported growing up in nuclear families (57.30%) and step- or blended families (29%), with fewer respondents being raised by their grandparents (2.60%) or from single-parent households (9.40%); 1.7% marked "Other," with all respondents noting that their parents divorced but never remarried. At the time of the survey, participants were largely Single (31%), Dating Exclusively (22.40%), or Married (31.90%). Individuals who marked "Married" reported being wed 0.59 times on average

($SD = 0.77$), and the majority of participants had either never been married (35.70%) or married once (35.70%). Only one person had been married more than three times.

Additionally, participants were predominantly childless (64.30%) at the time of this study, reporting an average of only .87 children per household ($SD = 1.52$); although several participants listed between 6-8 children, these families were in the minority (2.60%). Finally, although this research project was designed to focus only on heterosexual relationships, 8.30% of the sample indicated that they identified as bisexual, gay, or lesbian; still, none of this data was discarded as all participants indicated a cross-sex broken engagement. However, this points to an important area for future research.

Participants' Ex-Partners

Again, although some people had experienced more than one broken engagement, all respondents were asked to focus on only one broken engagement for the purposes of this study. Participants' ex-fiancé/es were predominantly White (79.30%) and Christian (17% Catholic, 44.60% Protestant), with the remaining ex-fiancé/es representing other racial groups (Hispanic, 5.40%; Black, 7.20%; Asian, 3.60%; Other, including biracial, 4.50%) and religious preferences (Agnosticism, 9.80%, Atheism, 11.60%; Buddhism, 3.60%; Islam, 1.80%; Judaism, 1.80%; Other, 9.80%).

Overall, ex-fiancé/es were generally less-educated than study participants, with Master's Degree (8.20%), Doctoral Degree (2.80%), Bachelor's Degree (20.20%), and some graduate work (4.60%) marked less than 40% of the time. All of the other ex-fiancé/es in the current project had not finished high school (2.75%), had completed high

school or earned a GED (23.85%), received an Associate's degree or technical certificate (6.40%), or had taken some undergraduate classes (31.20%). Finally, ex-fiancé/es primarily grew up in nuclear families (53.20%) and step- or blended families (25.20%), with fewer respondents being raised by their grandparents (1.80%) or from single-parent households (15.30%); 4.50% marked "Other," with some respondents noting that their ex-fiancé/e's parents divorced and neither had remarried by the time the participants' broken engagements occurred.

Characteristics of Broken Engagements

At the time of their broken engagement, respondents were 16 to 56 years old ($M = 24.71$, $SD = 7.48$) and ex-fiancé/es were 18 to 57 years old ($M = 26.03$, $SD = 7.97$). Couples dated an average of 25.41 months before getting engaged ($SD = 20.90$), and were betrothed 9.30 months on average before the engagement was broken ($SD = 9.21$). Additionally, 48.62% of the sample shared a residence with their ex-partner during the dating or engagement periods. No one reported being left, or having left another person, at the altar. A list of the major events that had occurred by the time the engagement was terminated can be found in Table 1.

The majority of participants learned about the survey through word-of-mouth ($n = 43$) or via the CRTNet list-service ($n = 32$), although others indicated they were students at the researcher's academic institution and heard about the project from the researcher, an instructor, or from another student at school ($n = 25$). Remaining participants left the question blank or provided miscellaneous answers (e.g., "interesting

Table 1. *List of Events which Occurred before Engagement was Broken*

Event	Count	Percentage
Official marriage proposal	93	85.32%
Ring(s) was purchased	88	80.73%
Announcement (verbal, newspaper, "Save the Date," etc.)	62	56.88%
Moved in together	53	48.62%
Date set for wedding/reception	47	43.12%
Invited at least one person to be in wedding party	40	36.70%
Shopped for dress or formal wear	37	33.94%
Guest list created	37	33.94%
Adopted a pet(s)	31	28.44%
Asked parents/guardians for hand in marriage	24	22.02%
Wedding and/or reception location(s) booked	18	16.51%
Received gift(s)	18	16.51%
Bought or rented dress or formal wear	17	15.60%
Made a major purchase together (ex. car, property, etc.)	17	15.60%
Some/all payment on wedding items (florist, caterer, etc.)	15	13.76%
Honeymoon planned	14	12.84%
Registered for gifts	12	11.01%
Invitations made or ordered	12	11.01%
Engagement party or parties held	11	10.09%
Took a premarital education class	10	9.17%
Wedding shower(s) arranged and/or hosted for couple	9	8.26%
Other	8	7.34%
Pregnant or had/adopted a child(ren) together	7	6.42%
Invitations mailed out to guests	4	3.67%
Hired a wedding planner	4	3.67%
Had a bachelor and/or bachelorette party	3	2.75%
Honeymoon partially or completely paid for	2	1.83%
Held wedding rehearsal and/or rehearsal dinner	1	0.92%

and slightly boring”). Additionally, although roughly 44% of respondents skipped this question or provided answers that indicated a lack of understanding, almost half of the sample (47.15%) expressed a desire for the results of this study to be shared with others via scholarly or popular press publications, through counseling or teaching, and/or on a website like www.theknot.com in order to either prevent future broken engagements or to help people realize “you are not alone” as the disengaged man or woman grieves a life that will never be. Another 8.64% indicated they were simply excited to help with this project, and/or encouraged further research on this understudied subject.

Participants reported being involved in 1.17 broken engagements on average ($SD = 0.43$), with almost 85% ($n = 92$) having only been through one. However, 15 people had experienced two broken engagements, and 2 individuals noted they had personally been through three broken engagements. To help keep narratives more cohesive (assuming experiences might have differed, even slightly, in separate former engagement scenarios), each respondent was asked to think about and report on only one broken engagement during the survey. Again, responses from those who later indicated “zero” broken engagements were not used.

Additionally, roughly half of the sample (49.11%) claimed they were the one to break their engagement, while a little over a quarter (27.68%) noted the decision was made by their ex-fiancé/e; almost one-fifth of the participants (19.64%) believed the decision to end the engagement was the result of mutual agreement between themselves and their former partners. Interestingly, the final 3.57% reported that “someone else” was responsible for ending their engagement and, without exception, named and blamed the

person with whom their ex-fiancé/e had cheated. 53.21% of engagements reported in this sample were ended by women (either the participant herself, or the male participant's ex). Further, well over half of the sample (66.39%) shared actions, behaviors, and/or events brought about by their exes as the primary reason(s) their engagement came to an end, although some participants (17.65%) did admit to personal activities or traits that negatively impacted both their fiancé/e and the romantic relationship. Remaining respondents (15.96%) were either vague in their answers (assignment of fault or responsibility was unclear), or were blindsided by the end of the relationship. However, principal culpability for the demise of the engagement – almost 70% of responses – was laid at the feet of participants' former partners.

Engagements reported in this project were broken 8.09 years ago, on average ($SD = 8.96$), but several respondents took the survey mere days or months after their engagements ended. Further, the majority of participants (84.40%) said that the engagement and relationship were terminated permanently, but approximately 13.00% of the sample later resumed dating and/or became re-engaged to their former partner. Four participants noted that they later married their ex-fiancé/e; however, at the time the survey was completed, only two of those reconciliations proved lasting.

Measures

A mixed-methods survey (Appendix B) was created from the two scholarly research studies focused on broken engagements, and in concert with the researcher's original dissertation committee, to find answers for the research questions in this project.

Again, this instrument and all other materials were reapproved annually by the IRB at the researcher's academic institution (Approvals 2009-1035 and 471850).

The survey contained 62 questions overall, although some were conditional: the base survey consisted of 29 demographic or limited-response questions (e.g., sex, age, ethnicity, family of origin, year the broken engagement occurred, who ended the engagement, etc.) and 11 open-ended questions (e.g., "In 3 sentences or more, please describe the specific SIGNS or major events during your relationship with your ex-fiancé/e that contributed to the ending of your engagement"). Additionally, questions were also included to address participation requirements, contact information (optional), to gain opinions on how information from the study should be used, or were tied to "Other" selections (e.g., "If you answered 'Other' in question 11, please describe your religious preference"). Aside from the three mandatory questions used to determine study eligibility, respondents were allowed to skip any questions they did not want to answer and/or which made them uncomfortable. Depending on the depth and quality of responses, the survey took participants 42.17 minutes to complete.

Procedures

All responses were collected electronically through Survey Monkey, although the researcher offered to mail a hard copy of the survey to anyone who preferred that method of delivery. Immediately following the survey's welcome screen, participants were required to read an informed consent form and acknowledge that they understood the terms and conditions for participation in the study (Appendix B). The next three

questions determined study eligibility: individuals who indicated that they had not been involved in at least one broken cross-sex engagement, did not live in the United States, were younger than 18 years old, and/or who did not agree to the terms and conditions of the study were redirected to a closing screen thanking them for their interest in the project. After all preliminary requirements for participation were met, respondents completed demographic and open-ended survey questions. Upon completion of the questionnaire, respondents were thanked for their involvement in the project and encouraged to forward the survey link to other qualified participants.

Participation in this study was voluntary and either confidential (if contact information was provided) or anonymous (if no identifying information was given). To preserve the privacy of all responses, only the researcher had access to the raw data on the Survey Monkey website, and all surveys downloaded to the researcher's personal computer were saved as password-protected files (also only accessible by the researcher). Further, any data printed for coding purposes was kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's private office and shredded when no longer needed. Finally, all identifying information in this dissertation (names, specific locations, etc.) and for any subsequent publications was removed or replaced with a pseudonym to further ensure the confidentiality of participants.

Additionally, the study was considered low-risk as no deception was used, at-risk populations were not specifically targeted, no minors were involved in this project, and respondents were neither audio- nor video-recorded. Individuals were able to skip questions they felt uncomfortable answering, and/or could withdraw from the study at

any time for any reason without penalty. Although optional, some participants chose to enter their contact information so they could be reached for future research projects on broken engagements, receive a synopsis of the results of the current study, get extra credit (as applicable), and/or to be entered in the drawing for a gift card.

Should the primary investigator pursue additional studies on broken engagements, individuals who denoted their interest in future research will be contacted. Next, and with the approval of the IRB at the researcher's academic institution, some participants were offered extra credit by their instructors for either participation in this study or for finding someone who was qualified to participate, if the student had not personally experienced a broken engagement. In these cases, participants wrote their own name or the name of the student for whom they were participating, as well as the name of the student's instructor, in the final question on the survey. At the end of each academic term during the data collection period, names (but no data) were sent to applicable instructors via email with a reminder to keep all information confidential. It should be noted that the researcher did not give instructors the names of any participants who falsified data, and that participation in this study was only one of several opportunities offered for extra credit in those courses.

Some participants ($n = 58$) also chose to enter their names in a drawing for one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to Walmart or Target. These gift cards were made possible by a generous grant from an endowment at the researcher's academic institution, which was reported to and approved by the IRB prior to the purchase of any prizes. After the data collection period ended, winning participants were selected using a random number

generator. The researcher contacted the initial 10 winners via the email address they had provided, referenced the study on broken engagements, and explained how to claim their gift card. Drawing winners were given 3 weeks to respond with a valid mailing address, and anyone who had not replied to the researcher's original message after a 1- and 2-week period was sent a follow-up email(s). After 3 weeks expired, anyone who had not provided a valid mailing address was removed from the list and the selection/contact process began again until all 10 gift cards had been distributed. Each gift card was mailed to the necessary recipient with a letter reiterating the purpose of the study and a note of appreciation for their involvement in the project (Appendix C).

Coding Methods

Originally, the researcher intended to code each open-ended question separately. However, after reading participants' responses, it became clear that these narratives – the “story” of a person's broken engagement – bled across multiple questions. Thus, in order to gain a more complete picture of broken engagements, all of the open-ended questions were coded as one cohesive narrative for each participant, in order to maintain consistency in coding. Further, an exploratory approach was selected for this project so as not to assume the thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences of participants but rather, to allow disengaged individuals to speak for themselves.

Open-ended responses were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis until theoretical saturation was reached. Thematic analysis involves an inductive process where themes are generated from the data itself (Owen, 1984). According to Ryan and

Bernard (2003) this involves a careful, line-by-line reading of the text to reveal themes that will increase our understanding of relational processes, rule management, and consequences, among other elements. Whatever emerges, thematic analysis starts broadly, as the researcher reads participants' statements and then "sort[s] them into thematic piles" (p. 275) based on the elements of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Although different words might be used throughout an account, recurrence refers to "the presence of similar threads of meaning in at least two parts of the same report" (Siegert & Stamp, 1994, p. 349); repetition indicates the presence of repeated wording or phrasing; and forcefulness denotes the emphasis placed on different words, phrases, or parts.

The researcher first read each narrative as a whole in order to broadly classify raw codes; evidence of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness were considered on the second pass, and items were relocated as appropriate. Narratives were then analyzed a third time: through a constant comparison of "all social incidents observed" within and across categories (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000, p. 2), responses were moved and themes were renamed until all qualitative data found a "home" and a highly-polished list of subcategories had emerged. In this way, the category system produced in the first few rounds of coding was simultaneously refined. The researcher performed one fourth and final pass over the data to make sure each group had good internal consistency, to determine what (if any) larger code families might exist, and to select strong excerpts that best represented each item.

Further, participants' open-ended accounts were compared to the criteria listed for the Excitement/Obligation tension posed by Montemurro (2002) as well as Autonomy/

Connection, Novelty/Predictability, Openness/Closedness, Seclusion/Inclusion, Conventionality/Uniqueness, and Revelation/Concealment (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Baxter and Erbert (1999) analyzed the transcripts of several retrospective interviews to determine the importance of dialectical pairs in turning points, such as getting engaged or married, and offer relevant comparison criteria for relational dialectics in the current study. Any tensions that did not fit within one of these seven tension pairs were labeled and will be discussed accordingly. Finally, the researcher coded for the presence of dialectical coping strategies, namely: Denial, Disorientation, Segmentation, Spiraling Alternation, Balance, Integration, Recalibration, and Reaffirmation (Yoshimura, 2013).

CHAPTER FOUR, RESULTS: UNDERSTANDING PROCESSES & TENSIONS

The results of thematic analysis and frequency counts are provided in this section through quoted participant narratives, category summaries, and detailed tables regarding the first three research questions; similar results are provided in the next chapter for the last three research questions. Additionally, a discussion of the results for this project and suggestions for future research are provided in the final chapter.

Research Questions 1-2: Causes and Precipitating Events

The first two research questions focused on the signs and/or events which contribute to the ending of an engagement, as well as the reasons the broken engagement occurred. As previously noted, participants did not answer these questions separately and merged the signs, events, and reasons into one interconnected narrative. Thus, these two research questions were analyzed together for each respondent. In coding the data, 181 distinct reasons for ending a romantic heterosexual engagement were provided, which were sorted into 21 subcategories: Abuse/Threats, Age, Alcohol/Drugs, Change of Heart, Cheating/Infidelity, Communication Problems, Crossing a Line, Differences Became Too Great, Distance, Health, Money/Work, Parenting/Children, Personality/ Behavior Irritants, Second Place, Sexual Issues, Third Parties, Time/Timing, Trust/ Respect, Unmet Needs, Wrong Reasons, and Other. These categories were then grouped into 7 larger code

families: Divergence, Reflection, Boundary Violations, Priorities, Cumulative Annoyances, Outside Influences, and Discursive Discord (see Tables 2 through 8).

Divergence. The largest grouping was Divergence ($n = 160$ codes), which includes the subcategories of Differences Became Too Great, Parenting/Children, Sexual Issues, and Unmet Needs, and focuses on areas where the participant and his or her former partner diverged too much in thought and/or behavior for the relationship to be successful long-term (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Divergence Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
DIVERGENCE (160 total)		
Differences Became Too Great	107	Lack of shared values or limited things in common; different life goals and/or plans for the future; ex lacked ambition, drive, or initiative; ex did not want to “further his education” (all males); different relational and role expectations (primarily, household division of labor); inequality in intelligence or attractiveness levels between the participant and his or her ex; religious/spiritual differences; the relationship suffered from a one-sided investment; one or both parties changed significantly
Parenting/Children	10	Differences in parenting styles; difficulty integrating blended families
Sexual Issues	20	Decline in physical intimacy; “bad sex” and/or an unskilled sexual partner; non-reciprocal acts
Unmet Needs	23	Lack of stability; decline in romance; one or both persons did not stand up for or defend their partner to others; poor listening skills; dissatisfaction as a result of general unmet needs

Differences Became Too Great. First, Differences Became Too Great ($n = 107$) was so named because participants disclosed something that started out small but eventually grew to an intolerable degree over time. These codes were distinct from the somewhat similar Crossing a Line category because participants either knew about the items in this group and did not believe such things to be “a big deal” at first, or couples tried (and failed) to work through these differences as they emerged; events in Crossing a Line were one-time occurrences which caused immediate disruption. Further, Differences were placed in the Divergence super-category because the separation between partners on issues like a lack of shared values and relational inequality caused an eventual and irrevocable split.

One of the largest contributors to this subcategory was the degree of difference found in relational expectations, which often centered on the division of household labor:

When a man proposes to you thusly: “Will you marry me? You’re worth the sacrifice of doing housework,” say no. Silly me, I said yes. We lived together for 4 months when he proposed; during that time, we battled constantly about housework. He expected me to do all of the cooking and cleaning, but I was also to pay half the household bills and all of my personal bills... He thought that contributing to the maintenance of our household made him a “houseboy.” [However] He did not contribute in other ways, such as yard work, working on the cars, or any “masculine” chores. (PP 103)

Although Participant 103 knew her ex-partner's views on "women's responsibilities" around the house prior to accepting his proposal of marriage, she believed his perspective would change over time. However, her ex-partner remained steadfast in his opinions, even after attending multiple therapy sessions together, which ultimately caused the participant to terminate the engagement. Other elements which contributed to the breadth of this group included limited things in common between the participant and his or her ex-fiancé/e, as well as different goals and/or visions for the future. Some people, like Participant 109, began dating their ex-partner in high school and upon entering college or career, discovered how much they craved similarity from a potential life-mate:

My ex got a job right out of high school and had no plans to start college. I began college [a few months after I graduated from high school and we] were engaged in October of that year... I love reading, the arts, philosophy (I became a professor). My ex loved sports, drinking, partying, etc. Entering college... was like finding a whole new world of people like [me] who enjoyed talking about all the things I previously kept to myself. (PP 109)

Whatever the differences were, many participants and exes appear to have started out with a "love conquers all" approach, only to find that some of these differences were too great to be rectified and/or that one or both persons were unwilling to compromise in that particular area.

Parenting/Children. Similarly, Parenting/Children, Sexual Issues, and Unmet Needs also represented areas of divergence for couples that were too considerable to

overcome. Parenting/Children ($n = 10$) largely centered on differences in parenting styles for both real and hypothetical (i.e. anticipated future) children, and/or difficulty integrating blended families. Parenting/Children concerns were placed in the Divergence super-category because participants and ex-partners held irreconcilable perspectives, approaches, or expectations in regard to having or raising children. For example,

We have had major problems integrating kids into our relationship... [my ex] demanded that I send my 3-year old grandson to live with my other son because he [fiancé] didn't want to raise him. It's been tough all around with me having to soft-pedal why [my fiancé] makes these demands of me but doesn't seem willing to reciprocate by, say, having his 25-year old child move out. (PP 95)

As seen in this narrative, participants are not only learning how to navigate romantic waters in preparation for marriage, but may also encounter choppy seas when it comes to their children and/or grandchildren – regardless whether those children are young enough to still live at home, or have grown to adulthood and supposedly left the nest.

Sexual Issues and Unmet Needs. In the area of Sexual Issues ($n = 20$), many participants reported a decline in physical intimacy, as well as “bad sex” or non-reciprocal acts; however, it should be noted that this category does not include rape or sexual assault, as the recurrence and forcefulness themes present in those narratives indicated a better fit with the Crossing a Line category. Sexual Issues were placed in the Divergence super-category because partners’ differing expectations regarding the

frequency, personal preferences, behaviors, and/or the quality of sexual activities could not be resolved.

An excellent example of this category came from Participant 93, who shared that her former partner “did not take ‘no’ for an answer in bed. I thought he was just young and horny, but now I [realize] it was exceptionally disrespectful... at times, he would just ask me to watch him/help him masturbate if I didn't want to have sex.” Another strong illustration was provided by a respondent who completed the survey only *three days* after his engagement ended:

Sexually, while physically present together, there was very little reciprocation on her part. She would request certain acts, yet be unwilling to perform them herself. Several times during vaginal intercourse she would orgasm, [and] then before I would orgasm, she would say it was too painful for me to continue and instruct me to stop. That was never fun. (PP 123)

This participant’s account of sexual problems in his romantic relationship merges well into the next category, Unmet Needs ($n = 23$), as he went on to share that “I ended [the engagement] because my emotional, physical, and communication needs were not being met” (PP 123). Relational dissatisfaction ranged from a lack of support to general unhappiness as a result of things like poor listening skills, lack of romance, or instability:

He had been acting strange (crying easily, not wanting to go out, etc.) and when I asked why, yet again, he admitted he stopped taking his medication, which he had

previously told me he was still taking. I told him he was a liar (among other things) and I deserved better... I deserved stability and an equal partner. (PP 41)

Participant 41 believed that having a degree of constancy, or knowing what to expect from the person with whom she was trying to build her life, was not just a desire but a deep-seated need. Some respondents, like Participant 41, also acknowledged that he or she learned what they needed – and what they were and were not willing to live without – over the course of this engagement, and have carried that knowledge forward to later romantic associations. Overall, Unmet Needs were placed in the Divergence super-category because an absence of need fulfillment for one both persons drove a wedge between romantic partners and pushed them apart.

In short, the subcategories of Differences Became Too Great, Parenting/Children, Sexual Issues, and Unmet Needs are clear reminders that some differences keep a relationship interesting – but only so long as those differences are complementary (or at least addressed early and managed well). Too much variance (Divergence) will cause the romantic relationship to capsize.

Reflection. The next large category was Reflection ($n = 143$ codes), which focused on important conclusions drawn by the participant during the course of his or her engagement that helped bring about the end of the relationship; the subgroups of Age, Change of Heart, Time/Timing, and Wrong Reasons comprise this code family (Table 3).

Age. To begin, Age ($n = 29$) addressed differences in years of age between the participant and his or her ex-fiancé/e, and was placed in the Reflection super-category

Table 3. *Reflection Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
REFLECTION (143 total)		
Age	29	Either one or both persons were too young, naïve, or immature to get married; problems caused by significant age differences
Change of Heart	49	Falling out of love; falling in love with someone else; the relationship had declined to the point the couple was better as friends; the respondent realized that he or she did not want to marry the person to whom they were engaged, or to get married at all; the couple got to know one another better after living together and determined the relationship would not work long-term; one or both persons had doubts or second thoughts, felt like they were holding the other person back, and/or realized they resented their partner and could not continue the engagement; “something was just missing/off” with their partner that the participant no longer wanted to put up with
Time/ Timing	36	Engagement felt rushed; it was “too soon” to get married; the couple’s property rental lease was up; lack of quality alone time together despite living near/with each other
Wrong Reasons	29	Pressure to accept a public or exciting proposal; used engagement as a means of coping with the death of a loved one; feeling like one’s ex was “the best I could do”; knowing they didn’t really want to marry their ex when he proposed, but hoped affection would grow over time (all females); feeling like the engagement was a natural but undesirable “next step”

because of participants’ realizations that one or both persons were too young, too naïve, and/or too immature to get married at that time. For example, Participant 113 noted that she “was young and he was my first love... I was so young when we started seeing each

other and he was so much older than I was that now sometimes I feel as though he molested me (7-year age difference, I was 13 when we began talking).” In this case, there is a dramatic developmental difference between a 13-year old and a 20-year old, which ultimately contributed to the downfall of the relationship. However, some participants arrived at the conclusion that their ex-partner was unprepared for marriage through more circuitous means, and almost seemed to be looking for reasons to end the engagement: “He was not a great skier and had improperly set his equipment causing his broken leg when he fell. This was a sign to me that he was still too immature... to continue on with our plans” (PP 68).

Change of Heart. In the Change of Heart ($n = 49$) grouping, respondents came to important realizations about the relationship that were important enough to impact the length and direction of that romantic association; these meditative conclusions landed Change of Heart in the Reflection super-category. Common occurrences were primarily focused on falling out of love with one’s ex-partner, realizing that “some relationships are better off as friends,” learning that the couple was unable to live together successfully, and finally admitting that he or she was simply no longer interested in marrying the other person. As an example, Participant 70 shared that it took the death of a beloved family member to bring her clarity: “As I sat waiting [for my ex] I realized I was not where I wanted to be in life and more importantly, I was not with the person I wanted to be with. I didn’t know who that person was at the time, I just knew my [ex-fiancé] was not that person” (PP 70). Additionally, Participant 60 shared that “We had become better friends than anything. I was not satisfied on many levels. I needed him to show initiative... and I

eventually fell in love with someone else,” and others concurred: “I told him I wanted the whole package if I was getting married, i.e. a best friend, a lover, a husband, a caretaker. Not just a best friend and a good roommate” (PP 52). It is unclear how long it took each participant to arrive at these conclusions, but once reached, the engagement was terminated soon after.

Time/Timing. The codes sorted into Time/Timing ($n = 36$) focused on feeling rushed toward marriage, and/or that the timing of the engagement and impending wedding was not right: “We decided that... we moved too fast. Even though we had known [each other] and been friends for 9 years, this relationship was too fast. So we broke the engagement but stayed together, then in 2 weeks agreed either way it won’t work” (PP 45). Others seemed to know it was time to end the relationship, and used the expiration of a shared property lease with one’s partner as a convenient excuse to part ways, as seen in Participant 73’s tale: “We were living together and it was time to sign a new lease and I told him I decided I wanted to take a break from the relationship,” which led to a terminated engagement the very next day. In this scenario, the participant admitted she had known for months it was time to move on, but hesitated to end the engagement until the moment arrived to sign another legal contract with the landlord. Time/Timing was placed in the Reflection super-category because participants shared that extensive thought went into considering why their romantic relationship was not working, which ultimately led formerly-engaged persons or couples to conclude that the relational timing was not right.

Wrong Reasons. Finally, some respondents indicated that their mental deliberation process illustrated they were getting married for the Wrong Reasons ($n = 29$); consequently, these codes were placed in the Reflection super-category. While the “right reasons” to wed were not divulged, participants shared that the pressure to accept a public or exotic proposal, knowing one’s partner was not who he or she wanted to spend life with but hoping affection would blossom over time, and feeling like engagement was a natural “next step” on a predetermined path (but not necessarily a wanted or chosen step) were all incorrect reasons to get married. For example, Participant 97 noted, “I knew when he proposed that I didn’t want to be with him but thought the affection would grow,” and was finally forced to admit the love she wanted to have for a life partner was not present with/for her ex-fiancé. Participant 40 also revealed she knew her dating relationship with her ex-partner had problems, but

felt like half the reason I said yes at the time of being proposed to was because I had travelled out to see my [ex-fiancé] in a different country [Australia] and in doing so it had been incredibly romantic. There was a lot of pressure to say yes in an [extravagant] event or a public event and I’m wondering if that may be a reason people say yes even if they’re not ready, hence calling it off later. (PP 40)

The respondent went on to share that a number of reasons not to get married were already present in the relationship with her ex-fiancé:

I came to realize that there were a large quantity of reasons why I shouldn’t have considered marrying him. These reasons were: I didn’t like the way he dressed and was always trying to buy him new clothes; I didn’t think he was going to be a

good father; I thought he got angry too often over things that didn't matter; he wasn't an active listener and he frequently became defensive when he and I had arguments; I didn't support what he wished to do with his profession; our age gap and the parts of the country we were raised in played a significant role in our morals; and we often came to different conclusions about moral issues. (PP 40)

Despite her awareness of these factors, Participant 40 still accepted a very public, exciting proposal and remained engaged to her ex-fiancé until he cheated on her with another woman and physically struck their dog. At that point, reasons why the two of them should not be together were brought back to the forefront of her mind; the participant determined she was marrying for the wrong reasons, and proceeded to called off the engagement.

As seen through these examples, many people knew the time had come to end their romantic relationship, but put off that decision for a variety of reasons; however, upon Reflection, these participants determined the reasons to separate (Age, Change of Heart, Time/Timing, or Wrong Reasons) were greater than the reasons to remain together as a romantic couple.

Boundary Violations. The third meta-category was Boundary Violations ($n = 143$ codes), which tied Reflection in the number of instances reported by study participants. This group concentrated on overstepping significant lines or limits in one's relationship and is made up of the Abuse/Threats, Cheating/Infidelity, Crossing a Line, and Trust/Respect subcategories (Table 4).

Table 4. *Boundary Violations Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS (143 total)		
Abuse/ Threats	32	Verbal, mental, and/or emotional abuse by one's ex; threats of physical harm and/or to kill the participant; physical abuse by the ex or his friends; physical abuse of an animal; promises of self-harm if the participant ever left him or her; harassment of the respondent by their ex; general threats or fear (exact behaviors were not specified, but participants were scared by his or her violent behavior)
Cheating/ Infidelity	48	Both exes' and participants' unfaithfulness (flirting, kissing, having sex with, or deliberately trying to attract others); both participants and exes who were hung up on "the one that got away" (harbored feelings for and/or actively pursued a former romantic partner)
Crossing a Line	13	Inviting others to move in without first discussing it with the participant; ex sexually assaulted/molested the participant; one gave the other an ultimatum; ex gave the respondent's belongings to another woman; ex married someone else while engaged
Trust/ Respect	50	Lies; betrayal; broken promises; trust issues; disrespect

Abuse/Threats. First, Abuse/Threats ($n = 32$) includes physical, verbal, or other harm done to the participant, animals, or an ex-partner (although only one participant disclosed abusing their ex-fiancé/e), as well as other threats which scared respondents; all of these items were noted Boundary Violations (super-category). Several individuals shared examples of repeated mistreatment at the hands of their exes, like this:

[Through therapy, I learned that I had been] dealing with years of emotional abuse... [as one example, he] left me on the road with a 2-hour walk home

because I had tried to stop him from driving drunk... [Later in the relationship,] I came home from work late one night and needed to work a long double shift the next day. He was already passed out across the entire bed... so I gave up and went to the couch to sleep... I was awoken early in the morning by him screaming... “If you’re going to fucking act like that, get the fuck out of my house!” (PP 90)

Another respondent shared a similar story:

My [ex-fiancé’s] best friend started yelling at me about being “too bossy” to them and then his girlfriend actually tried to physically harm me. My Ex did nothing to stop the situation and would not even come to my [aid]. This made me very upset and when I tried to address the issue with the girl who came at me, my Ex actually pushed me down onto the stairs and then proceeded to drag me up the stairs because I was “out of line” for yelling at his friend’s girlfriend because she tried to punch me. (PP 44)

Although it is unclear how or why participants determined “I’ve had enough,” as events like the ones described here were not the first of their kind in these relationships, abuse recipients eventually reached some sort of threshold where they were unwilling to accept any more mistreatment and terminated the premarital engagement. Even if the participant him/herself was not being physically harmed, ex-partners often used threats, accusations, and/or manipulation to get their way, prompting a fear response in the participant and which consequently kept those individuals in an unhealthy situation longer than they should have been.

Cheating/Infidelity. Next, reports of Cheating/Infidelity ($n = 48$) were present for both participants and exes and served as relational Boundary Violations (super-category), no matter who perpetrated the indiscretion. While accounts of ex-partners' unfaithfulness (flirting, kissing, having sex with, or deliberately trying to attract others) were expected, several participants did confess to flirting or sleeping with one or more persons outside the relationship while engaged to their fiancé/e. However, reports of former partners' indiscretions were still five times that of participants'.

Although some accounts of infidelity were better hidden and thus surprising (“it actually [ended when] I walked in on him and the other woman and I decided it was time to move my things out” [PP 56]), others were more obvious and repeated:

[My ex was regularly] Cheating, Talking to his X-girlfriend, telling her he wants to go get back with her because she made him who he was and that he missed her... Also talking to another girl behind my back... at times he would just go out with his friends and [come home] drunk with numbers on his hand. (PP 29)

Further, roughly 8.25% of participants or their exes acknowledged being hung up on “the one that got away” while engaged to their former partner, and noted that harboring romantic feelings for or actively pursuing a previous love contributed to the end of their current premarital engagement.

Crossing a Line. Much like flirting or sexual infidelity, the Crossing a Line category ($n = 13$) focused on events which served as a “deal breaker” for the participant or his or her ex-fiancé/e; such Boundary Violations (super-category) caused the

immediate end of the engagement, as opposed to other categories where multiple infractions were allowed. In Participant 83's narrative, she shared that her ex crossed two important lines: one (disrespectful change of plans) caused the respondent to promptly postpone the engagement, and the other (relational ultimatum) forced the end of the engagement entirely.

[My ex] changed our honeymoon plans from a trip to Bermuda to backpacking [through] the Upper Peninsula of Michigan without asking me. The beach was an important part of it for me, but he never asked... When I told him that I wanted to postpone, he gave me an ultimatum... When we talked, he again said "marry me in two weeks or not at all." I said then it won't be at all and stormed out of the restaurant. He chased me in a car but I wouldn't get in. (PP 83)

In another account, Participant 77 noted she had entered an agreement for an arranged marriage "common among Southeast Asian Indians," and due to the implications for both families involved, was hesitant to end her engagement despite the presence of significant problems. However, her ex-fiancé later crossed an unforgivable line:

The main incident that led to the breaking of the engagement was [a disagreement which caused] a physical/sexual altercation. We had been having problems and I was not amenable to his physical advances so when he came near me to kiss me/caress me, I told him in no uncertain terms that I did not want to engage in anything physical with him. He used force then and kissed/caressed me for a while before leaving. (PP 77)

After this, the participant told her father she could not marry her betrothed, who later contacted Participant 77 and tried to talk her out of this decision. Other family members argued that her ex-fiancé “is repentant about the issues you have talked about and has understood [the problems]... It will not occur again. Now forget the whole thing,” but the participant stood firm regarding her boundaries. The engagement remained broken.

Trust/Respect. The last subcategory in this group was Trust/Respect ($n = 50$), a collection of codes demonstrating the trust issues, disrespect, broken promises, and/or lies which violated one or both persons’ relational expectations (and thus, why these codes were placed in the Boundary Violations super-category) and brought about the end of the engagement. Although some concerns regarding trust and/or lies were understandably tied to infidelity, others were not; sometimes, participants felt disrespected by a sexually faithful partner.

He often talked about how he had messed up his life and hadn’t achieved several of his goals. He kept saying that if he had made better choices, his life would be better. This made me feel that I was part of a life he did not want... He bought a case of wine because “we like it so much” and I don’t drink... He wanted me to support him financially while he finished grad school and choose my grad program based on his desires... [Overall, I felt like] he didn’t respect me and my desires. (PP 83)

Others shared stories where betrayal occurred on multiple levels, and/or was instigated by multiple people:

Because my ex... was in prison, it was difficult to have a lot of communication and spend time together in a normal setting. My best friend signed her son up to be mentored by my [ex-fiancé] through a program they had at the prison... [and] my [ex-fiancé] ended up developing a relationship with my best friend (really should say former best friend)... [H]e married her 1 year later... [which] was very difficult for me because [my former friend and I] worked together in the same office and saw each other every day. (PP 124)

No matter the reason for the breach of trust or feelings of disrespect, participants listed these factors as necessitating disengagement.

In summary, whether the Boundary Violation was a one-time occurrence (Crossing a Line or Cheating/Infidelity) or repeated until the behavior could no longer be endured (Abuse/Threats or Trust/Respect), the result was the same: each person had a “line in the sand” and, once crossed, could not go back to the way things were before.

Priorities. Moving on, the next larger grouping is centered on Priorities ($n = 126$) and includes Distance, Health, and Second Place (Table 5). Narratives which indicated that an ex-partner had elevated something or someone else to a position or priority level above the romantic relationship were placed into this code family and one of its associated subgroups.

Distance. To begin, Distance ($n = 73$) focused on relationships which grew apart due to the impact of the physical or emotional “miles” between lovers: over 40% of the

Table 5. *Priorities Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
PRIORITIES (126 total)		
Distance	73	Physical and/or emotional distance; growing apart
Health	31	Physical (including injuries and disabilities), mental (including depression), and/or emotional health concerns
Second Place	22	Prioritizing something or someone else above the relationship (typically work, friends, school, or technology)

sample indicated that the physical distance between themselves and their ex-fiancé/e caused enough strain on the relationship to necessitate the end of the engagement. Much of the time, couples were separated by distance due to the Prioritization (super-category) of something like work or school over the romantic relationship, which they believed to be temporary and thus tolerable for a short while. Stated “commutes” to see one another ranged from an hour and a half drive to international distances, but no matter how near or far, all physically-separated individuals remarked that not being able to see or talk to one another for short or long periods of time damaged their romantic bond and created an emotional gap (“growing apart”). Others lived together, but still faced harmful periods apart: “...any chance he got, he got away from me or the house. One time he left for 4 days without telling me where he was going simply because we couldn’t agree on what movie to rent” (PP 22). Even so, after long-distance couples became proximal again, the problems caused by physical and/or emotional distance were not immediately resolved:

I lived 6 hours away when we got engaged, then she had our son and for four more months I lived away visiting every other weekend. Then when I moved back

she could not adjust to me being around. Then I started graduate school 1.5 hours away and she [said she] was not ready to “struggle with me...” (PP 102)

Given that long-distance romantic partners (and even geographically-close partners who have grown apart) lead relatively separate lives, it makes sense that re-integration – a result longed-for by most couples separated by physical and/or emotional distance – could also prove challenging.

Second Place. With this in mind, respondents reported struggling with feeling like they were in Second Place ($n = 22$); when something or someone else (typically work, friends, school, or technology) was Prioritized (super-category) over the romantic relationship, former fiancé/es no longer felt like the most important person in their romantic partner’s life.

My [fiancé] moved to another country for a job... [and] rarely called me. He said he was working 16 hour days... [but] I felt like he chose his job over me. I felt rejected. I was putting in so much effort to make the [relationship] work, but he wasn’t... He thought his career was priority #1, [and] I thought our relationship was. (PP 92)

Several military girlfriends shared similar stories:

Once he was back [from basic training] he was totally different, he chose to spend time with his friends drinking and partying instead of being with me. Or we would be together and one of his friends would call and invite him over and he would ditch me for them... I got fed up with being his whenever person. (PP 55)

In short, individuals wanted to play an important role in the lives of their betrothed, and when it became apparent that another person or thing had taken or was placed in the spot that should have been “reserved” for one’s partner, the engagement was terminated.

Health. Finally, some couples struggled with physical, mental, or emotional Health issues ($n = 31$). While it is understandable that these health concerns might take precedence over the relationship for a temporary period (e.g., immediately following an injury or diagnosis), participants shared that the length of time such issues were Prioritized (super-category) over romantic relationship maintenance became unbearable and/or that the couple was unable to find a healthy, productive way to manage these issues. Health concerns ranged from emotional baggage from prior relationships (“She was emotionally unavailable due to being sexually abused as a child and teenager and having a string of boyfriends that were all verbally abusive and played mind games” [PP 123]) to unexpected physical injuries (“I was in a car accident and incurred a major back injury [which] put a lot of strain on the relationship” [PP 74]). In perhaps the most dramatic narrative in the current project, one participant’s ex-partner unexpectedly attempted to commit suicide while he was engaged to her, but was unsuccessful:

[My ex had “smiling depression” and] shot himself but lived through it, came out of the coma, and was [re-habilitated] to some degree... Imagine having to tell the story: “My [fiancé] shot himself, so we won’t be getting married!!!” It was very difficult. I thought at that point, maybe there was something wrong with me, or that I caused him to want to die... It was terrible... [but] no one paid any attention to me and how I was hurting until his re-hab was over... the incident so broke my

heart over time that eventually my grief turned into depression [and] my family didn't want to talk about the incident... [so I was alone]. (PP 47)

Participant 47 stayed with her fiancé for over a year after his suicide attempt, all the while plunging into depression herself. Through extensive therapy, the respondent finally determined that she was not to blame for her partner's actions (despite his family attributing guilt to her) and found the strength to walk away from an unhealthy relationship in order to "give myself a chance to have a relationship with someone else who could be an... equal partner" (PP 47).

Time and time again, no matter who or what (Distance, Health, or Second Place) was positioned above the romantic relationship, former fiancé/es consistently demonstrated the desire to be the top Priority in their romantic partner's life – and not just his or her "whenever person" (PP 55).

Cumulative Annoyances. The fifth super-category discovered through data analysis was Cumulative Annoyances ($n = 121$): real or perceived flaws in one or both persons (although attention was primarily focused on exes) which drove a wedge between romantic partners (Table 6). This larger code family includes the subgroups of Personality/ Behavior Irritants and Money/Work.

Personality/Behavior Irritants and Money/Work. First, Personality/Behavior Irritants yielded a staggering 91 accounts, which ranged from indecisiveness to avoiding responsibility to selfishness to condescension, among numerous others; at certain points during the coding process, it felt like anything which could even *potentially* irritate

Table 6. *Cumulative Annoyances Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
CUMULATIVE ANNOYANCES (121 total)		
Money/ Work	30	Ex-partner's unwillingness to work; lack of a job; being fired from or quitting a job; lengthy job search; debt; and/or general "money issues"
Personality/ Behavior Irritants	91	Real or perceived character flaws in one or both persons, such as avoiding responsibility; being controlling, jealous, or having anger issues (exclusively attributed to males); playing emotional "games"; being selfish, lazy, weak, needy, stubborn, whiny, or indecisive; not following through with tasks; making poor clothing choices or having bad hygiene; and many others

someone was mentioned. However, the heaviest contributors to this subcategory were anger, control, and jealousy issues, principally demonstrated by one's partner; it should also be noted that all instances of these specific irritants were exclusively attributed to men in this study (both male participants and also female participants' ex-partners). As one example,

We had been separated for 2 months before we got back together, at which point we took a vacation to California and he proposed on the beach. We had broken up because he was too controlling and I felt like I had no freedom... [and] he had promised to change... When we became engaged things were no different and when I brought this up to him he told me I was his [fiancée] and it was his business to know everyone I spent time with and where I was 100% of the time.

That's when I knew that things were not going to work out because he hadn't changed; the engagement was just another way for him to be controlling. (PP 59)

Similarly, participants were concerned about ex-partners' lack of or unwillingness to get a job, unequal monetary contribution to the relationship, and debt or money issues, as well as when former partners were fired from or quit paying positions:

My [ex-fiancé] ... lost several jobs... and was working in a low-paying job where he was unhappy; he insisted that we were having so many problems because he had to wait around while I finished my bachelor's degree, and then we could move on and start life. (PP 90)

In many cases, partners who lost or quit jobs largely chose not to pursue other paying opportunities. These concerns were grouped into the second subcategory in this area, called Money/Work ($n = 30$). irritant

Together, these codes (Personality/Behavior Irritants and Money/Work) illustrate that individuals will only tolerate a disruptive, unchecked behavior or trait for a period of time before relational termination occurs. Both subgroups were placed in the Cumulative Annoyances super-category because the traits or behaviors in question had been endured by the participant or ex-partner over and over again until such aggravations could no longer be tolerated.

Outside Influences. Further, the sixth largest code family was titled Outside Influences ($n = 80$) because of the significant and detrimental impact an external person

or thing had on the internal relationship between romantic partners (Table 7). Codes related to Alcohol/Drugs and Third Parties made up this grouping.

Alcohol/Drugs. The first subcategory, Alcohol/Drugs ($n = 19$), is relatively self-explanatory: both participants' and ex-fiancé/es' drug and/or alcohol use or abuse were factors which contributed to the end of one's engagement. However, it was reported that ex-partners' reliance on drugs and/or alcohol was four times that of participants' addictions. Given that substances like alcohol and drugs are external factors which weigh on and impact the internal relationship, these codes were placed in the Outside Influences super-category.

Additionally, multiple respondents expressed an awareness of the other person's interest in or dependence on drugs and/or alcohol early in the relationship, even noting that the participant him- or herself occasionally shared in these same substances, but that the situation eventually got out of hand:

My [ex-fiancé's] drinking habit... was a significant issue that we were never able to overcome. We would regularly fight about it, my [ex-fiancé] would periodically not go out as often, but it would always come back. My [ex-fiancé] would go out to the bar at the beginning of our relationship an average of 5 nights a week for 6+ hours at a time. At the end of our relationship it had decreased to an average of 2-3 nights a week for the same amount of time... I knew that I couldn't tolerate that level of addiction... [but] it wasn't something that my [ex-fiancé] actually wanted to stop. (PP 129)

Table 7. *Outside Influences Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
OUTSIDE INFLUENCES (80 total)		
Alcohol/ Drugs	19	Drinking, alcoholism, and/or drug use or abuse by both participants and/or exes
Third Parties	61	Negative opinion of both participants' and exes' friends and families toward the opposite partner; respondents did not like exes' friends and/or family; exes disliked participants' friends and/or family

Third Parties. The second subcategory in this area is tied to communication.

While participants and exes may not have been communicating effectively (or at all), the lines of communication with friends and family were alive and well: the Third Parties category ($n = 61$) clearly illustrates that individuals beyond the dyad (Outside Influences super-category) do affect a couple's internal relationship, as the negative opinion of both participants' and ex-fiancé/es' friends and families toward the opposite partner was regularly reported as a lingering warning or reservation in the mind of the recipient. To illustrate, Participant 40 recalled that

a number of my friends had never liked my [ex-fiancé], and far before I called off the relationship this opinion of my friends was a big red flag. I was... heavily influenced by my social network and was glad they seemed to think I had made the correct decision [when I ended the engagement]. (PP 40)

Participant 23 offered a comparable account: "Everyone on my side... told me the standard '[you're too] pretty, too smart, [you're] going places... he's a loser.' These were

close friends and primarily my mother.” Respondents also related distaste for some of their exes’ friends and/or family, as well as knowledge of ex-fiancé/es’ dislike for their own friends and/or family members and vice versa (“[My ex’s] best friend... hated me. She told me to go kill myself... [and] none of his friends liked me... due to the picture of me that he painted for them” [PP 111]).

In short, relationships do not exist in a vacuum, and the influence of outside (re)sources – both individuals (Third Parties) and substances (Alcohol/Drugs) – cannot and should not be ignored. Outside Influences, like those described here, clearly have both short- and long-term impacts on a romantic engagement.

Discursive Discord. Finally, the last major category produced through data analysis was Discursive Discord ($n = 75$), and includes only one significant subcategory: Communication Problems (Table 8).

Table 8. *Discursive Discord Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
DISCURSIVE DISCORD (75 total)		
Communication Problems	75	Ex was often evasive or defensive; there were long periods without communication when clear communication was needed; couples experienced regular, unresolved, and unproductive conflict; poor conflict management skills were displayed by one or both persons; incompatible conflict and/or communication styles created unhealthy and often chronic patterns or cycles and damaged the partners’ bond

Communication Problems. In this group, couples experienced regular or chronic, unresolved, and unproductive conflict while simultaneously demonstrating poor conflict management skills and evasiveness, defensiveness, or silence in place of clear, healthy communication. All of these factors damaged the partners' bond, caused Discursive Discord (super-category), and thus negatively affected the romantic relationship. In a particularly self-aware account, Participant 106 shared:

We did a horrible job communicating with one another... [My ex was] the middle child, [and therefore] my ex was always the peacemaker. In our relationship, she kept everything bottled up inside... I let my ex get away with not communicating, and in turn, did so myself, and that was [what] led to the ultimate decline of the relationship. (PP 106)

Stories like this one highlight the necessity of regular, high-quality communication between romantic partners, as well as the importance of developing skills to resolve inevitable relational disagreements. Finally, the few remaining reasons or signs did not neatly fit into any particular category, and were grouped together (Other, $n = 20$).

Research Question 3: Dialectical Tension Pairs

The third research question explored the dialectical tensions that emerged from written accounts of broken engagements (Table 9). First, the researcher read participants' narratives several times to identify main themes and categories, through which "a coding frame was developed and the [surveys were] coded" (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Baxter and Erbert's (1999) six tension pairs and Montemurro's (2002) dialectic were all seen during

Table 9. *Primary Tension Pairs*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
BAXTER & ERBERT's (1999) TENSION PAIRS		
Autonomy/ Connection	60	Time spent apart vs. together; desire for independence vs. togetherness; physical and/or emotional distance; attempts to use threats and/or control as a forced point of connection
Novelty/ Predictability	19	Degree of newness (change) present and/or wanted vs. degree of stability (known/expected variables, boredom) present and/or wanted
Openness/ Closedness	41	Open sharing (thoughts, feelings, opportunity to fix relational problems) vs. communicative barriers or isolation (decline in or disappearance of high-quality, intimate conversations)
Seclusion/ Inclusion	14	Time spent as a couple vs. time spent with others (group setting, outside the home); desire for couple to stay home alone vs. engage others together
Conventionality/ Uniqueness	8	Replication of "traditional" roles, norms, or expectations vs. different, unconventional approaches to these same factors
Revelation/ Concealment	24	Degree of sharing by/about the couple to the outside community vs. degree of details hidden from external others; includes motivation (why factors were shared or kept private)

coding: Autonomy/Connection, Openness/Closedness, Revelation/Concealment, Novelty/Predictability, Seclusion/Inclusion, Conventionality/Uniqueness, and Excitement/Obligation. However, inductive coding also uncovered several new experiences evident in the raw data, so "the coding frame was changed and [surveys] were reread according to the new structure" (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Through this process, three additional dialectics emerged: Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty.

Autonomy/Connection. First, the Autonomy/Connection and Openness/Closedness dialectics had a strong presence in the current study (Table 9). When considering Autonomy/Connection ($n = 60$), it was unsurprisingly noted that couples often privileged autonomy as they grew apart and into different lives:

We had both decided to go to different undergraduate universities for our degrees. I was not personally happy that she had decided to move a state away, but it was still close enough I could visit often... [However] Her choice seemed to become more and more about her getting away from her family and myself as the move got closer. I was even told not to visit on several [occasions]. (PP 112)

In this case, romantic partners followed relatively separate paths, and connection was made more difficult to achieve due to physical and later emotional distance. Even in proximal relationships, people struggled with this dialectic and shared a longing for more connection, but were often left “sitting home alone, waiting for [my ex] to come home” (PP 103). Conversely, one participant discovered that his ex-partner felt they had grown too close and lost individual autonomy: “She felt that we had become too codependent and had completely lost our... independence and had essentially merged into one being as a couple, and she fought tooth and nail to get back her individuality” (PP 106).

Openness/Closedness. In the Openness/Closedness dialectic ($n = 41$; Table 9), many people emphasized the closedness pole as partners grew apart and productive communication declined or disappeared entirely: “At first everything was fine, but as time went on I felt he began to talk less... After about a month of significantly decreasing

communication... we broke up on my parents' front porch" (PP 11). Even in cases where more openness was not only desired but directly requested by one party, the other partner did not always comply – until it was too late:

When I came home on Friday evening, she had a bag packed. She met me at the door and told me it was over... She claimed she was unhappy with our relationship (though this was the first time she'd brought it up, and had previously stated, when asked, that everything was 'fine'), and was convinced that I couldn't change to fix the situation... [If I were to offer advice to someone considering a broken engagement, it would be to] Keep your significant other informed of your fears and doubts. If you truly love somebody, it's unconscionable to tell them that everything is great if that's not the way you feel, and you're sparing them nothing in the end but the chance to fix anything. (PP 94)

However, in select cases, participants noted that it was actually the presence of *too much* openness that brought about the end of their engagement:

[My ex-fiancé] still had a lot of contact with his ex-girlfriend. Said they were still friends... I had trouble accepting the fact that he and his ex g/f still talked, texted, [and] saw each other on a regular basis... I just couldn't understand why he was still so involved with his ex. To me, and ex is an ex is an ex! I never stayed friends with any of them. I still loved him and thought that the ex g/f problem would end the next year when we got married and he moved to [another state] with me. However, he kept talking to her and about her... One night in February

we got into a fight over the phone (about her again!) and he told me that I had to accept he had friends, both male and female. I told him I accepted that, but he would also have to accept the fact that I didn't want to hear about them. (PP 79)

Participant 79's ex-partner broke up with her later that evening. Another participant related his struggle with cancer. After traveling hundreds of miles away for treatments, "I was scared and angry and unfortunately... all she got was me complaining about how much pain I was in and how she wasn't there to help me through the rough times" (PP 51). After multiple phone calls like the one just described, Participant 51's partner began to distance herself; upon his return months later, the damage of excessive sharing and subsequent closedness had been done. Couples struggling with the Openness/Closedness dialectic discovered that communication is a key determinant in whether or not a relationship (and thus, premarital romantic engagement) will survive: it is only through clear, collaborative communication, where both partners work together, that the delicate balance between openness and closedness can be attained.

Revelation/Concealment. Next, the Revelation/Concealment dialectic ($n = 24$) appeared regularly in participants' broken engagement stories (Table 9). Although some respondents favored one pole over another ("I did not discuss it with anyone [other than my ex]. I did not feel it was anyone's business" [PP 71]), several narratives displayed elements of both revelation and concealment. Take Participant 46 for example: when his engagement ended due to his ex-fiancée's infidelity,

I was very open and honest with my close family and friends. Other than that I did not tell anyone. People at work months later would ask “are you married yet?” [and] I would simply say “no, I am not.” If someone asked how she was doing I would say “I’m sure she is fine.” I did not advertise that I was not with her [anymore] because I did not want to have to explain things to everyone. (PP 46)

Although the concept of shame is explored more fully in the discussion, perhaps certain individuals did not reveal many details about their relational dissolution because of an anticipated or commonly-received response.

To illustrate, several participants expressed disbelief at answers received in response to the revelation that their engagement had ended because of repeated lies and cheating by one’s former partner: “My parents really advocated for us to stay together b/c there will always be struggles. Friends... who knew that I wanted to get married also supported accepting/moving past the [affairs]” (PP 86). Shocked and surprised at being told to “just get over it” in order to attain a certain marital status, Participant 86 stood firm in her decision to end the engagement and instead began telling those who inquired that she and her ex-partner “had different priorities... things we could not resolve” (PP 86). By privileging concealment in the latter conversations, Participant 86 felt she faced less open criticism for and contrary opinions regarding her decision to end the four-year romantic relationship and engagement.

Other respondents revealed that the hesitance to share more detailed accounts of their broken engagement stemmed from physically distant (“Because I [attended] college

1000 miles from home, I did not explain the extent of the problems that were occurring between myself and my partner to my family, only that I had ended the relationship” [PP 91]) or emotionally distant (“When I did get around to telling my mother and brother... it was kinda like talking about the weather... I was frankly pleased just not to be met with contempt” [PP 129]) family members; however, these same respondents did share intimate details with close friends, mentors, and/or therapists. Finally, the potential for reunification with an ex-fiancé/e seems to have pushed some participants toward concealment, as it did here:

I didn't feel able to talk to my family about breaking things off because I was poignantly aware that they'd remember those doubts I had expressed if I were to go on and marry my ex. I didn't want to bring up the problems with the relationship to people who would be my [ex-fiancée's] future in-laws. (PP 126)

Novelty/Predictability. The next category, Novelty/Predictability ($n = 19$), was more salient in participants' broken engagement narratives than originally anticipated (Table 9). Although a few respondents reported the presence of too much predictability in their romantic relationships (“He told his younger brother that he just got bored” [PP 12]; also “I had sort of been bored with the relationship for a long time” [PP 118]), the vast majority shared narratives like Participant 125, where too many new variables were introduced in rapid succession: “In the short time we were together [10 months], we dealt with a number of MAJOR stressors (e.g., a cross country move, new job, moving in together, wedding planning, and major deaths in the family, including his father)” [emphasis in original]. The respondent went on to say, “I think I would have had more

faith in our relationship if we had been together longer” (PP 125), and argued that there was simply “too much new” too fast for the couple to adapt appropriately.

Similarly, Participant 32 longed for more predictability, as his former partner’s drug and alcohol addictions caused near-constant turmoil: his ex-fiancée got “fired for not showing up to work,” had to be driven around “because she had gotten a DUI and lost her license,” and regularly gave “lap dances to everyone in the room” or slept with others when drunk or high. These things occurred while Participant 32 was also trying to readjust to civilian life after being discharged from the Navy, attend college part-time, and work a full-time job; there was simply too much novelty, and not enough predictability, to deal with in a short time frame (4 months).

Seclusion/Inclusion. Many of the external tension pairs were less noticeable in the broken engagement narratives provided in this study, which is understandable given the uncoupling that occurred. However, some examples of Seclusion/Inclusion and Conventionality/Uniqueness were still present (Table 9). First, Seclusion/Inclusion ($n = 14$) was most often reported when participants looked back on the problems present in the dating and engagement periods of their relationship (prior to the broken engagement and subsequent coping period). Several participants lamented the lack of “alone time,” or seclusion as a couple: “We would mostly argue about house work and alone time because we were never alone... His friends would come everywhere with us and were always around at home” (PP 44). Participant 48 agreed:

She wanted me to spend more time with her one-on-one instead of with our group of friends. We connected as a couple during outings with a circle of friends and it seemed to establish a pattern that continued even after she and I began an intimate relationship. (PP 48)

In both cases, the lack of seclusion contributed to the ending of the engagement. In contrast, some couples needed more inclusion. In analyzing Participant 46's tale, he and his ex-partner had been drifting apart, but still saw each other regularly. As the wedding date approached, an important family member came to town who had not met his betrothed, so the participant tried to arrange some deliberate inclusion time:

My mom came in to town to visit once and she had never met my [fiancée]. My mother lives in a different state, and I had not seen her in almost 5 years. I thought this would be a great bonding time for all of us, but my [ex-fiancée] showed no interest in her being there and made excuses to leave the [apartment]. During the whole week and a half my mother was there my ex was with us twice, and that was to eat dinner. (PP 46)

Unfortunately, the lack of effort on his ex-fiancée's part cemented some of the problems the couple had been experiencing, and the engagement was ended soon after.

Conventionality/Uniqueness. Next, Conventionality/Uniqueness ($n = 8$) almost exclusively manifested as a struggle around traditional gender roles in the division of household labor, with cooking and cleaning expectations falling squarely on the shoulders of women (Table 9). Female participants resented this convention, and several

expressly stated they were looking for an “equal partner” who would share household responsibilities. Participant 34 struggled with this dialectic in particular, because her ex “seemed like he had it together” while they were dating and promised to do his share of the work; however, upon moving in together, she learned that

my [ex-fiancé] would sit around all day and never do any chores (taking out the trash, laundry, cleaning up after himself) and always expected me to do it. I never knew about this side of him... I [later] explained to him that I wanted him to help out more and share our load 50/50 and he agreed [but] each and every day, his promise became [more] apparent. (PP 34)

Other participants resented the fact that their former partner did not want them to pursue higher education or a career, because “[my ex said] that was stupid. He already was well off in his job and wanted me to become his child [bearing] house slave” (PP 98); the inability to follow their own interests and/or the absence of support needed in order to reach personal goals placed additional strain on the relationship. Finally, some female respondents struggled with this dialectic because they were expected to make a solid income, pay certain bills, cook, *and* keep the house with limited or no reciprocation from their male partner (PP 103).

Excitement/Obligation. Montemurro’s (2002) dialectic of Excitement/Obligation ($n = 22$) was also mentioned in a few accounts (Table 10), although no question on the survey specifically addressed how respondents, exes, or respective networks handled the “business” of the broken engagement (which would have better captured this tension).

Table 10. *Engagement-Specific Tensions*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
MONTEMURRO'S (2002) DIALECTIC		
Excitement/ Obligation	22	During engagement, excitement for impending marriage vs. required duties performed in preparation; during broken engagement, relief experienced as a result of termination vs. commitment to “doing what’s right” to successfully end the engagement (e.g. return gifts)

Considering the engagement period, specifically, some respondents felt pushed and pulled between the excitement of getting married and unhappiness regarding the city or state where they would live with their partner (obligation). Participant 11 noted,

We had very different goals. I had said I wanted to move away from [the town we met in, where he still lived] and start a career, etc. when we first met. When we got serious, I told him I would be happy [there] and would stay for him. At first he was totally fine with this, but I think he began to feel guilty and thought he would be holding me back... [and honestly,] I wouldn't have been happy [living in that town]. (PP 11)

After the engagement had been broken, participants seemed to experience relief that the relationship was over, but still felt compelled (obligation) to “do the right thing”:

I returned [the engagement ring I had bought] and used the money to buy some housewares for my new apartment. I was actually really relieved... My grandmother [also] went with me to his house to get my half of the engagement gifts so that I could return them. (PP 83)

As seen in this narrative, Participant 83 was excited to be free from the relationship and her abusive ex-partner, but still felt obligated to do her duty in the aftermath of the broken engagement so that all of the “business” of disengagement (cancelling vendors, notifying guests, etc.) did not fall solely to her ex-fiancé.

Hope/Resignation. In addition to Baxter and Erbert’s (1999) and Montemurro’s (2002) dialectics, three new tension pairs appeared during the coding process: Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty (Table 11). First, the Hope/Resignation dialectic ($n = 34$) includes elements of *fantasy* (the individual was at least vaguely aware of unfavorable traits or behaviors in one’s partner/relationship, but hopeful these factors would change over time) and *reality* (ultimately, the individual realized that such traits/behaviors were unlikely to change, and resigned him/herself to relational termination). As an example, Participant 128 shared that after she finally admitted her ex-partner had violent tendencies, she tried talking to him about her concerns:

I knew earlier that he had a temper, but then I spent time with his father who I would say was “violent” – and realized my [fiancé] had so many similar mannerisms and habits. I did not want to end up married to him and him showing his father’s violence. Then I realized he already was, and I was simply calling it something else. I tried postponing the wedding – twice – and talking to him about the issues, but nothing ever changed... I was tired of all the fighting, all his temper, and could see he was going to end up just like his dad. (PP 128)

Table 11. *New Dialectical Tensions*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
NEW DIALECTICAL TENSIONS		
Hope/ Resignation	34	Includes elements of fantasy vs. reality, willful denial; at least vague awareness of unfavorable element(s) in one's partner/relationship, fueled by the hope that these factors would change over time; ultimately, forced to acknowledge that such traits and/or behaviors were enduring
Familiarity/ Instability	32	Periods of disruption (instability) vs. a return to the relative comfort of what is known (familiar; does not imply functionality or health)
Love/ Loyalty	31	Torn between affection for and commitment to romantic partner and affection for and commitment to one's family/friends

It is clear that Participant 128 had already seen signs of violence in her partner but had elected to “simply [call] it something else” (fantasy). Upon recognizing the violence for what it was, Participant 128 still held out hope that her ex would change, directly communicated her concerns, and offered him the opportunity to work together to correct the issue. However, the reality of the situation slowly set in, and the respondent finally came to the conclusion that her ex-partner did not want to change (resignation), and subsequently broke the engagement. Similarly, Participant 82

broke it off because I saw “signs” that he was never going to move forward with his life. He spent most of his free time watching TV. He always talked about going to college but never once cracked an SAT book, no matter how many I brought to him. He had big ambitions but was very loyal to his employer and

settled in his job. He just was not a mover or improver. I was in college at the time, so my whole world was changing, and he was sitting still. Clearly we were not going in the same direction. (Hell, he wasn't even going.)... [After years of no change, I finally called off our engagement.] He was very upset, too, and angry, but not being much of a strong will nature, eventually resigned himself to it and just went back to his parents... he found a job where his parents live and has been in the same job ever since, and has still not been in any other relationship. Not much of a mover, as I said... (PP 82)

Despite repeatedly encouraging her ex-fiancé to pursue a college education, earn a degree or certificate, or at least seek out a job he found more appealing or suited to his personal strengths – all while actively trying to help him reach these goals – Participant 82 recognized that her efforts (hope) were not making the desired impact and then resigned herself to try to “go on with life” without her former partner.

Another respondent shared that it took a cross-country move to draw attention to factors he and his ex-fiancée had previously ignored: “Perhaps the biggest event that was cause for concern was a move across the country. Being in a context different from the one in which our relationship had always existed forced us to face some disconnects that we were able to ignore for a long time” (PP 100). Despite discussing these differences and how to navigate them, Participant 100 and his ex both agreed that lasting change was unlikely because, “after having been together for seven years,” these patterns were ingrained and a broken engagement made more sense.

Familiarity/Instability. The second new dialectical pair, Familiarity/Instability ($n = 32$), explored the tension between familiarity (comfort with what is already known) and instability (disruption). The best example of this dialectic was shared by Participant 95, who was in the midst of a broken engagement and tentative reconciliation at the time of the survey:

[My fiancé thinks that] any disagreement equals disrespect. If I don't agree with him, then I am not seeing his point of view, but... this isn't reciprocal. There isn't a desire to consider what I may view as disrespectful, such as disregarding what is important to ME... It is just deemed disrespect and assumed that I will drop it. Otherwise, the relationship is over. What happens then is we reach an impasse. We break up. We stay away from each other for a short time, then tearfully make up. We promise to listen better and be more aware of our past issues which may be driving our current behavior. Yet, we have been through this cycle of removing rings many times; in two years, I'd say this has happened 3 or 4 times. We are in the midst of such a situation currently... [However,] when the rings come off... they are usually back on within days... Our friends from tennis know we belong together but are concerned with his controlling attitude... He seems to be willing to reconcile, like recently, but there's always some miscommunication about what each of us meant, which often leads to another breakup, like now... I've been told that his power issues were bad for me, so that a break up might be good... On the other hand, we love each other and really are a good match. We just have a lot of things to still figure out. (PP 95; emphasis in original)

Throughout her narrative, Participant 95 makes several references to the centripetal pull of familiarity (“we love each other and really are a good match”) and the centrifugal push of disruption (“I am pursuing a job in a place he won’t consider going. The only way to maintain the relationship in his opinion is for me to quit pursuing the opportunity [and because I am even considering it,] he has asked me to move out”). This couple has been struggling with the familiarity/instability dialectic for a while, and despite being “broken up” at the time of the survey, Participant 95 was confident she and her partner would get back together soon “and try to keep a delicate peace.” For people in relationships like this, the pull of familiarity is too strong – and yet, without effective relational maintenance, another disruption is practically assured.

Love/Loyalty. Finally, the third new tension pair, Love/Loyalty ($n = 31$), involves feeling caught between different forms of affection: love for one’s romantic partner, and loyalty to one’s friends and family. In most cases, friends and/or family disliked the participant’s ex-fiancé/e, and shared these negative opinions with the respondent (and sometimes with the ex-partner). As a result, participants felt torn between love for the person he or she planned to marry, and love for family and friends:

My family didn’t [really] care for [my ex]. She was an atheist and my father is a minister. We came from two complete opposite types of families but we made it work for a while. My brother had a son out of wedlock in high school and she constantly made him feel bad for what she said was his screw up. My friends hated her because she was very short with people and constantly hateful with them. She was a very mean person but I had learned to dismiss that. My family

supported me big time when [our engagement ended]. My friends came back around and supported my journey back to being the old me. (PP 112)

Other participants related that “I experienced conflict with my family because my [fiancée] came from a lower socioeconomic status and came from a background of alcoholism” (PP 74), or that “I always defended myself for loving him. None of my family/friends felt he was ‘good enough’ for me” (PP 73). One person regularly found himself in a position of having to stand up for his ex-partner to others:

My father was never a big supporter of the relationship. Shortly before the engagement ended, he told me he thought my [ex-fiancée] was selfish and only interested in herself. My best friend and roommate basically said the same thing [and] we had a large argument about my relationship. Finally, I lost one of my best friends in the course of the relationship. It was a female friend who didn’t like the way I was being treated and I chose my [fiancée] over my friend and I haven’t spoken to that friend in two years [which I deeply regret]. (PP 123)

Despite the unique factors governing each broken engagement scenario, participants caught between familial love/loyalty and romantic love/loyalty all lamented the difficulties of both successfully and unsuccessfully navigating those tensions. The push and pull of love for one’s romantic partner and love for friends and family left individuals feeling torn and frustrated: there was no good choice to be made, as someone would be upset or hurt either way.

CHAPTER FIVE, RESULTS: SENSE-MAKING & COPING

The results of thematic analysis and frequency counts are provided in this section through quoted participant narratives, category summaries, and detailed tables regarding the last three research questions. Finally, a discussion of the results for this project and suggestions for future research are provided in the following chapter.

Research Question 4: Coping Strategies

The fourth research question asked which coping strategies would emerge from broken engagement narratives. After coding for tension pairs, the researcher analyzed participants' accounts for evidence of dialectical coping strategies (Yoshimura, 2013): Denial, Disorientation, Segmentation, Spiraling Alternation, Balance, Integration, Recalibration, and Reaffirmation. The researcher first reviewed participants' written accounts to determine general methods of dealing with a broken engagement; coping strategies were only coded for the participants themselves (not exes or third parties, if known). Unfortunately, due to poor wording on the survey, many respondents did not seem to understand what the researcher was asking and as a result, the eight previously-mentioned dialectical coping categories were not a natural fit.

Next, the researcher attempted to code the emergent coping strategies as either functional or dysfunctional, but soon realized that many of these methods could be both healthy and unhealthy depending on context and application (i.e. how each strategy was

used in that unique scenario). Ultimately, the researcher more broadly grouped coping methods into the larger code families of Connection or Separation.

Additionally, 11 subcategories were discovered during data analysis:

Communication (Open), Communication (Closed), Distance, Fresh Start, Intervention, Living Situation, Mourning, Readjustment/Redefinition, Reconciliation Attempts, and Take Your Mind Off (see Tables 12 and 13). Any coping strategies that did not fit neatly into one of the listed subcategories (generally, vague accounts where no coping method was easily discernible) were grouped together into the Other ($n = 9$) category.

Connection. The first large group, Connection ($n = 247$), focused on coping strategies where the individual proactively sought help and/or input from others to aid him- or herself in the disengagement process and includes Communication (Open), Intervention, Readjustment/Redefinition, and Reconciliation Attempts (Table 12).

Communication (Open). To begin, Communication (Open) ($n = 127$) includes participants' attempts to discursively process the relationship and associated broken engagement with friends and/or family members, and occasionally with one's ex-partner and his or her family, as well. It should be noted that communication with one's ex was not conciliatory, but rather, used to keep the lines of communication open to facilitate a smoother uncoupling. In most cases, the participant actively sought help and Connection (super-category) from others in order to process the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with the termination of his or her engagement, and/or remained open to

Table 12. *Connection Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
CONNECTION (247 total)		
Communication (Open)	127	Non-conciliatory communication with ex; communication with one's own friends and/or family; communication with ex-partner's family; reinstated contact with a family member who had disowned the participant due to her relationship with ex
Intervention	24	Sought assistance from outside sources like the police (protective order), prayer, or therapy/counseling
Readjustment/Redefinition	45	Badmouthed ex to/with friends or family, or heard similar comments from these people, as a way to help the disengaged person feel better; posted comments about the breakup on social media; successfully navigated the broken engagement in such a way to remain friends; unsuccessfully navigated the broken engagement in such a way that friendship was not possible; went through a mental/identity readjustment process; hooked up with ex
Reconciliation Attempts	51	Both successful and failed reconciliation attempts by participant, one's ex, a friend, or family member; brief romantic reconciliation; long-term romantic reconciliation

communication attempts initiated by friends or family. As an example, Participant 129 worked through the end of her engagement with her best friend and several others:

My friends were VITAL to the way I processed the conclusion of this relationship. My best friend came in from out of town for several days [just] to be with me. This was very helpful for me in several ways: she was another body in the house so I didn't feel alone, she was available all day each day (which allowed me to talk about it when I could and not when I wasn't able), and she was

remarkably patient with my emotional volatility. Having her support was critical during that time and I believe I would have struggled much more if she hadn't been there for me at that time. (PP 129)

Interestingly, the respondent went on to add that “one unexpected place I found support was in my [ex-fiancé's] parents... they would still meet me periodically for lunch to catch up and provide encouragement” (PP 129). Although the parents in this scenario were hopeful the participant and their son would reconcile (and thus, perhaps had ulterior motives for meeting with her), the communication between Participant 129 and these people still served as a valuable point of connection in helping her cope with the broken engagement. Occasionally, contact with one's ex and his or her network was dysfunctional, such as when the ex-partner's family incorrectly accused the participant of “withholding his belongings” (PP 103) or when communication with one's former partner reached a level that was no longer productive. By a staggering majority, the largest strategy reported both in this category and in the project overall ($n = 84$) was communication with the participant's own friends and family, further indication of the importance of third parties during disengagement.

Intervention. The next subcategory in this area is Intervention. In addition to friends and family, a small group of participants ($n = 24$) sought assistance or Connection (super-category) from other outside sources like the police, therapists, counselors, or a higher power. First, some participants were engaged to violent, abusive, and/or threatening persons, and were fearful for their own safety after calling off the engagement; as a result, respondents sought protective actions (like a restraining order) to

help reduce the likelihood of harm. Participant 91 found herself in such a position: she and her fiancé had been having problems readjusting to one another's physical presence after her return from a study abroad program, ultimately escalating to the point of violence against objects (hitting the wall, throwing keys, etc.) which the participant feared might progress to physical injury against herself.

I was so concerned about my safety after one night when he forced his way into my dorm and refused to leave until I talked to him – at one point, I tried to shut the door and he held it open, refusing to leave until we talked more... [even after I broke off our engagement,] he continued to text, call, e-mail, and leave voicemails for both myself, my best friend, and a close mentor of mine until I filed a no-contact order against him through the school because I was so concerned about my safety. (PP 91)

A few former fiancé/es elected to enter therapy or counseling to help sort through the relationship and its dissolution, and several participants reported praying (to God, for some, and unnamed deities or other spiritual beings for others) to help them through this difficult transition. Coping methods like these serve as points of connection because of the emphasis on sharing and/or seeking help dealing with heavy emotions, instead of bottling them up.

Readjustment/Redefinition. Moving on, multiple respondents ($n = 45$) mentioned specific components of the Readjustment/Redefinition process experienced in the wake of their broken engagement, during which time individuals worked with others

(Connection super-category) to adjust to a life without their ex and acclimate to new personal and relational labels (e.g. “just friends,” ex-fiancé/e, single, etc.). The adjustment period was rocky for some participants, who hooked up with their former partner due to the dialectical pull of familiarity (“We had sex for a while after the relationship was over. We didn’t talk much during that period... that lasted about a month and a half before we saw how unhealthy it was” [PP 126]), and finally stopped when one or both persons realized this coping strategy was inhibiting growth. Other participants and/or friends and family “trash talked” the ex in an attempt to lift the participant’s spirits (“One of my [friends said] that my ex only care[d] about himself and always put himself in first place. I did [not] agree with her... The reason she was saying that [was] because she want[ed] me to feel better [but it didn’t work]” [PP 57]), often unsuccessfully, and as a way to help the individual adjust to a life and label without one’s former partner.

Reconciliation Attempts. The last subcategory under Connection is Reconciliation Attempts ($n = 51$), where one or more persons endeavored to get the couple back together after the engagement was broken. Attempts were initiated by the participant, his or her ex-partner, and also by outside parties (most often, the parent[s] or sibling[s] of one of the disengaged individuals) and were largely unsuccessful ($n = 31$). For example, Participant 83’s account revealed multiple attempts at reunification:

[My ex] went to my parents’ house and commiserated with them (they loved him and supported him in this event). He did not give up on the engagement until several months later. He kept showing up where I lived telling me that we were

“destined” to be together... My parents were very upset [and] my dad didn’t talk to me for weeks... My mom was not happy, but she had inklings that there were problems. She wished I had backed out earlier if I was going to do that. I got a lot of comments about “cold feet don’t mean that you call off the wedding”... My parents told me I was making a mistake and should go back to him. (PP 83)

Despite the insistence of her ex-fiancé and social network, the participant “knew that I had made the right decision” and finally realized “I learned I had to be happy with my partner. It didn’t matter if my parents liked him” (PP 83). However, some former fiancé/es did reconcile briefly ($n = 16$), while a few others later married ($n = 4$); at the time of the survey, only two formerly-disengaged couples who had reconciled were still together.

Regardless whether the couple got back together after the broken engagement or not, these actions (Intervention, Open Communication, Readjustment/ Redefinition, Reconciliation Attempts) served as Connection points because ex-fiancé/es and their friends and family members engaged in regular conversation about the state of the relationship, which either solidified the reasons the pair separated in the first place or helped the couple overcome differences and get back together.

Separation. The second large group, Separation ($n = 262$), focused on coping strategies where the disengaged individual attempted to physically or emotionally distance him- or herself. In some cases, isolation was practical (i.e. moving out of a shared residence), while in others, the separation was an unhealthy coping method used

to numb or distract oneself from emotional pain. This larger category includes the subgroups of Communication (Closed), Distance, Fresh Start, Living Situation, Mourning, and Take Your Mind Off (Table 13).

Communication (Closed). To begin, Communication (Closed) ($n = 32$) focuses on participants' efforts to minimize communication with others through physical and/or emotional isolation (a good fit with the Separation super-category). Some discursive distance was also seen when participants waited days, weeks, or even months to tell friends and family the engagement had ended, or by glossing over the difficulty of the breakup by using a cliché (e.g. "I just tried to tough it out" [PP 102]). Some respondents shared that they tried to talk to others but were avoided because their emotional pain and/or process made others uncomfortable ("I really didn't get a lot of support after the engagement ended. When I would try to talk about it, some people just changed the subject... It was very frustrating to me, to not be able to talk it out with someone" [PP 79]), thus effectively "closing" the lines of communication. Finally, one participant admitted she used dark humor as a means of shutting down communication with those whom she did not want to interact:

I didn't want to talk about it at all. I just said we broke up and "it wasn't right." Then after a while I used humor as a coping mechanism when too many people [were] asking saying "I demolished his soul" – I know it sounds absolutely horrible! And looking back it was. I was immature and didn't want to tell people the real story so I just said I broke up with him because it wasn't right and I had "demolished his soul." (PP 93)

Table 13. *Separation Code Family*

Category	Count	Qualifying Codes
SEPARATION (262 total)		
Communication (Closed)	32	Waited days, weeks, or months to tell friends and/or family about broken engagement; spent short or long periods isolated from others; used dark humor to shut down communication with others; tried to talk to others about the broken engagement but was avoided; used clichés to gloss over relational dissolution with people the participant did not want to talk to
Distance	70	Severed contact with ex; lost or distanced self from mutual friends after breakup; changed relationship status on Facebook; unfriended ex on social media; moved to a different town, state, or country to get away from ex; transferred schools; persons who claimed to have an “unemotional reaction” in response to the breakup
Fresh Start	36	Began dating and/or sleeping with someone else after engagement was broken; focused on achieving life goals put on hold due to ex; purged one’s home of ex-partner’s possessions; focused on returning and/or separating belongings, property, and pets
Living Situation	23	Moved in with family, friends, or found a new place by him/herself
Mourning	45	Worked through the “emotional pain” of the broken engagement, including crying; depression; sadness; relief; anger; and other emotions
Take Your Mind Off	56	Focused on work/school/volunteering; took road trips; went to concerts, hiking, partying; “keeping busy”; heavy drinking or substance use; attended religious services/events; focused on care for sick family member; worked out; played games online; spent money; slept excessively

While some isolation and reflection can be positive, most of the strategies shared in this section were generally dysfunctional because participants tried to separate or hide – both from other people, as well as from their own pain. Additionally, Hopper and Drummond (1990) argued that dramatically oversimplifying one’s pain (such as by using a cliché like “I got over it”) is often an indicator that the individual has not fully dealt with the difficult situation and its associated thoughts and emotions.

Distance. Next, a number of participants sought to put Distance ($n = 70$) between themselves and their former partner by severing contact, moving to a different city/state/country, transferring schools, or “unfriending” the person online; these criteria easily placed Distance in the Separation super-category. Further, some disengaged individuals ($n = 12$) shared that they deliberately distanced themselves from mutual or other friends, or that this was done for them (“Several of my girlfriends sided with my ex which caused [irreparable] damage to our friendships” [PP 109]). Another form of distancing can occur technologically, as changing one’s status on Facebook or other social networking sites is now seen as a social and relational “must” (PP 116). Interestingly, some participants claimed to be largely unemotional or numb during the disengagement process (“I just remained almost emotionless” [PP 118]) as another means of separating oneself from the situation and ex-partner. In cases of abuse and/or threat of force or harm, participants who felt it was “better to be far away from that situation” (PP 128) were probably right; however, in other cases, separation methods might have served to stunt or cut short the grieving process for participants, former partners, and/or other parties, which is unproductive.

Fresh Start and Living Situation. Moving on, several participants indicated it was important to achieve a Fresh Start ($n = 36$) in life, and primarily began seeing another person (either right away, or within the year) or started working to achieve a life goal(s) that had been put on hold because of reticence from or blocking by their former romantic partner. A few others focused on the return or Separation (super-category) of each person's belongings, property, and/or pets, so that there were limited visible reminders of a relationship gone wrong (“[After the broken engagement,] I had to face problems like working at the same place and having the same friends, also [separating] belongings and custody of animals, we had dogs and fish” [PP 66]). Hand in hand with seeking a fresh start, pursuing a new Living Situation ($n = 23$) was a practical yet critical step for individuals who cohabited with their ex-partner. Some participants moved in with friends or family or found a new place to live independently (“[My mother] drove out to help me move out of the house and find a new place to live [after the engagement ended. Mom and I] lived in the hotel together for a few days as we looked at rental apartments” [PP 90]), while others just vaguely noted that they had “moved out.” Establishing a new place of residence as “mine” and not “ours” is an important part of the parting process for disengaged persons, and also lands this item squarely in the Separation super-category.

Mourning. Additionally, multiple persons experienced deep Mourning ($n = 45$) in the wake of their relationship dissolution and specifically named crying, sadness, depression, or other emotions like relief or anger as a necessary part of working through the pain of the broken engagement (“I know I dealt with more emotions the first few days

after the breakup than I have ever dealt with in my life!” [PP 112]). Further, several participants commented on the lingering emotional effects of the broken engagement, namely depression:

I was just very, very depressed... I lay on the sofa, inconsolable and mute, for a few days. [My ex] tried to talk to me and was very frustrated that I wouldn't. I looked like a catatonic, I'm sure. I mostly just stared at the fish tank... [After we broke up and I left,] he didn't call me first. I called him... we were supposed to talk at that point about [if and] how to go forward, but it was abundantly clear from his voice that there was no forward. He just wanted to break it off. So I let it happen... For me, it still hurts [even 7 years later], but mostly as the most clear and dramatic instance of a more general, lifelong phenomenon of others being unable to love me. (PP 82)

While not all instances of mourning were as prolonged or intense as in this narrative, it is clear from participants' narratives that disengagement often causes a person to retreat inward and separate himself or herself from those around them as he or she copes with this challenging relational loss; as a result, Mourning codes were moved into the Separation super-category.

Take Your Mind Off. Finally, the last method used to help adjust to one's new status as a formerly-engaged individual was distractions, which comprise the Take Your Mind Off ($n = 56$) subcategory. Distractions included everything from road trips to hiking to attending religious events to “drowning some sorrows” in alcohol (PP 102),

among others; in short, individuals tried to keep busy in order to divert one's thoughts away from the broken engagement. The largest contributor was accounts of pouring oneself into work, school, or volunteering ($n = 27$) as a way to keep mental attention from drifting back to the engagement and former partner. Again, the coping methods used here have the potential to be both functional and dysfunctional. If, for example, a disengaged person has been mourning or ruminating on the relationship, an outing here or there might lift his or her spirits; however, if the person primarily flits from distraction to distraction, no real emotion work is being done, thus making these diversions a dysfunctional strategy.

In summary, some Separation from one's ex and his or her social networks is both practical and essential to moving on; one cannot keep living with a former romantic partner (Distance or Living Situation) or withhold his or her belongings (Fresh Start) and press forward with life effectively. However, other methods of Separation shut down the lines of communication (Closed Communication) or allow the hurting individual to numb him- or herself to the pain through distractions (Take Your Mind Off), which often inhibit the Mourning and healing processes.

Research Questions 5-6: Strategies and Advice

The last two research questions asked what communication strategies individuals used to explain the termination of their engagement to family members, friends, and others, as well as what advice disengaged persons would offer someone considering a broken engagement. First, the researcher attempted to address the research question regarding communication strategies used in the dissemination of information about one's

broken engagement. Disappointingly, due to a poorly-worded survey question, participants did not seem to understand what the researcher was asking and thus, were unable to offer strong answers: the vast majority (50.66%) provided vague comments like “I just explained to my family that the relationship was over. I later explained to extended family that the relationship was over. I would briefly tell people when they would ask, that the relationship was over” (PP 74). On the one hand, responses like this fit Doering’s (2010) criterion that “individuals must construct narratives that plausibly explain the breakup without losing face” (p. 71). However, it is unlikely that disengaged individuals were this vague with everyone, especially close friends and family.

Some participants specified that they made sure to tell friends and family in person (5.26%) or over the phone (13.16%), while others (5.26%) noted a preference for email (“I e-mailed all of my family members so that I could tell them all at once” [PP 106]) or social media (“Facebook did the job for us” [PP 111]). Only one respondent (0.66%) indicated that a printed card was mailed out to all wedding guests announcing the cancellation, and 7.24% skipped the question.

In the spirit the question was originally intended, 11.84% of study participants shared that they deliberately waited to tell family, friends, and/or others for a period of time due to fear, shame, guilt, embarrassment, or privacy (“It took about a week for me to break the news to my family. I was embarrassed that my family was right and I was scared since I was left by myself” [PP 34]). Many stories detailed how friends and/or family members disapproved of the respondent’s former partner but the participant stood up for him or her – only to discover later that “my family was right” (PP 34).

Surprisingly, others indicated they were even willing to go so far as to marry the other person to avoid having to admit fault or appearing like a failure: “For me, it was shame. I actually considered marrying a violent man so I did not have to admit I had made a mistake in dating him for so long” (PP 128).

Further, 5.92% said that a gatekeeper – typically, the mother(s) of the bride and/or groom – dispersed information for them (e.g. called extended family, guests, vendors, etc.; “my mother told the majority of my family so that I did not have to” [PP 73]). In one instance, the participant had actually moved in with her future in-laws while she and her fiancé hunted for a place to live together; one day, her ex suddenly said “I don’t love you” and abruptly ended their engagement. As a result, the participant moved out and

my family created a card that read something along the lines of “We regretfully announce that our daughter’s wedding has been cancelled. We appreciate prayers and support during this difficult time.” I believe his mother called everyone who was invited and had received a Save the Date card.” (PP 122)

It is unknown whether the gatekeepers in these situations were asked to do these tasks or volunteered as a way to help their sons or daughters deal with the pain from the broken engagement. Whatever the case, later studies on broken engagements should better explore the communication strategies used to share this news with others, as Doering’s (2010) point about the necessity of understanding the social and personal concerns used to mentally frame and construct narratives is well-taken.

In regard to research question six, disengaged persons offered several main pieces of advice to those considering the termination of a premarital engagement. Chief among respondents' recommendations (29.08%) was to call off the engagement if one or both persons have any significant doubts or red flags about marrying their partner, as those reservations do not go away over time and are not miraculously resolved upon marriage:

If your [fiancé/e] is not treating you well now, it will only get worse once you're married. Engagement is the time where you really see who each other is. Do not be so invested in all of the trappings of the white wedding; if he/she is a jerk, break it off and do not marry that person!" (PP 103)

Other participants acknowledged turning a blind eye to traits or behaviors in their ex which should have been cause for alarm ("My situation could have been remedied with much less problem and heartache *had I been willing to pay attention* to the warning signs happening in our relationship" [PP 114]; emphasis added), but were often overlooked due to the strong desire for a particular life outcome (marriage):

If you have any doubts, see any red flags... get out... fast. I ignored the warning signs. Yes, I was heartbroken at the time, but when I found out he was arrested for a DUI and Possession of a Controlled Substance, I realized I dodged a big bullet. I had a fantasy of what I thought could be [married life together], so I ignored "red flags." So for people who are considering breaking their engagements, I would recommend that they look long and hard for red flags. Then they should be totally honest [with themselves]. If it's not working... just give it up. Don't compromise.

You will be miserable. Yes, breaking up hurt, but I now realize that a relationship with him would have been hopeless. After all was said and done, I made the right decision. (PP 119)

Participants (27.66%) also reminded individuals considering a broken engagement that each individual knows what is best for him- or herself, and that it is important to take the time to truly listen to and trust our gut. However, former fiancé/es also stressed the necessity of being thoughtful, as a decision of this magnitude should not be made impulsively because of the impacts this choice will have on the others involved. The ripple effect (4.96%) is clearly reflected in this person's remarks:

If you feel something is wrong [then] follow your heart. If you are meant to be with that person you will be... it is important to follow your heart but it is also important to follow [your gut instinct]. Take some time to yourself [and] figure out what makes you happy because breaking up an engagement will not just affect you [it] will affect your family, your partner and their family too. (PP 62)

Next, 12.06% of respondents urged people to pray or seek counsel from those "who know you both" (PP 8) and/or to talk to a professional, like a therapist or counselor: "Never feel like you have to make the decision on your own. Let people help you. And if there's a problem, don't wait for it to go away and don't assume it will go away... [that] doesn't work" (PP 126). Inviting others into our process is beneficial because outside parties often see things we might miss.

Sadly, less of the sample (9.22%) suggested that individuals should actually communicate their concerns to their partner and work together to address those concerns before involving outside parties or calling the relationship off. Such a low figure may be an indication that many respondents did not want to invest any more time or energy in this relationship (e.g. they were “done” and ready to move on), or that he or she had tried to bring up concerns before with limited success; minimal support for directly and openly talking to one’s partner about relational issues also tracks well with the high number of communication problems reported earlier in this project (i.e. a couple with incompatible communication and/or conflict styles would be less likely to engage in conversation about relational issues). Further, 5.67% of participants quipped that it is better (although still difficult) to endure a broken engagement than to go through a divorce later:

Break or suspend an engagement if there is any doubt about the satisfaction or success of the relationship before you say “I do.” It’s better to leave someone at the [altar] than to go through with a marriage you have uncertainty about. It will end with much more heartache and pain if you continue. (PP 48)

Multiple participants pointed out that the presence of concerns and doubts during the engagement set people up for divorce if they choose to push ahead without communicating about and resolving those problems. Although marriage is rewarding, it is also “very hard... if you’re not damn sure that the person at the end of that aisle is the right one for you, then don’t go through with it” (PP 40). Other guidance was vague (9.90%), and ranged from “there are other fish in the sea” to “it depends.” The few remaining participants (1.42%) skipped this question.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The goal of this exploratory study was to increase understanding about the reasons behind, dialectical tensions and coping strategies present in, and communication processes used in broken engagements for heterosexual couples. Previous chapters divided the research questions and participants' narratives along two main lines: understanding broken engagements, and the sense-making processes one might employ after disengagement. To date, this is one of the first scholarly studies – and indeed, the most comprehensive – to explore this phenomenon. However, given the limited methodology (survey only), results and implications discussed here should be considered preliminary; in short, more research needs to be done to flesh out our knowledge of broken premarital engagements and the impact of these dissolutions.

Understanding Broken Engagements

The first discussion section explores the stigma surrounding broken premarital engagements in modern society; demonstrates how and why broken engagements best align with the findings on divorces, not dating breakups; expands on the reasons broken engagements occur, including factors like age, gender, and cohabitation (among others); describes why former fiancées are more likely to blame their ex-partner for necessitating the termination of an engagement; and finally, reveals the primary dialectical tensions

present during and after a broken heterosexual engagement. Three new tension pairs (Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty) are also addressed.

Social Stigma is Lessening. To begin, several participants commented on the social stigma associated with a broken engagement (“For me, the idea of breaking off an engagement was so taboo that a lot of my consternation about ending my relationship wasn’t about whether I should, but how people would react” [PP 126]), and how they still elect not to share this information unless necessary:

When you’ve had one broken engagement, smart-asses are always saying, “oh, AGAIN?” after a second one. My friends were kind enough not to do this, but my mother and brother [didn’t hold back]... I’ve also learned over the years that this is not something you tell men on dates. You keep it to yourself until they pry it out of you with all their conversational might. If I could marry and never tell my husband about these incidents, I would. Absolutely I would. They make people see you differently. As damaged and pathetic and sad. (PP 82)

Despite the undesirability bias presented in this excerpt, it is possible that the social stigma around broken engagements is abating, which would explain the increase in broken engagements over the last twenty years.

For example, wedding consultants shared that some brides have thrown “broken engagement showers” instead of bridal showers (depending on the point in the engagement when the relationship is terminated), where guests offer the erstwhile-bride “gift certificates for spa treatments and celebrate her independence and courage” (Paul,

2003, “Calling it Off”) in ending the premarital engagement. Similarly, Participant 118 referred to a broken engagement as a *brave choice*, and is not alone: rather than face a broken engagement with shame, “many almost-unhappily-marrieds see it as a *wise, even courageous act*” (Paul, 2003, “Calling it Off”; emphasis added). However, this trend is not limited to women: When his [fiancée] opted out five weeks before their March 2003 wedding, Michael Manning... nonetheless held a bachelor party. Friends and family with nonreturnable plane tickets came to a “She Loves Me Not” bowling bash (Paul, 2003, “Calling it Off”). While the taboo of breaking one’s engagement is not entirely gone, of course, future studies on this phenomenon should better explore the thought processes of the initiator to determine his or her perspective on the potential fallout (including social stigma) of disengagement.

Situating Engagement. Next, participants were asked to describe the reasons premarital romantic engagements were ended, and what signs predicted the termination of the relationship. As previously noted, Safier and Roberts (2003) only peripherally touched on the causes of broken engagements; further, the researcher wanted to determine the similarities and differences between romantic disengagement and dating or marital dissolution. Responses yielded rich data: a total of 7 meta-categories and 21 subcategories emerged from individuals’ accounts of their terminated relationship.

The most commonly cited reasons for ending a premarital engagement were Differences Became Too Great ($n = 107$), Personality/Behavior Irritants ($n = 91$), Communication Problems ($n = 75$), and Distance ($n = 73$). Three of these four causes – Differences, Communication, and Emotional Distance ($n = 26$) – are consistent with

findings on reasons for divorce, as well as Cheating/Infidelity ($n = 48$), Age ($n = 29$), and Abuse/Threats ($n = 32$). Research by Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) cites “growing apart” and “not able to talk together” as the top two reasons individuals initiated divorce proceedings. Additional causes of divorce reported by the National Fatherhood Initiative (2005) include too much arguing (addressed under Communication in this project), infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations and/or lack of equity in the relationship (covered in Differences), and domestic violence.

Although there is minor overlap, reasons offered for the decline of romantic *dating* relationships do not correlate as well with the disengagement factors reported in this study. First, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) noted that the most common reasons offered for ending a dating relationship were unequal involvement and differences in age, educational aspirations, intelligence, and physical attractiveness. Additionally, Baxter (1986) found that the top eight reasons for dating breakup were a desire for autonomy, lack of similarities, lack of supportiveness, lack of openness, lack of loyalty/fidelity, insufficient shared time together, lack of equity, and a loss of romance. While infidelity was reported by multiple participants in the current project and as a top reason for divorce, the other motives behind the end of a dating relationship did not have a strong presence: lack of openness ($n = 0$), decline in romance ($n = 1$), age differences ($n = 3$), lack of support ($n = 3$), unequal investment ($n = 6$), the participant’s ex dropped out of college or did not want to pursue higher education ($n = 6$), and a difference in intelligence and/or physical attractiveness levels ($n = 6$) were minimal in the current study. Even a

lack of similarities or things in common ($n = 12$) and a lack of time spent together ($n = 16$) did not emerge as even moderate contributors to the end of one's engagement.

With this in mind, it is important to note that the reasons for a broken engagement more closely mirror reasons for divorce than the reasons for the end of a dating relationship. This is significant for several reasons. First,

issues formerly reserved for marriage [must] now be confronted earlier for many premarital couples. For example, an increasing number of American couples now cohabit prior to marriage... more couples engage in intimate sexual relations before marriage... [and] it is now more acceptable for premarital couples to have children outside of marriage (Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002, p. 262).

Such steps are generally regarded as an increase in relational seriousness and are often seen in more advanced stages of romantic commitment, like engagement.

Next, researchers (Amato, 2000; Hughes & Waite, 2009) have found that “divorced individuals, compared with their married counterparts, have higher levels of psychological distress, substance abuse, and depression, as well as lower levels of overall health” (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013, p. 131). When considering the idea of “premarital divorce,” then, it is critical that future scholars, friends and family, and others treat disengaged individuals more sensitively, as the seriousness and potential side effects of a broken engagement more resemble those of divorce than either casual or exclusive dating. Participants in this study agreed, and repeated phrases like “it truly feels like a divorce... [it's a] huge loss” (PP 93), “There's less pressure involved in dating than in an engagement” (PP 123), and “there are things that made [breaking the engagement] tougher than dissolving a dating relationship” (PP 125), such as the level of monetary

investment and the difficulties associated with extricating oneself from heavily entwined networks. Other participants commented on the lingering effects of a broken engagement, and how these impacts extend far beyond that of a dating relationship:

Because of the [profound] effects of the emotional abuse I experienced, my social network(s) have played an *ongoing role* in supporting the ending of my engagement. For several years after the break-up I would occasionally turn to my mother for specific support [and we often talked about] how to move past such a damaging relationship... *[6 years later], I still use my social network of immediate family and friends to support my decision to leave, and [the broken engagement still] affects my relationships today...* I am now more open about what happened, what it did to me, and how it continues to affect me, always in the hopes [my story] helps someone else leave when they need to. (PP 90, emphasis added)

Although it is likely that these factors will fall in line with data on divorce, future studies should be conducted on the specific levels of internal distress, drug or alcohol use/abuse, depression, and other protracted effects experienced after a broken engagement in order to determine what kind of interventions need to be made available to people coping with this kind of relational loss.

In contrast, it is important to note that some of the causes of broken engagements also differ from the primary reasons reported for both divorce and dating breakups. In the current study, Personality/Behavior Irritants ($n = 91$), Third Parties ($n = 61$), Trust/Respect ($n = 50$), Change of Heart ($n = 49$), and physical Distance ($n = 40$) were

frequent causes of the end of a romantic heterosexual engagement. While some participants related incidents which immediately ended the relationship (e.g. the ex-partner assaulted the participant, gave away priceless belongings, or issued an ultimatum), others shared damaging or dissatisfying behaviors which had been endured over and over again in the irritants, respect, and physical distance categories. This fits well with research by Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, and Markman (2013), which suggests that individuals often put up with a behavior for longer than is healthy until a precipitating event occurs:

After assessing participant major reasons for divorce, we were interested to see whether participants indicated a single event or reason that constituted a “final straw” in the process of their marriage dissolution. Overall, 68.6% of participants and at least one partner in 88.9% of couples reported that there was a final straw leading to the end of their marriage... At the couple level, no couples (0%) had both partners report the same reason for the final straw. Participants expressed that although these final straw events may not have been the first incident of their kind (e.g., the first time they realized their partner had a substance abuse problem), an event involving these behaviors led to the final decision for their relationship to end (pp. 136-137).

It is unclear how, why, and when an individual determines “I’ve had enough,” but it is apparent that the “final straw” is different for each person. For example, participants in this study who shared that their ex had issues with control, anger, and/or jealousy did not assert that these traits developed overnight, but rather, were a known pattern:

There was [a lot] of accusing on his part about me cheating on him with my best friend at home [although I didn’t], so lots of jealousy issues... he was being way controlling and the jealousy was getting in the way of everything... he wanted me

to be by his side and give him children and cook and clean, but not have my own life. (PP 39)

For this participant, the final straw occurred not when her controlling and jealous ex attempted to stifle her life or career ambitions, but when he made a threat against her safety because of imagined infidelity; she was willing to endure negative or unhealthy personality traits for almost a year before finally calling off the engagement. Similarly, 29.08% of participants in the current study recommended ending an engagement if one or both members has any doubts or red flags associated with marrying the other person, because such concerns (like trust, respect, and irritants) are often witnessed multiple times and generally do not go away. While the final straw was not specifically studied in this project, future research on broken premarital engagements should explore why unhappily engaged individuals choose to stay in a relationship longer than they should and what it took to get one or both persons to terminate the engagement.

Additionally, this project found extensive support for the social network effect (Third Parties, $n = 61$), or how “approval for one’s relationship [by family and friends] boosts positive relationship outcomes and how social disapproval can lead to relationship termination” (Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher, & Wright, 2015, p. 77). As relational beings, romance does not take place in a vacuum;

friends and family members typically help mold relationship outcomes... [often] reinforcing norms of partner similarity, particularly along the lines of race and social class. Social networks... are unlikely to be neutral and likely play a larger role in shaping the aggregate trends of mate formation in our society (Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher, & Wright, 2015, pp. 95-96)

than is often recognized. Other studies have demonstrated that having the support of one's social network is a predictor of romantic relationship stability (Lewis, 1973; Parks & Adelman, 1983), an effect which remains constant even when "controlling for length of relationship, investments, alternatives, and other variables" (Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002, p. 274). In the same way, a lack of network support or acceptance promotes more negative relational outcomes (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008). In Participant 82's case, her ex-partner's parents disapproved of her as a life mate for their son because she was not Scandinavian, which caused great turmoil in her romantic relationship:

His parents raised hell [and] he began a three-month-long back-and-forth about marrying me anyway and overworrying about giving his mother a heart attack... He was caught between me and his family... [After the breakup,] his family supported him, though probably by ensuring him he'd made the right decision [to end our engagement] and welcoming him back to the now-restored Nordic Brady Bunch utopia. I suspect it was more of a "Whew. Glad she's gone!" than it was [an] "oh, we're so sorry you've lost someone you love... let us comfort you in your grieving" kind of thing... [they] just made it disappear as quietly and invisibly as possible. (PP 82)

Participant 82's ex married a young woman his parents approved of only one or two years later. Similarly, in the current study, 12.06% of respondents indicated that someone considering a broken engagement should seek counsel from friends and family before making a final decision – yet another nod to the social network effect.

However, this project did not explore the presence of defiant or independent reactance: the decision to do the opposite of whatever friends or family recommend (defiance) or to continue seeing one's partner if network members are perceived as interfering with romantic decision-making or attempting to constrain one's free will (independence). "Reactance becomes particularly relevant when the odds are stacked against a couple. When both parents and friends disapprove, highly reactant individuals stand firm in their feelings" (Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher, & Wright, 2015, p. 95). From the current study, Participant 32 provides a fine example of this effect:

My best friend had known [the relationship] was a bad idea from the start, but I decided to go with what I wanted instead of listening to my gut and him... he told me every day that this wasn't a good match for me... he of course was right all along even when I vehemently disagreed saying that she was "the one and I can help her with her issues"... My parents didn't really agree [with my staying with her] either... [and another person] told me that [my ex-fiancée] had too much baggage going on in her life to try to juggle a serious relationship and... if I didn't want to get hurt, then I should walk away... [When the relationship ended, many people offered condolences] but also had said that this was a time bomb from the beginning. (PP 32)

Other examples of reactance could be present in participants' narratives. A later reanalysis of the data in the present study might also find a connection with previously-mentioned research on the final straw; perhaps individuals remained in unhealthy

engagements for so long because of defiant or independent reactance and/or until a breaking point was reached, but that remains to be seen.

Finally, premarital engagement is different from dating or married relationships because it serves as a transition period, where participants are shifting from one status (no legal bonds) to another, more official state (legally binding agreement). However, there is much more involved in the engagement process than a proposal on bended knee. While some rituals are expected and likely even enjoyed by participants and/or their networks (see Table 1), a romantic engagement is a *process* which “occurs through talk and actions that construct a new definition of the relationship... the messy work of reality construction... [involves] a myriad of actions and reactions by the couple and others that are continuously negotiated” (Sniezek, 2013, p. 12).

That is, although many engagements may progress through a series of steps or customs expected by one or both participants, friends and family, or on an even broader societal level, researchers should not continue lumping engagement in with other stages because of the mental, emotional, identity, and often physical preparations for marriage (Nelson & Otnes, 2005) “[which] vary based on the context of [the interactants’] social world” (Sniezek, 2013, p. 12). For example, couples seeking to blend their families will go through different negotiations than a childless couple, due to the influence of children (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008); arranged marriages, which may or may not be based on love, will face unique challenges due to the influence of family and/or cultural views on “matchmaking and kinship” (Pande, 2016, p. 380); and individuals who feel like they have “no other options” for a romantic partner will engage

in different self- and other-talk because of the influence of self-esteem and/or limited available relational alternatives (Rusbult, 1983). By viewing engagement as a unique process, the “social context and reflexive interaction required to become engaged are considered” (Sniezek, 2013, p. 1) in ways that are overlooked or otherwise missed when premarital engagement – and thus, subsequent disengagement – is merged with either the dissolution of dating or marital relationships. “Premarital divorce” deserves its own attention.

Age and Cohabitation. The demographic data revealed several important things. First, participants were 24.71 years and ex-fiancé/es were 26.03 years, on average, at the time of their broken engagement and could contribute to disengagement for several reasons. First, according to Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston (2011), the average age at first marriage for both men (28.70 years) and women (26.50 years) has gone up over the last 50 years, while the total number of marriages has also declined: “In 1960, 72% of all adults ages 18 and older were married [and] today just 51% are... [further,] just 20% of adults ages 18 to 29 are married, compared with 59% in 1960” (“Barely Half of US Adults are Married – A Record Low”). Although some people are abandoning marriage in favor of alternatives like living together without a marriage goal, single parenthood, or choosing to remain single, research (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011) suggests that many Americans are simply delaying marriage until later ages.

While some may be aware of the studies by Wolfinger (2015) and others, which argue that a person “who marries at 25 is over 50 percent less likely to get divorced than is someone who weds at age 20” (“Want to Avoid Divorce? Wait to Get Married, But

Not Too Long”), widespread knowledge of such data is unlikely. No, it is more plausible that romantic partners have learned through trial and error that many people are less able to make mature, objective decisions and have lower coping skills to deal with instability and conflict at younger ages (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013), and may call off their engagements as a result.

There may be other factors at play, too: new research by Willoughby, Hersh, Padilla-Walker, and Nelson (2015) found that the helicopter parenting phenomenon may have something to do with age at first marriage. Willoughby’s research team demonstrated that children with more active “helicopter parents,” or parents overly-involved in the lives of their emerging and young adult children, are taught the benefits of remaining single until later ages (giving parents more control for a longer period of time). Although the current study did not gather data on helicoptering, it is an interesting notion worthy of future study, both to determine the possible relationship between helicopter parenting and broken engagements and to expand our understanding of the influence of third parties on romantic relationships through this unique subset.

Further, people may elect to wait until older ages to get married “because they can’t afford it (or feel like they can’t afford it) due to wage stagnation” (Wolfinger, 2015, “Want to Avoid Divorce? Wait to Get Married, But Not Too Long”). It should be noted that Wolfinger is not merely referencing the median cost of a wedding today, but also the average cost of living and related living expenses in the United States. That argument leads to an interesting idea regarding cohabitation: some couples may elect to move in together not because they have already made the decision to wed and are using this time

to prepare for marriage, but rather, because of finances and convenience. First, the average amount demanded for rent continues to rise; to use the major metropolitan area of Denver, Colorado as one example, “Rents in Denver have increased more than 5 percent a year every year since 2010. In 2014, the spike was 9.2 percent... Denver’s 14.2 percent rental increase in January [2015] was the highest in the country” (Hickey, 2015, “Study: Denver Apartment Rent Increases to be Largest in US This Year”); the changes in Denver’s rental prices are not unlike the rest of the United States’ more heavily populated areas. Similarly, a recent study reported by *Fortune* “showed that the number of U.S. households that fork out at least half of their income on rent is set to increase by 25% to 14.8 million over the next decade” (Chew, 2015, “Why the Renting Crisis Could be About to Get a Lot Worse”).

An article on the prominent dating website eHarmony (2016), which references various relationship therapists and divorce scholars, also weighed in on these issues:

Some people move in together not because they genuinely want to see this person every morning upon waking, but because it’s convenient... Moving in together can solve a lot of logistical problems, as well as cut your living costs [but] experts warn that moving in for the sake of convenience could hurt your relationship in the long run [because] it makes it more difficult to break up later if you also have to leave your roommate *and* figure out a way to afford a new place... [further, it’s important to understand that] living with someone as a roommate is different than cohabitating as partners... As roommates, there is always an underlying [assumption] that you can just “get out” if things don’t work... If the going gets tough, the tough might get going and [then] the couple splits instead of working on issues together (“Reasons Couples Move In Together Before Marriage and Why They Shouldn’t”; emphasis in original).

Similarly, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009) studied the reasons romantic partners moved in together, and found that spending more time together and convenience/finances

“are the most strongly endorsed reasons” (p. 233) to cohabit. Over 45% of respondents in the current study reported sharing a residence with their ex-fiancé/e, and several others noted that they were “practically living together”: “We had already been sleeping together and stayed over at one another’s place almost every night so ultimately there was not much difference” (PP 93). In an important aside, Manning and Smock (2005) found that couples’ interpretations of what it means to cohabit often differ from researchers’ definitions, which has led to significant underestimation of cohabitation rates; thus, it is believed that the number of cohabiting engaged couples is higher than reported.

This information – combined with the average age of participants at broken engagement, increased rental prices, and lower earning potential at younger ages – could mean that some study participants chose to cohabit with their romantic partner before getting engaged principally to help ease the strain on their wallets. In the current study, Participant 99 shared that she and her ex grew apart, but “continued to live together... for a few more months until our lease was up” because neither person could afford the fees associated with breaking the lease; it also took some time to find new roommate(s) and other affordable places to live. Future studies on broken engagements should explore when and why partners chose to move in together to determine whether or not the aforementioned reasons contributed to the decline of their relationship, or if the couple simply learned they were not compatible in the long run after cohabiting.

This brings us to another important consideration regarding cohabitation and engagement: what Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) call “the inertia of cohabitation” (p. 499). These researchers argued that while many romantic couples

cohabit prior to premarital engagement, some simply get caught up in the relationship and “slide” toward a marriage that might not have happened otherwise – instead of making a more deliberate choice to wed. Several participants in the current study supported this theory: “I *got swept up* in my first serious relationship and *found myself on a pre-determined path*: dating, moving in together, [and] getting engaged” (PP 99, emphasis added), and “We really only got engaged [because] we had been dating for so long that it *seemed like ‘the next step.’* I had sort of been bored with the relationship for a long time [but accepted the marriage proposal anyway]” (PP 118, emphasis added). One participant noted that

We lived together at the time and gradually realized our feelings had changed and we were not ready to marry. We began to feel that *we were ‘following a path’ for the sake of following it...* We both knew our differences and eventually realized we didn’t want to accept them permanently. (PP 115, emphasis added)

Another expressed surprise upon discovering that he

had never [actually] proposed engagement, but felt like I had just *fallen into it because she presumed we’d get married* and began telling her family so, adding that “she and I had decided.” Before I recognized that I’d never proposed engagement, she had told most of my friends and her entire family that we’d be marrying. I had no specific objections at the time, so I told my family and made it “official.” (PP 126, emphasis added)

In addition to research on when couples choose to cohabit (e.g. at what point in their relationship), future studies on broken engagements should also explore whether or not formerly engaged couples moved in together as a deliberate choice and step toward marriage (deciding), or because “it seemed like the right thing to do” or was “a logical/expected next step” (sliding) that at least one member might not have wanted. The difference between sliding and deciding may play a role in relational stability and success, and would benefit future couples considering engagement and/or cohabitation.

Finally, there is the possibility that some participants engaged at younger ages may wonder “what they are missing out on” in the realm of dating partners and life experiences, an idea which aligns with the Wrong Reasons category addressed in the first two research questions. After Participant 90’s engagement ended, she tried

to have an “undergraduate experience” again [by attending parties, drinking, staying out late to do whatever I wanted to do, and dating other people].

Specifically, because I had always been a nontraditional student and had for all intents and purposes acted “married” (house-making, working full time, [and] having an older partner who had already been through the college experience), my friends [and even my] boss encouraged me when I cut back on work and began to go out, learning what it was like to have fun with my friends [and] take time for myself. (PP 90)

Similarly, Participant 105 noted that “in the middle of trying to keep us together I met somebody else and I decided that I might as well see where the new possible relationship

might take me... and make up for lost time.” Participant 115 remarked that he learned “how young I was and how dangerous it can be to not date more than one person.”

Whether this is because of the lack of good comparison levels for alternatives or simply a desire to not miss out on whatever experiences one’s current life stage has to offer, the implication is clear: couples who become engaged at younger ages may wonder what or who else is “out there.” If the desirability of this mystery person/experience is stronger than an individual’s satisfaction level in the current relationship, he or she may break an engagement in order to pursue these other possibilities, as vague and nebulous as those options may be.

With all of this in mind, Kuperberg (2014) offers one final reminder: cohabitation and age are linked.

Does the age at which premarital cohabitators moved in together explain why they have been found to have an increased risk of marital dissolution? Explanations for the increased risk of marriage dissolution among those who marry young center on marital role preparation; for premarital cohabitators, many, if not most, of these roles began at the onset of cohabitation, not marriage. Analyses of the 1995, 2002, and 2006-2010 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth ($n = 7,037$) revealed that age at co-residence explained a substantial portion of the higher marital dissolution risk of premarital cohabitators (p. 352).

In short, additional research should be conducted in order to expand our knowledge of the variables connected to age and cohabitation, and how such elements are related to the engagement and broken engagement processes.

Gender of Dissolution Initiator. As previously noted, 53.21% of engagements in this study were ended by women (either the participant herself, or the male participant’s ex-partner). These results are unsurprising: as “women attend more closely to

relationship-oriented information,” they are often “able to forecast the decline of the relationship earlier” (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003, p. 126) than men. Sniezek (2013) also confirms that women are “more likely to initiate... relational conversation[s]” than their male counterparts (p. 7). Conversely, 22.94% of engagements in this project were broken by men, a number of which were due to infidelity. As Participant 22 observed,

[My ex] started to fight with me constantly [and] threatened to break up with me repeatedly... Then he moved out one night while I was at work... There was zero communication, he simply told me it’s over and he left. He contacted me a year later very sorry about everything and admitted he had cheated on me, and leaving was better than facing me. (PP 22)

As seen in this example, the male partner was the one to break the engagement, but his decision seemed less about having a nuanced view or sensitivity to interpersonal difficulties (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981) and more to do with conflict avoidance, guilt, and/or an unwillingness to admit fault. However, this is likely not the case for all males who end their romantic associations (e.g. some are certain to have a handle on their relationship problems), and merits further consideration.

Through the coding process, it was also discovered that some participants saw responsibility or blame in the wording of a question simply meant to assess who uttered the words “our relationship is over.” For example, if Teresa told her ex-fiancé Scott that she no longer wanted to get married, she should have selected “Me” in the survey

question, “Who ended this engagement?” However, some participants interpreted this question differently. Considering the same scenario, if Teresa’s ex-partner Scott cheated on her, participants like Teresa often chose answer options like “My ex-fiancé/e” or “Someone Else” (as it was the actions by these individuals the participant felt truly “ended” the relationship). Some respondents surprisingly marked “Mutual Agreement,” instead; for example, if Teresa confronted Scott about his infidelity, her part in the dissolution was saying “I no longer want to get married” and his part was the romantic indiscretion. Participants denoted that their engagement ended by mutual decision in 20.18% of survey responses.

Specifically, some participants seem to have taken the phrase “mutual agreement” in unique ways. The scenario just provided is one example: while mutual agreement was envisioned by the researcher as a conversation where both parties went their separate ways after reaching consensus on the direction and/or health of the romantic relationship, some respondents were more creative in their approach. Take Participant 91: her ex-partner became increasingly jealous and controlling with occasional violent outbursts, and did not take the ending of the engagement well. Participant 91 wrote, “He continued to text, call, e-mail, and leave voicemails for both myself, my best friend, and a close mentor of mine until I filed a no-contact order against him through the school.” In this case, the participant is actually the one who broke the engagement (her part), which she saw as necessitated by her ex’s actions (his part); thus, she selected “mutual agreement.” Participant 68 shared a similar story: she believed her ex-partner was immature, partied too much, had no job prospects, and was bothered that he had recently dropped out of

college. Upon telling him she thought they were too young to get married and breaking the engagement, “[my ex] tried for several months to return the ring [and] sent cards begging me to take him back” – and yet, the participant still marked “mutual agreement” in the aforementioned question.

The problem here could simply be a poorly-worded survey question, which will certainly be revised in any future studies on this topic. However, there may be other factors at play. First, Baum (2007) argues that divorce initiators often have difficulty making “the distinction between responsibility and guilt. It is important to make [people] aware of the difference and to help them accept responsibility for their decision to divorce, while freeing themselves of their guilt” (p. 47). Whether one’s former partner was a good match or left much to be desired, breakup initiators may still feel guilt at hurting the other person and thus face difficulty in accepting responsibility for having been the one to make a decision that caused pain (“What about guilt? I’m glad I broke the engagement; sorry I hurt him” [PP 117]).

Next, Perilloux and Buss (2008) assert that “rejecters” (persons initiating a romantic breakup with a rejectee) also face the cost of being perceived as cruel, mean, cold, or uncaring by their peer network:

Rejecters may be characterized as the villains and Rejectees as the victims. Suffering reputational damage such as appearing heartless or unsympathetic can diminish one’s ability to obtain future long-term mates, and also may incite retribution on the part of the Rejectee (pp. 167-168).

Therefore, participants who selected “mutual agreement” on this survey, and who likely share a similar narrative about the end of their engagement with others, may do so as a

way to mitigate some of these perceived costs. Additionally, face-saving strategies may also be a factor. Cupach and Metts (1994) described face as “the conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others” (p. 3); people use facework to correct and repair any damage to this desired image in the wake of “face-threatening” acts, like embarrassing situations (McBride, 2010).

Participant 125 is a good example of this concept. While she indicated she was the one to break the engagement, the participant also agreed to “go along with” a less-truthful narrative about the ending of their relationship since she and her ex-partner worked together and thus, had significant professional network overlap:

When I got back [home from a trip], we had a very civil, positive conversation in which we decided to end things. We work together so he desperately wanted people to think it was mutual (which I've gone along with to make things easier). He acted like he was thinking about calling things off too, which I know is not true. For a year and a half after the breakup he told me that he still had feelings for me, which wouldn't be the case if it were truly mutual. (PP 125)

Later in her narrative, Participant 125 indicated that she did feel guilty for hurting her former partner because she truly cared about him (more as a friend than as a romantic partner). Because of their history, her guilt, to help her ex save face, and possibly also to mitigate some of the costs outlined by Perilloux and Buss (2008), the participant has repeatedly told people at work that their relationship ended by mutual decision – despite the fact that she broke the engagement. Therefore, there appears to be a “strong

subjective component in the perception of [breakup] initiator status” (Baum, 2007, p. 47), which warrants follow-up.

Assignment of Blame. Further, as reported in a previous chapter, 66.39% of respondents listed specific actions and/or behaviors by their ex as the principal reason(s) the broken engagement occurred. This finding falls in line with research by Gray and Silver (1990) and Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, and Markman (2013) and could be indicative of the self-serving bias. Similarly, some of the participants in this study shared that he or she would have gone through with the marriage if his or her ex-partner had been able to overcome or change the stated negative factors; as an example, Participant 41 affirmed, “If he had overcome his mental illness, I would have married him.” By assigning blame to her ex-fiancé for the ending of their relationship (due to the mismanagement of his mental illness), Participant 41 believed her hand was forced: she felt like she had no choice but to call off the engagement, and that she was a “victim in a life change [she] did not want” (Baum, 2007, p. 47).

However, 17.65% of participants did admit to engaging in personal activities or possessing traits which negatively impacted their fiancé/e and contributed to the decline of the romantic relationship. Madey and Jilek (2012) found that attachment style is related to blame: those who are more secure are less likely to blame others for ending the relationship and also more likely to admit personal responsibility (self-blame) in relational demise, while those with higher anxiety and insecure attachment more often blame their former partner. Thus, it is possible that the individuals who shared the responsibility for the broken engagement with their ex-partner have a healthier

attachment style, or simply gained the benefit of perspective over time. Broken engagements occurred approximately 8.09 years ago, on average, so the disengaged individuals in this study have had sufficient time to engage in honest self-reflection. One of the drawbacks to conducting a survey (as opposed to interviews) is that much of the reflection process is missed; participants may share the conclusions reached about their relationship and engagement, but not necessarily how they arrived at those realizations.

Even still, the fact that less than 20% of the sample acknowledged the role their own personal traits, actions, and/or behaviors played in the demise of their engagement is troubling. In order to experience more positive personal growth upon the conclusion of a romantic relationship, disengaged persons need to increase self-reflection and decrease the number of attributions that place blame on one's ex-partner, which are "consistently related to distress, including more negative emotions, such as sadness" (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003, p. 115). In this same study, individuals who self-reported their own role in the dissolution of a romantic relationship were able to list at least five beneficial changes to their own thoughts, words, and/or actions that would be implemented in and improve future romantic relationships, and also demonstrated the ability to find "more meaning in the [breakup] event" (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003, p. 116). However, women were more likely to do so than men.

Participant 126 provides an example of this gender disparity. He largely attributed the end of his engagement to a myriad of his ex-fiancée's issues, and later shared that "I [thought] I had mostly dealt with the breakup before I initiated it... However, she has since married, and I haven't dated again seriously [in the two years] since the breakup, so

I guess it's hard to say who was left with more issues after we split.” In this excerpt, the male participant indicated he did plan to enter another romantic relationship in the future, but had been unsuccessful thus far; perhaps by engaging in the self-reflection and honest “self-blame” process promoted by Tashiro and Frazier (2003), individuals can learn how to take a more balanced view of former romantic relationships, mourn them, and then use the knowledge and experience gained through those encounters to make their next romantic associations even better. In summary, it is important to engage in the sometimes-difficult work of honest self-reflection regarding the end of our romantic unions, especially for men, if our later romantic relationships are to endure.

Relational Dialectics: Tension Pairs. Dialectical tensions and coping strategies were clearly visible in participants' accounts of their broken engagements. As anticipated, the Autonomy and Closedness poles were most supported, adding another layer of confirmation for stage models of “coming apart” (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2014; Knapp, 1984), although it should be noted that all of the tensions identified in the previous chapter were seen in the data with varying frequencies. However, the presence of Novelty/Predictability and Revelation/Concealment are more surprising, and warrant further consideration.

First, several participants described “feeling bored” with the romantic relationship designated in the survey; the individuals' need for novelty was not being met, and due to the high level of predictability, boredom set in. Despite this, in each case where boredom was reported, the engagement was not terminated until another romantic alternative (who could presumably provide all the novelty the participant might want) was present.

Further, Sprecher (1994) argues that it is more “socially desirable to be the one who gets bored or wants to be independent than it is to be the one responsible for a partner’s boredom or desire to be independent” (p. 203).

However, the answer to boredom is not necessarily “more change.” Rothwell (2016) described the concept of dynamic equilibrium as “a range in which systems can manage change effectively to promote growth and success without pushing the system to disaster” (p. 426), and noted that this principle is based on three key elements: degree of change, rate of change, and desirability of change. To begin, it is easier to adapt to minor changes than major changes (degree); people typically adjust better when there is more time to become acquainted with and prepare for the change (rate); and finally, individuals often respond more positively to a change when it falls in line with their beliefs or preferences (desirability). All three are necessary in order for the optimal level of success to be achieved.

Considering Participant 125’s account provided in the previous chapter, too many new variables (a cross-country move, new job, moving in together, etc.) were introduced in rapid succession (degree) during the 10 months (rate) the couple was together. Further, although these changes were more desirable for the respondent, as she had earned the high-paying position which prompted the move, Participant 125 shared that the degree and rate of change were still “too much” for both her and her ex-partner to handle; as a result, their engagement was terminated. Similarly, while boredom, diminishing fun, and/or diminishing excitement may be shared as common reasons for the relational termination of *dating* relationships (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010), the

vast majority of *engaged* couples experiencing Novelty/ Predictability actually indicated a desire for *less* novelty, not more, as they transitioned toward marriage.

Next, while it was expected that individuals would tell close friends or family about the ending of their engagement (revelation), the number of persons who concealed details from their support system due to shame or embarrassment was unexpected and is addressed more fully later in this chapter (see “Communication Strategies and Advice”). It is also possible that participants did not conceal as much information from friends or family members as the author was led to believe, but rather, did not want to disclose elements of personal fault or responsibility to an unknown researcher. Some narratives, like Participant 27’s, are vague enough to hide personal actions or behaviors:

I just got fed up with [his] nonsense... We were at home eating dinner and I was just questioning him because he talked and acted differently towards me. So I kept questioning him and he wouldn’t answer my questions. We got into a big argument and things just went sour. Next thing you know, the engagement was called off... [Later I told family and friends] flat out that I’m not getting married anymore. They kept questioning me and I just said “things just change.”

However, this same participant went on to describe how supportive her network was during the disengagement process, and how she could “always rely on [them]” (PP 27) for advice and a listening ear – which would seem to contradict her earlier statement that she said only “things just change” (PP 27). Thus, it is possible some participants were influenced by the social desirability bias: a “systematic error in self-report measures

resulting from the desire of respondents to avoid embarrassment and project a favorable image to others” (Fisher, 1993, p. 303), especially regarding socially-sensitive issues (Grimm, 2010) like broken engagements. Despite the fact that the researcher and study participants will never meet, some respondents may still have been worried about their image and/or concerned the author’s perception of them might lessen should he or she admit to behaviors which contributed to the dissolution of their dating relationship.

Moving on, the presence of three new tension pairs – Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty – is exciting, and marks an area ripe for further exploration. In the first two pairs, specifically, engaged partners reported enduring unhealthy or unproductive relational behaviors multiple times (in some cases, for many months or years). But why? Rusbult’s Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980) asserts that partners may remain in undesirable relationships due to the low quality of relational alternatives; level of dependence, or “the extent to which an individual ‘needs’ a given relationship, or relies uniquely on the relationship for attaining desired outcomes” (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 359); and investment size, or the level of and importance attached to resources poured into the relationship (like time, money, love, etc.), including what resources would decline or be lost if the relationship was terminated.

While these factors may play a role, the word “hope” was selected specifically for the first dialectic because of the optimism initially shared by multiple respondents. Hope has been identified as an important coping mechanism for people experiencing difficult situations, results “from a unique pattern of thoughts and evaluations about a situation, and is important for sustaining commitment to desired goals” (Ebright & Lyon, 2002, p.

561). In short, many engaged participants *wanted* to move forward with their former partners; some respondents nostalgically recalled a time when their romantic partnership was the best thing in their life (“The relationship with my ex started out amazing! We were so in love and did everything together; he truly was my best friend. My happiest memory is when he proposed” [PP 44]) and yearned for it to be that way again, while others shared that their ex was “a good person” and would have made a reasonable life-mate (if only certain issues could have been overcome). This serves as a valuable area for future research, as exploring why couples became engaged in the first place would add another chapter to and provide more context for the later broken engagement.

On the one hand, these participants may be onto something: “Hope is said to be important in recovery from illness or injury, supporting adjustment, perseverance, and positive outcomes... [and can be] conceptualized in 3 interrelated ways: as an inner state, as being outcome-oriented, and as an active process” (Bright, Kayes, McCann, & McPherson, 2011, p. 490). In analyzing the broken engagement narratives provided in this study, hope can be seen as a motivator behind participants’ repeated attempts to engage partners in discussions about relationship-oriented topics, to help partners overcome addictions, to help partners achieve goals, and to forgive partners for indiscretions, among others. Sniezek (2013) argues that people will invest this level of time and effort into a relationship after “assessing the relationship potential” and determining it to be good or satisfactory. On the other hand, hope also encompasses a degree of willful denial, or a refusal to acknowledge the level of one’s own unhappiness and/or the full extent of a problem. In a less-optimistic application of the word, some

participants merely “hoped” their relational partner would change and/or that the problem would go away on its own, and did not actively commit to its resolution. Whatever the case, a precipitating event often pushed individuals toward the resignation pole: in spite of their best efforts (or perhaps simply fervent finger-crossing), the necessary change was not going to happen. Thus, individuals then set themselves on a long-avoided course of action: terminating the engagement.

However, the notion of hope is still important. From a relational outsider’s perspective, it is easy to criticize study respondents for not ending the engagement sooner. However, given the benefits of hope (Bright, Kayes, McCann, & McPherson, 2011) and resilience (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004), remaining committed to positive, productive, collaborative change in the face of challenges with one’s intimate partner or relational difficulties might not be such a bad thing – so long as individuals take the “active process” and not “willful denial” approach. Future research on broken engagements should explore the Hope/Resignation dialectic further, in order to better determine the reasons for and motivations behind prolonging hope and delaying resignation.

Additionally, breaking up may be so hard to do because of the dialectical pull toward familiarity. Research by Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, & Green (2013) asserts that more than half of all young adults have experienced an “on again, off again” romantic relationship; despite relational disruptions and occasional termination, these couples are drawn back to one another. What is it about the other person or relationship that brings us back time and time again, sometimes in the face of or wake of serious

conflict or instability? Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, and Green (2013) found that people return to what they know, often out of habit; convenience or easiness; companionship; comfort; love; need; or control. Similarly, despite continued cycles of instability and familiarity, participants in on-again/off-again romantic relationships did not firmly terminate their association until a more desirable relational alternative appeared; at least one interactant was willing to admit that certain incompatibilities could not be resolved, and/or to finally admit the difference(s) were real and not going away; or at least one party was tired of the “back and forth” and was no longer interested in continuing the relationship.

An old adage states, “better the devil you know,” meaning that a person will often choose to deal with something or something he or she is familiar with (even if that individual, job, etc. is less than ideal) rather than take a risk on a new or different person or situation. Multiple participants in the current study indicated an unwillingness to terminate the engagement not because of the hope of improvement, as in the previous dialectic, but because of the familiarity of shared history or because the relationship was “easy and comfortable” (PP 112). Others who hooked up with their ex after the engagement was dissolved often referred to it as a form of “mutual comfort” (PP 126) – the familiarity of the other person was reassuring on some level, even though the other person is the very reason the participant needed “comforting” in the first place. Additionally, during periods of instability and/or out of a fear of being alone, some participants (PP 82; PP 95) rationalized that “everyone has problems” (Murray, 1999)

and thus elected to stick with their current relationship for a while longer (i.e., why trade new problems for old ones?).

Further, some people may fear losing mutual friends as a result of disengagement, and rightly so. Multiple participants talked about friendship casualties after the engagement was broken (“We shared a good friend that told me [our problems were] my fault and I was a slut and he never wanted to see me again” [PP 59]), and Gray (2012) asserts that breakups can cause an individual to lose up to eight friends. Former fiancé/es have spent time building a life with these people, and unfortunately, many feel the need to “pick a side” when the couple parts ways; Duck and Wood (2006) note that partners tend “to be more interested in having his or her social supporters accept his or her account of how things went wrong and *to take his or her side* rather than just offer comfort” (p. 180; emphasis added). Thus, the pull of familiarity of mutual friends and shared networks may temporarily outweigh the push of relational instability, until the individual is finally prepared to grieve not only the loss of their romantic partner but a friendship(s), as well.

Finally, the third new dialectic pair, Love/Loyalty, further illustrates the importance and influence of third party networks like friends and family. In the current study, participants reported feeling caught between affection for and loyalty to one’s romantic partner, and affection for and loyalty to one’s friends and family members. There are several reasons why individuals may initially defend a romantic partner, but later yield to the negative judgement offered by one’s social network. First, on the economic side of engagement, family members often pay for part or all of the wedding,

and therefore may attempt to exert more influence on the relationship as a result (Lowrey & Otnes, 1994) – especially if things seem to be going poorly, as intervention will save money. Next, it is often assumed that third parties are more objective, and can see things individuals involved in the romantic relationship might miss:

Listen to your friends. They have an outside view looking in and typically will see all the issues in the relationship while you are ‘lovestruck.’ The best advice I have ever gotten was from [my best friend], and if I had listened to him from the start it would have saved me [a lot] of pain. (PP 32)

Moreover, listening to friends and/or family members’ unfavorable views of one’s fiancé/e may also plant seeds of doubt which were not there before. As Participant 73 noted in the current study, “I recall feeling that he was not as ambitious with his career goals as I would have liked; my friends and my mother began questioning whether he was ‘good enough’ for me and that made me start to wonder the same things.” Comments like these also indicate the possibility of the confirmation bias: female partners tend to seek supporting input from friends or family when concerns or frustrations with a relationship are already present, whereas male partners more often perceive network support regarding one’s romantic companion in the absence of critics (Klein & Milardo, 2000). It is possible that social network members did not proactively make negative comments regarding romantic partners but rather, offered feedback in response to information provided by the participant; “the chicken or the egg question” is difficult to determine in many responses to the current survey. Qualitative interviews with former fiancé/es would add depth to our knowledge of broken engagements overall, and would

also allow researchers to more fully explore the influence of third parties. Finally, close family and friends often have intimate knowledge of the individual, due to shared history. Further, given the fact that “there is increasing evidence that our blind spots are substantial” (Vazire & Carlson, 2011, p. 104), whose opinion should we trust more than people who “know us better than we know ourselves”?

In summary, this study broke important ground in exploring the phenomenon of broken engagements and expanded our knowledge of the reasons disengagement occurs, including age, gender, and cohabitation (among others); addressed some of the stigma surrounding disengagement; firmly situated broken engagements with divorce (or even as a unique life stage), and demonstrated why broken engagements should not be merged with premarital dating relationships; established how and why we assign blame when a romantic relationship dissolves; and finally, discovered which dialectical tensions most often emerge during the process of and after a terminated heterosexual engagement, including three new tension pairs.

Sense-making, Coping, and Communication

The next section of the discussion is focused on the coping and communication strategies used during the process of disengagement, as well as what counsel participants would give someone who was considering calling things off with a romantic partner; an analysis of the strategies used and advice given by respondents sheds light on how former fiancé/es made sense of and mentally and emotionally managed their own broken engagement.

Relational Dialectics: Coping Strategies. These tensions are readily apparent in the context of broken engagements – especially the three new tension pairs – as are dialectical coping strategies. Some narratives fit into one of the eight primary coping methods (Yoshimura, 2013) identified in the previous chapter, but these were few. Thus, strategies were instead categorized more broadly as points of Connection or Separation, and a list of coping methods was generated from the data itself.

The most frequently reported coping strategy, by far, was open communication with one's friends and family ($n = 84$). The presence and preference of this coping method is hardly surprising, though, especially considering the strength of support found for third party networks (like family and friends) in the current project alone. However, psychological adjustment researchers Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) asserted that “the tendency to seek out social support may have both good and bad overtones, and whether it is primarily good [functional] or bad [dysfunctional] may depend on what other coping processes are occurring along with it” (p. 274). Thus, since it is important to understand what coping strategies were used in conjunction with open communication, several of the most-reported coping methods found through data analysis are discussed.

First, multiple participants ($n = 26$) reported severing all contact with their ex-partner upon the dissolution of their romantic engagement, and some even went so far as to post “vague stabs” (PP 121) at the other person before “unfriending” him or her on social media. This is both functional and dysfunctional. On the functional side, research by Marshall (2012) and Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith (2013) found that continued exposure to an ex-partner's social media profile during the grieving period obstructs the

process of healing and moving past that relationship. Thus, while it might be tempting to “Facebook stalk” one’s former fiancé/e to see if he or she is hurting as much as we are, researchers argue that it is essential to resist this urge as it impedes the recovery process and increases the likelihood that the individual will “perpetrate obsessive relational pursuit” both online and offline (Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011). Additionally, individuals in abusive, threatening, or otherwise harmful relationships needed to sever contact for their own protection (both physical safety, and for peace of mind); in these ways, distancing or separating oneself from an ex-partner seems healthy.

In contrast, research by Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, and Cheng (2008) found productive communication between exes post-breakup was related to more successful adjustment in post-dissolution relationships. Research by Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, and Green (2013) echoed these findings, and reported that “more explicit communication [after romantic relationship dissolution was] associated with more positive communication dynamics and relatively stable [subsequent dating] relationships” (p. 403). This research challenges a popular belief about former romantic relationships: what if cutting all ties with a non-abusive partner is not the best practice? Certainly, there are times we simply do not want to continue seeing or talking to this person (there are reasons for the breakup, after all), or perhaps we don’t want to string the other person along and make him or her think reconciliation is an option when it is not. In the current study, only 17 individuals indicated they kept the lines of communication open with their ex-partner; however, the research suggests continued communication (presumably positive or at least neutral/cordial) post-breakup may serve “legitimate adult attachment

needs, e.g., friendship, shared history, and extended family networks” (Graham, 2003, p. 118), especially for individuals formerly at a high level of commitment and integration – like engagement.

Additionally, it is important to remember that the dissolution of an intimate relationship does not just affect the participants, but also others in their networks. Multiple individuals in the current study ($n = 25$) indicated the lines of communication remained open with their former in-laws-to-be after the engagement was broken – even if the participant did not keep in touch with his or her ex-partner. Among other points of connection post-dissolution, the parents of Participant 53’s ex-partner reached out to her to offer an apology for their son’s indiscretion, arranged for Participant 102 to see his son regularly, attended a coronation for Participant 93’s advancement in a local Dairy Princess competition, mailed Participant 126 encouraging notes and cards, and enjoyed regular lunches with Participant 129 (their son’s ex-fiancée). Although all communication with ex-partners’ families and friends was not so cordial, it is important to remember that engaged couples reached a level of bonding and enmeshment with each other’s network not seen in dating relationships. As one participant noted, “Talk to others around you first, especially close friends and family because they are also invested in your relationship and [may] be hurt and angry by the break-up” (PP 109). If the relationship with future in-laws is particularly good or strong, this factor becomes a relational cost an individual must weigh when considering breaking an engagement, and may serve as another pull toward the familiarity or comfort tension pole.

Speaking of familiarity, participants in the current project provided 31 accounts of attempted reconciliations, which were initiated by at least one partner or an outside party (typically, a parent or sibling), and 20 accounts of either short- or long-term reunions. However, at the time of the survey, only two reconciliations (1.84%) proved lasting, which aligns with Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, and Green's (2013) findings:

Although certain types [of on-again/off-again relationships] demonstrated relational status transitions strengthened the relationship or helped partners reach closure in terminating their relationship, other types suggested multiple transitions [i.e. multiple breakups and returns] reflected lower quality functioning (p. 405).

Similarly, Dailey, Hampel, and Roberts (2010) reported that on/off partners "reported using less maintenance behaviors... [and] generally reported they were less cooperative, patient, and polite in conversations with their partners and also included the partner in their social network to a lesser degree" (p. 92). Given this knowledge, why do people continue to return to former relationships? Again, the centripetal pull of familiarity should not be ignored. Also, the spiraling alternation coping strategy has a similar pull (at least part of the time), as relational partners who use this strategy alternate back and forth by first prioritizing one dialectical pole and then the other. Given the number of individuals who experienced a broken engagement and later attempted to reconcile (with an abysmally low success rate) in the current study, it would be interesting to do another research project focused on these former fiancé/es in particular.

Another method of returning to one's ex occurs discursively through the process of "trash talking" ($n = 20$), or speaking negatively about a former romantic partner to one's social network. Hickman and Ward (2007) conducted research on brand loyalty and

discovered that people regularly engage in trash talk as a way to promote in-group bonding and further out-group rival products or companies. These ideas are easily translated to romantic relationships: although an individual or his or her friends/family may “badmouth” a former romantic partner in an attempt to raise the person’s spirits and promote bonding or connection, regular trash talk can “lead to active derogation of the out-group” (p. 318). Belittling the worth or value of a former partner may cause an individual to feel criticized for his or her choice of partner whom, lest we forget, he or she almost married. In this way, badmouthing an ex may blow up in the face of the well-meaning friend or family member: instead of helping a loved one move past the relationship, this strategy may serve to promote rumination and keep someone in the mourning period longer, which has been linked to depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

Finally, multiple participants ($n = 27$) reported pouring oneself into work, school, or volunteering as a way to cope with the broken engagement. These actions often served as a form of compartmentalization, or a means to divert constant attention away from one’s emotional pain and/or confine one’s focus on relational termination to the personal sphere, where the disengagement could be processed with trusted friends or family.

Johnson (2005) studied the use of distractions and found that

engaging in thoughts or activities that distract attention from pain is one of the most commonly used and highly endorsed strategies for controlling pain. The process of distraction appears to involve competition for attention between a highly salient sensation (pain) and consciously directed focus on some other information processing activity (p. 90).

On the surface “distraction appears to help persons cope with painful stimuli. People certainly use the technique – perhaps because they feel that it has worked in the past – and they prefer distraction to other coping strategies” (McCaul, Monson, & Maki, 1992, p. 210).

However, while there are some immediate short-term benefits to using distractions to keep oneself from over-focusing on or obsessing about a pain or stressor, researchers acknowledges that this method should be used with caution: not all distractions help one cope with pain effectively. McCaul, Monson, and Maki (1992) found that distraction tasks that demand greater attention may actually increase distress, especially if the distraction does not specifically generate positive emotional effects because “pleasant cognitions help coping, whereas negative – even attentionally demanding – cognitions do not” (p. 216). Thus, if one’s job, classes at school, or volunteer efforts are generally pleasant and anxiety-reducing, this may serve as an effective coping method; however, if the tasks encountered at work, school, or with a volunteer organization are stressful and demanding, these distractions may actually increase emotional distress and subsequently create more problems than they solve.

Communication Strategies and Advice. As previously mentioned, a poorly-worded survey question limited the comments received in response to this research question. However, 11.84% did answer in a way that aligned with the original spirit of the question, and noted they employed a deliberate delay strategy: certain disengaged individuals waited to tell family, friends, and/or others for a period of time due to fear, shame, guilt, embarrassment, or privacy. Although one female participant confessed that

“For me, it was shame [that kept me in the relationship]... I actually considered marrying a violent man so I did not have to admit I had made a mistake in dating him for so long” (PP 128), all others who related these feelings were male. Instead of sharing the pain of infidelity or abuse with friends and/or family (who would presumably rally around and support the victim, as in Participant 46’s story in the previous chapter), some respondents swung toward extreme concealment:

Feeling ashamed of being cheated on, I never told my family or hers what specifically caused the engagement to end... I refused to talk about it with my family and never did [even now, years later]. After a few attempts to discover what happened, they seemed to resign themselves to the fact that it was over and I did not want to discuss it. (PP 48)

It is interesting that this participant, and three other men like him, elected to tell their story through an anonymous survey to a researcher he will never meet. While completing the survey might provide some degree of catharsis, individuals like Participant 48 still carried the shame and rejection from their ex-fiancé/e, even many years later.

Leith and Baumeister (1998) noted that although shame and guilt “have many common features... shame does not have the socially-desirable or relationship-enhancing effects that guilt has” (p. 2). When an individual feels guilt, he or she has attempted to take the perspective of the other person, whereas shame focuses on and magnifies one’s own distress. Shame “involves feeling that the entire self (rather than just one particular action) is bad... [and leaves the person] preoccupied with his or her own upset feelings”

(Leith & Baumeister, 1998, pp. 3, 13), which often lead to “relatively poor and destructive relational outcomes” (Leith & Baumeister, 1998, p. 32).

While the shame experienced in this study occurred after one’s engagement had already ended, it is plausible that continued rumination or focus on feelings of distress and shame can carry over to later relationships in the form of depression (Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006), if such relationships are formed. As seen in Participant 48’s account, shame is not easily overcome, even if a person is not technically “at fault” for the precipitating event(s) which brought about such feelings in the first place. Thus, concealment could be a face-saving strategy (Doering, 2010) due to intense feelings of rejection, especially in males, but may not benefit those who favor this tension pole in the desired ways. Future studies on broken engagements should proactively seek out “almost grooms” and more deeply explore the concepts of shame and rejection, in order to better understand the presence and impact of these emotions in the broken engagement process.

Additionally, over half the sample (56.74%) encouraged anyone considering a broken engagement to end the relationship if significant red flags are present that have not been resolved after a reasonable period of time and effort (or to end the association immediately, if the boundary violation is severe). Participants noted that each individual must determine what is and is not right for him- or herself, and urged potential former fiancé/es not to turn a blind eye on issues which will likely worsen (not magically improve) upon marriage: “Be totally honest [with yourself]” (PP119).

Several participants also referenced the media's perpetuation of unrealistic partner and/or relationship expectations (Segrin & Nabi, 2002), which have a significantly damaging effect on marriages (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981), and used this as a call to action for other almost-unhappily-marrieds. That is, not all romances are guaranteed a happy ending: while romantic comedies, soap operas, and other media portrayals of romantic affiliations beg to differ, some relationships are toxic, destructive, and dysfunctional and need to be terminated, for the sake of one or both parties involved.

Next, a much smaller percentage of participants (9.22%) urged others to talk to their partner about any issues or problems. Perhaps we avoid open communication because "it seems that people and relationships are disposable. It's just easier to get rid of one and try to start over with a 'newer' version" (PP 95), or in an attempt to spare the other person's feelings – a tactic which often generates more hurt in the long run (PP 94). Finally, several participants indicated that, while challenging, a broken engagement is better than a divorce. These individuals believe breaking one's engagement to be a courageous and honest choice – because "marriage is too important" (PP 99), and "it would be just awful being married to the wrong person" (PP 11). Be brave, be realistic, and be honest with yourself.

In summary, participants employed certain communication strategies in sharing their disengagement story with others, and also coped with the dialectics of a broken engagement by engaging in points of connection and/or separation. Lastly, former fiancé/es shared advice for those considering terminating a premarital engagement, in

order to help people realize “you are not alone” and to allow their knowledge, experience, and mistakes to benefit others going through a similar situation.

Limitations and Future Research

Although a number of recommendations have already been presented throughout this project, there are several other areas for future study that should be mentioned, as well as the limitations of this project. First, the delimitations on the study were that participants must be at least 18 years old, live in the United States, understand English, and have experienced at least one heterosexual broken engagement.

Considering age, this restriction was imposed so that no minors would participate in the study; it was also assumed that few persons under 18 years of age would have experienced a broken engagement so young, and the loss of potential participants was believed to be minimal. However, at least one respondent in the current study indicated that she was 16 years old at the time of her broken engagement, so future research should consider lifting the age restriction in order to better capture the stories of individuals engaged during high school. Next, the researcher’s dissertation committee requested that participation be confined to the United States, and that the survey be presented in one language. As an exploratory project on a lesser-studied phenomenon, it made sense to cast a smaller net first to see “what’s out there.” Still, it took a long time (2 years) to locate enough people within this unique population who wanted to participate, and later studies would benefit from expanding the search criterion; it is likely that former

fiancé/es outside of the United States, and/or who primarily speak a language other than English, would add valuable insights on broken engagements.

Looking beyond language and geographical restrictions would also potentially capture a more diverse pool of respondents: individuals in this study were predominantly white (77.5%), Christian (62.4%), and female (78%). Although this is a wonderful place to start, the skewed sample population limits the generalizability of these findings. Further, participants were necessarily required to have experienced at least one broken premarital engagement in order to participate in the project, but several of the 17 people who had experienced *more than one* broken engagement expressed regret at not being able to share multiple stories (“If you ask how many broken engagements a person has had in the intro questions, which you do, you ought to accommodate more than one answer to these questions in the later sections,” PP 82). Given the (albeit slight) rise in social acceptability and that at least 15 percent of the current sample (15.60%) had gone through multiple terminated engagements, an exploration of “chronic (dis)engagement” might prove revealing.

Similarly, although the researcher was pleased to have a reasonable male presence in this project (22%), more work needs to be done to more fully capture the experiences of almost-grooms. The participants in this study were also reasonably well-educated, with 55.40% holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. Research by Birditt, Hope, Orbuch, and Brown (2012) found that

husbands and wives who reported lower income and education were more likely to belong to the low-happiness trajectories. We also found that Black spouses, spouses

with premarital children, and husbands who cohabitated before marriage were more likely to belong to the low-happiness trajectory [and were at a higher risk for divorce] (p. 139).

Cherlin (2010) added that a disparity in education level between husbands and wives also predicted divorce. This research project did not ask participants to disclose income level but information on number of children, cohabitation, race, and education was received; it would be interesting to determine whether or not these trends hold true in the engagement period, as well.

Another consideration for future research lies in the area of methodology. The current study used a questionnaire developed by the researcher, which provided a good “first look” at broken heterosexual engagements. However, some of the survey questions were not worded in a way that maximized understanding for disengaged persons – namely, questions focused on relational dialectics and communication strategies for personal news dispersal confused respondents. Better understanding the strategies used to tell others the account of one’s broken engagement would be especially useful in two ways. First, it would be interesting to see how disengaged individuals constructed and shared the “story” of their broken engagement because “storytelling is one of the primary mechanisms through which humans make sense of their experiences... [and] narrating stress, difficulty, or trauma can be beneficial for improved mental health” (Koenig Kellas, Trees, Schrod, LeClair-Underberg, & Willer, 2013, pp. 99-100).

Second, several respondents in the current project lamented that friends or family (accidentally) trivialized their relational loss, which served as another barrier to effective coping. Research on grief (White, Walker, & Richards, 2008) has illustrated that

at least one family member... was not as helpful as hoped... Frequently, nonsupport was attributed to clumsiness in offering support and a lack of knowledge or understanding about what was needed... [and often] took the form of unwanted advice or messages to “move on” or “get over it” (pp. 200-201).

Sadly, unskilled support from one’s social networks is relatively common and may lead to conflict or friction in interpersonal relationships (Lehman & Hemphill, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). In the case of a broken engagement, specifically, advice like “just move on” or “there are other fish in the sea” glosses over the “rich and diverse ways [people] meaningfully understand and invoke marriage in their [engaged] relationship” (Sniezek, 2013, p. 11) and does not acknowledge the mental, emotional, and sometimes physical adjustments couples “use to collaboratively construct a new identity” (Sniezek, 2013, p. 3) during the engagement process. Thus, exploring the communication strategies used to tell others about relational termination, and the responses received in return, may aid in the development of training or materials for individuals helping a loved one cope with a broken engagement in order to minimize unskilled support messages.

Many participants also experienced fatigue toward the end of the survey, and provided short answers instead of in-depth accounts on the qualitative portion of this project. Others completed all 46 of the demographic questions, only to abandon the project once the open-ended questions were reached ($n = 10$). As a result, future studies which use surveys should employ a brief demographic section and then jump to the open-

ended and/or most critical questions to help limit fatigue and attrition. Along these same lines, in-depth interviews would also allow researchers to dig deeper into participants' accounts of broken engagements, and more fully explore this understudied topic. As an example, the current project did not ask participants to disclose whether or not there was a point in their romantic relationship where the traits or events that brought about the end of their engagement could have been fixed; exploring questions like this during the interview process would add to our knowledge of the turning points which often lead to a broken engagement. Finally, the current project did not distinguish between the experiences of the "engagement breaker" and the "engagement breakee," nor were the impacts of the disengagement on others (like friends, family members, or children) addressed; each could prove an exciting site for communicative study.

Additionally, although this research project was targeted at heterosexual couples (which are easier to track), 8.30% of the sample marked bisexual, gay, or lesbian as their sexual orientation. While these individuals still shared their experiences with cross-sex broken engagement, the question remains: how are broken engagements similar and/or different between and within these populations? At the time the survey was completed, gay marriage was not legal in all areas of the United States. However, that has since changed, and conducting a similar study for couples in the LGBT* community would be an excellent contribution to our knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon.

Other unexpected results emerged in this project and merit further examination. To begin, the researcher was excited to discover three new dialectical tension pairs (Hope/Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty), and more work needs to

be done to further these dialectics. Next, it was assumed that more couples would formally break their engagement face-to-face. This supposition proved true, as 55.34% of respondents disengaged or uncoupled in person. However, as many as 21.36% of romantic heterosexual engagements were broken via phone, email, video call (e.g. Skype), letter, or text message, which was surprising – but perhaps it shouldn't have been. Research by LeFebvre, Blackburn, and Brody (2015) asserts that

in the last decade, the increased popularity of social networking sites... has profoundly influenced the nature of relational communication... [Technology] has provided new forums and opportunities for individuals to strategically present themselves through the careful editing of their written messages... [and] creates a [new space] for individuals to disclose information linked to identity (p. 79).

Weisskirch and Delevi (2012) agreed, and noted that “relationship dissolution now occurs through technologies like text messaging, e-mail, and social networking sites... [in a study of 105 college students... more than a quarter of the sample had experienced relationship dissolution via technology” (p. 486). Although not widespread, beliefs about the acceptability of using technology to end important associations are increasing, primarily in the millennial generation (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012). Future studies on relational termination, and especially at higher levels of commitment like engagement, should better address the methods used to end that relationship; the reasons for using that particular medium; and the short-term and long-term impacts of employing each channel.

Conclusion

The current project set out to explore the understudied phenomenon of broken premarital engagements for heterosexual couples, and broadened our understanding of

the reasons engagements are terminated; found the most common dialectical tensions and coping strategies present during this transition; reported some of the communication strategies used in sharing one's story of relational termination; related advice given and received by former fiancé/es; and determined how and why factors like age, sex, and cohabitation might influence disengagement.

Through this research, 7 super-categories or larger code families (Divergence, Reflection, Boundary Violations, Priorities, Cumulative Annoyances, Outside Influences, and Discursive Discord) and 21 subcategories (Abuse/Threats, Age, Alcohol/Drugs, Change of Heart, Cheating/Infidelity, Communication Problems, Crossing a Line, Differences Became Too Great, Distance, Health, Money/Work, Parenting/Children, Personality/Behavior Irritants, Second Place, Sexual Issues, Third Parties, Time/Timing, Trust/Respect, Unmet Needs, Wrong Reasons, and Other) were found to explain why broken engagements occur in opposite-sex relationships. It was also determined that broken engagements more closely mirror divorce than dating, thus prompting the term "premarital divorce," although a strong argument can be made for setting engagement apart as a relational stage.

Moreover, in addition to the presence of primary tension pairs like autonomy/connection, the current project discovered three new dialectical tension pairs (Hope/ Resignation, Familiarity/Instability, and Love/Loyalty) that capture the messiness of the disengagement process; further, coping strategies were grouped into 2 super-categories (Connection and Separation) and 11 subcategories (Closed Communication, Distance, Fresh Start, Intervention, Living Situation, Mourning, Open Communication,

Readjustment/Redefinition, Reconciliation Attempts, Take Your Mind Off, and Other). All of these findings add to scholars' understanding and application of Relational Dialectics Theory. Finally, this dissertation shared numerous accounts from male voices and persons across the life span, and did not focus exclusively on the experiences of the convenience sample. In short, important academic ground was broken on terminated heterosexual engagements through this exploratory and applied dissertation.

In closing, Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, and Green (2013) assert that “we know relatively little about how to successfully navigate breakups or the process of breaking up” (p. 403). Although more work still needs to be done, this study provides at least one professional resource for disengaged individuals as they navigate the disarray which accompanies uncoupling. By accurately assessing self-responsibility, employing productive dialectical coping strategies, and simply realizing they are not alone, former fiancé/es may still “feel like I hit a reset button on progress toward [my] dreams” (PP 125) but can also work to move past the stigma of a broken engagement and into the bright relational future beyond.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

You are invited to participate in a project exploring the behaviors, disagreements, and communication issues present during premarital engagements that were ended by one or both partners at any time during the engagement period. **Do you (or someone you know) meet the following criteria?**

- YES, I am at least 18 years old
- YES, I currently live in the United States
- YES, I have experienced at least one broken premarital engagement

**** If you said YES to all questions and are interested in participating, please follow the link below. If you know someone who meets the qualifications for participation, please send them the link to the survey. ****

<http://tinyurl.com/vzjvjk0>

Study Information

Who is conducting this research, and why? This research is part of the doctoral dissertation for Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD (303-404-5377; cstow@du.edu) under the direction of Dr. Mary Claire Morr Serewicz (303-871-4332; mserewic@du.edu) in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Denver. All project materials are reapproved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research annually (#2009-1035). The questionnaire is hosted by Survey Monkey.

What are the benefits of participating? Possible benefits of being involved in this study include shedding light on a rarely-researched topic, and responses may be used to develop materials to help people going through a broken engagement. Further, as you may not have had the chance to tell "your story" before, you might experience some catharsis in sharing your experiences!

How long does the survey take? Participation in this study is voluntary and should take about 45 minutes. I understand the survey is long, and **greatly** appreciate your overall participation and perseverance to the end of the study (where the most important questions are located). The risks associated with this research are minimal; however, if you become upset or uncomfortable at any time, feel free to discontinue participation.

Are my answers protected? Yes. ALL information submitted is **confidential**.

Will there be a drawing? Yes – at the end of data collection. While personal contact information is NOT required, you will be asked to provide this information IF you are

interested in being contacted for future studies. You may also submit your contact information if you would like to be entered in a drawing for the CHANCE to win one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to Wal-Mart or Target. The drawing will be conducted in December 2012 (so long as enough participants have been gathered by this time), and the 10 gift card winners will be notified via mail or email. Drawing winners will be randomly assigned a gift card to one of these locations.

Extra Credit: If your instructor is offering extra credit for you (or someone you know) to complete this survey, make sure to enter YOUR NAME and your INSTRUCTOR'S NAME in question 62. Extra credit will NOT be given to persons who do not meet the participation criteria, and/or who only complete the contact information section.

Contact Information

What if I have questions, or want more information? Please contact me via telephone or email. I look forward to connecting with you – and again, THANK YOU for participating in this research project! ☺

Sincerely,
Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD
Doctoral Candidate
University of Denver
(p) 303.404.5377
(e) cstow@du.edu

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM AND SURVEY

PAGE ONE

Welcome, and thank you for your interest in this research project! The study outlined on the following pages explores broken premarital engagements. Please feel free to contact me if any questions arise while reading information about the survey. Also, print a copy of the next page for your records.

Note: Once you click "next page," you will NOT be able to return to your previous answers. Please be sure your responses are complete on each page before moving on.

*** IMPORTANT NOTE: The questions build from demographic information to open-ended responses. It will take around 20 minutes to get to the open-ended questions, so please be patient! Also, please respond as thoroughly as possible to the questions which ask how your engagement actually ended, as they are the MOST critical questions in this project! ***

Again, THANK YOU for your interest and participation in this study!

Warmly,
Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD
Doctoral Candidate
University of Denver
(p) 303.404.5377
(e) cstow@du.edu

PAGE TWO

** PRINT THIS PAGE **

You are invited to participate in a project exploring the behaviors, communication issues, and disagreements present during premarital engagements that were ended by one or both partners. Participants MUST have experienced at least one broken engagement, be at least 18 years old, and live in the United States. Engagements may have been broken at any time during the engagement period. Each participant may take the survey ONCE.

This research is part of the doctoral dissertation for Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD (303.404.5377; cstow@du.edu) under the direction of Dr. Mary Claire Morr Serewicz (303.871.4332; mserewic@du.edu) in the Communication Studies department at the University of Denver. All project materials were reapproved annually by the University

of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (#20091035).

Participation in this study is voluntary and should take about 45 minutes. The risks associated with this research are minimal; however, if you become upset or uncomfortable please feel free to discontinue participation. If you would like assistance from a mental health professional due to your participation in this study, you may contact the Therapist Network (800.843.7274; www.1800therapist.com) or the National Mental Health Association Resource Center (800.969.6642; www.nmha.org).

Possible benefits of being involved in this study include shedding light on an under-researched topic; responses may be used to develop materials to help people going through a broken engagement. Further, as you may not have had the chance to share "your story" before, you might enjoy the opportunity to describe your experiences!

ALL information submitted is confidential. While personal contact information is NOT required, you will be asked to provide this information IF you are interested in being contacted for future studies. You may also submit your contact information if you would like to be entered in a drawing for the CHANCE to win one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to WalMart or Target. The drawing will be conducted in August 2012 (pending enough responses are received by this time), and the 10 gift card winners will be notified via mail and/or email. Drawing winners will be randomly assigned a gift card to one of these locations.

Only Chelsea A.H. Stow will review the surveys, for the purpose of data analysis. All contact information and electronic copies of the questionnaire will be saved on the researcher's computer in a password protected file. Any hard copies of the survey that are requested and returned will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by the researcher. In order to further ensure confidentiality, all names and places will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this project address it, if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during this study please contact Paul Olk, Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (303.871.4531), or the ORSP Office (303.871.4050; duirb@du.edu). You may also write to the University of Denver, ORSP, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-4820.

If you would prefer to complete a hard copy of the survey, or would like a copy of this page emailed to you, contact the researcher. Finally, if you know someone who meets the

qualifications for participation, PLEASE send them the survey link!

Thank you!

Chelsea A.H. Stow, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate

University of Denver

(p) 303.404.5377

(e) cstow@du.edu

**** PRINT THIS PAGE ****

PAGES THREE through TWENTY-THREE

- *1. Please select one of the following:
- YES, I HAVE been involved in at least one premarital engagement that was temporarily or permanently broken, ended, or called off at any time during the engagement period and AGREE to participate in this study.
 - NO, I HAVE NOT been involved in at least one premarital engagement that was temporarily or permanently broken, ended, or called off at any time during the engagement period, and therefore do NOT AGREE to participate in this study.
- *2. Are you at least 18 years old?
- Yes
 - No
- *3. Do you currently live in the United States?
- Yes
 - No

Personal contact information is NOT required for participation in this study. However, if you choose “YES” for ANY of the questions on this page, please complete the contact information section in question 7. If you select “NO” for ALL questions on this page, click “Next Page” at the bottom of the screen and proceed to the survey.

Again, only Chelsea A.H. Stow will review the surveys, for the purpose of data analysis. All contact information and electronic copies of the questionnaire will be saved on the researcher’s computer in a password-protected file. Any hard copies of the survey that are requested and returned will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by the researcher. In order to further ensure confidentiality, all names and places will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Further, all data submitted within and through this survey is encrypted. SurveyMonkey

promises to maintain privacy of data gathered through online surveys, and will NOT use the information you submit in any way. ALL participant contact information will only be used by the researcher in relation to the current study and will NOT be sold or given to any third parties. ALL information submitted is confidential.

- *4. Are you interested in being contacted for participation in future studies on broken engagements?
 - Yes
 - No

- *5. Do you want to be entered in a drawing for the CHANCE to win one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to Target or Wal-Mart? Drawing winners will be randomly assigned a gift card to one of these locations.
 - Yes
 - No

- *6. Would you like to have a synopsis of the study's findings mailed or emailed to you?
 - Yes, mailed
 - Yes, emailed
 - No

- 7. If you answered YES to any of these questions, please complete this contact information section. Again, all information received is confidential.
 - Name
 - Address
 - Address 2
 - City/Town
 - State
 - ZIP/Postal Code
 - Email Address
 - Phone Number

Thank you for participating in this research project! In order for results to be accurately assessed, please be AS DETAILED in your responses as possible. Keep in mind that these questions are based on your individual experiences and perceptions, so there are no right or wrong answers. ALL of the blanks in this survey will expand to include as much text as you would like to write.

- 8. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female

9. What is your current age, in YEARS? Please enter a number.
10. What is your ethnicity? Please list all that apply.
11. What is your religious preference?
 - Agnosticism
 - Atheism
 - Buddhism
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - Christianity (Protestant)
 - Hinduism
 - Islam
 - Judaism
 - OTHER (please describe in question 12)
12. If you answered “Other” in question 11, please describe your religious preference. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
13. What is your sexual orientation?
 - Bisexual
 - Gay or Lesbian
 - Heterosexual
 - Transgender
 - Transsexual
 - OTHER (please describe in question 14)
14. If you answered “Other” in question 13, please describe your sexual orientation. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
15. What is your highest level of education?
 - Did not complete High School
 - High School diploma or GED
 - Some college
 - Associate’s or Technical Degree
 - Bachelor’s Degree
 - Some graduate work
 - Master’s Degree
 - Doctoral Degree
 - OTHER (please describe in question 16)
16. If you answered “Other” in question 15, please describe your highest level of education. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.

17. Which of the following best describes the family in which you were raised?
- Nuclear Family (Your biological or adopted parents were only married once and are still married to each other; your parents raised their own biological and/or adopted children)
 - Stepfamily/Blended Family (At least one of your biological or adopted parents have married more than once due to death or divorce; your family may or may not include stepsiblings or halfsiblings)
 - Single Parent Family (You were raised primarily by one biological or adopted parent due to death, divorce, or parents not marrying)
 - Intergenerational Family (You were raised primarily by biological or adopted grandparents or other relatives)
 - OTHER (please describe in question 18)
18. If you answered “Other” in question 17, please describe your highest level of education. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
19. How many times have you been engaged, where the engagement was broken? Please enter a number.
20. What is your CURRENT relationship status?
- Single
 - Dating Casually (seeing MORE THAN one person)
 - Dating Exclusively (seeing ONLY one person)
 - Engaged
 - Married
 - Separated
 - Divorced – NOT Remarried
 - Divorced – YES Married
 - Widowed
 - OTHER (please describe in question 21)
21. If you answered “Other” in question 20, please describe your current relationship status. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
22. How many times have YOU been married?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 or more

- I have never been married
23. How many times has YOUR CURRENTPARTNER been married?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 or more
 - He/She has never been married
 - I am not currently dating, engaged, or married
24. How long have YOU and YOUR CURRENT PARTNER been dating, engaged, or married?
- Less than 1 month
 - 1-6 months
 - 7-12 months
 - 1-3 years
 - 4-6 years
 - 7-9 years
 - 10-12 years
 - 13-15 years
 - 16-18 years
 - 19-21 years
 - 22-24 years
 - 25 or more years
 - I am not currently dating, engaged, or married
25. How many children do YOU and/or YOUR CURRENT PARTNER have? If you do NOT have children, please enter a “0” on the line marked “Total Number of Children.” Please fill in all that apply, and enter your responses as numbers.
- TOTAL Number of Children
 - My Children (Adopted and/or Biological)
 - His/Her Children (Adopted and/or Biological)
 - Children Together
 - Other Children
26. How long have YOU been separated, divorced, or widowed from YOUR CURRENT PARTNER?
- Less than 1 month
 - 1-6 months
 - 7-12 months
 - 1-3 years
 - 4-6 years

- 7-9 years
- 10-12 years
- 13-15 years
- 16-18 years
- 19-21 years
- 22-24 years
- 25 or more years
- 1 am not currently separated, divorced, or widowed

Although you may have experienced more than one broken engagement, ALL of your responses for the rest of the survey should focus on ONE specific broken engagement. The broken engagement you select is completely up to you. Additionally, when you see the term EX-FIANCE/E, this refers to the person from the specific relationship being described. ALL of the blanks in this survey will expand to include as much text as you would like to write, and ALL information submitted is confidential.

27. In what YEAR did this broken engagement occur? Please enter a number, and approximate if necessary. (Example: 2002)
28. How old were YOU when this engagement was broken, in YEARS? Please enter a number, and approximate if necessary.
29. How old was YOUR EX-FIANCE/E when this engagement was broken, in YEARS? Please enter a number, and approximate if necessary.
30. What is your EX-FIANCE/E'S gender?
 - Male
 - Female
31. What is YOUR EX-FIANCE/E'S ethnicity? Please list all that apply.
32. What was YOUR EX-FIANCE/E'S religious preference?
 - Agnosticism
 - Atheism
 - Buddhism
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - Christianity (Protestant)
 - Hinduism
 - Islam
 - Judaism
 - OTHER (please describe in question 33)

33. If you answered “Other” in question 32, please describe YOUR EX-FIANCE/E’S religious preference. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
34. What was YOUR EX-FIANCE/E’S highest level of education?
- Did not complete High School
 - High School diploma or GED
 - Some college
 - Associate’s or Technical Degree
 - Bachelor’s Degree
 - Some graduate work
 - Master’s Degree
 - Doctoral Degree
 - OTHER (please describe in question 35)
35. If you answered “Other” in question 34, please describe YOUR EX-FIANCE/E’S highest level of education. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
36. Which of the following best describes the family in which YOUR EX-FIANCE/E was raised?
- Nuclear Family (Your biological or adopted parents were only married once and are still married to each other; your parents raised their own biological and/or adopted children)
 - Stepfamily/Blended Family (At least one of your biological or adopted parents have married more than once due to death or divorce; your family may or may not include stepsiblings or halfsiblings)
 - Single Parent Family (You were raised primarily by one biological or adopted parent due to death, divorce, or parents not marrying)
 - Intergenerational Family (You were raised primarily by biological or adopted grandparents or other relatives)
 - OTHER (please describe in question 37)
37. If you answered “Other” in question 36, please describe YOUR EX-FIANCE/E’S highest level of education. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
38. How long did you and your ex-fiance/e DATE prior to getting engaged, in MONTHS? Please enter a number, and approximate if necessary. (Example: If you dated for 2 years before getting engaged, please write 24 months.)
39. How long were you and your ex-fiance/e ENGAGED before the engagement was broken, in MONTHS? Please enter a number, and approximate if necessary.

(Example: If you were engaged for 1 year before this engagement was broken, please write 12 months.)

40. When was this engagement broken?
- 1 year or more before the wedding ceremony
 - 10-12 months before the wedding ceremony
 - 7-9 months before the wedding ceremony
 - 4-6 months before the wedding ceremony
 - 1-3 months before the wedding ceremony
 - Less than 1 month before the wedding ceremony
 - On the day of the wedding ceremony
 - I left my ex-fiance/e at the altar
 - My ex-fiance/e left me at the altar
41. What events had occurred by the time this engagement was broken? Please check all that apply.
- I proposed marriage, or was proposed to.
 - I asked this person's parents/guardians for their child's hand.
 - I gave or received a ring.
 - A date had been set for the wedding/reception.
 - An announcement had been made that we were getting married.
 - We moved in together.
 - We made a major purchase together, like a car or property.
 - We were pregnant, had a child/children together, or adopted a child/children together.
 - We adopted a pet(s).
 - We took a premarital education class.
 - We hired a wedding planner.
 - We registered for gifts.
 - We received at least one gift.
 - We had at least one engagement party.
 - Wedding showers were arranged and/or hosted for us.
 - I or my ex-fiance/e went shopping for a dress and/or formal wear.
 - I or my ex-fiance/e bought a dress and/or rented formal wear.
 - I or my ex-fiance/e invited at least one person to be in the wedding party.
 - The wedding and/or reception location(s) had been booked.
 - The honeymoon had been planned.
 - The honeymoon had been partially or completely paid for.
 - Some or all payment had been made on key items (florist, caterer, photographer, etc.).
 - A guest list was created.
 - Invitations were made or ordered.

- Invitations were mailed out to guests.
 - I or my ex-fiance/e had a bachelor or bachelorette party.
 - We held a wedding rehearsal and/or rehearsal dinner.
 - The engagement was broken on the day of the wedding ceremony.
 - OTHER (please describe in question 42)
42. If you answered “Other” in question 41, please describe any additional events that happened during your engagement to your ex-fiance/e. If you did not select “Other,” leave this blank and move to the next question.
43. Who ended this engagement?
- Me
 - My ex-fiance/e
 - Mutual agreement between my ex-fiance/e and myself
 - Someone else (please describe in question 44)
44. If you indicated SOMEONE ELSE was involved in ending this engagement in question 43, who is this person and what is their connection to you and/or your ex-fiance/e? Please explain.
45. Was this engagement ended permanently or temporarily?
- Permanently – The relationship was over
 - Temporarily – We took a break and/or got back together later
 - NEITHER (please describe in question 46)
46. If you answered “Neither” in question 45, please describe the length of time your engagement was broken. If you did NOT select “Neither,” leave this blank and move to the next page.

****These are the MOST IMPORTANT questions on the survey. Please be as DETAILED as possible in your responses!****

ALL of the blanks on this page will expand to include as much text as you would like to write. The depth of your responses will help reveal the behaviors, communication issues, and disagreements that arise in broken engagements! Further, ALL information submitted is confidential.

47. In 3 sentences or more, please describe the specific SIGNS or major events during your relationship with your ex-fiance/e that contributed to the ending of your engagement AS MUCH DETAIL as possible (helps with analysis). **** This question is VITAL to this research project! ****
48. In 3 sentences or more, please describe how your engagement actually ended AS

MUCH DETAIL as possible (helps with analysis). What were the reasons for which this engagement was ended? HOW was this decision communicated between you and your ex-fiance/e? How did EACH OF YOU react to this decision? ** This question is VITAL to this research project! **

49. What role did family and/or social networks (friends, coworkers, online communities, etc.) play in the decision to end this engagement? In what ways did your social networks offer support for you, or NOT support you, when this engagement ended? This includes BOTH your and your ex-fiance/e's families and social networks. Please explain!
50. What advice did you and/or your ex-fiance/e receive regarding whether or not to end this engagement? Who gave you this advice? Please explain!
51. How did you and/or your ex-fiance/e explain the ending of this engagement to family members and others? ** Please explain in 3 sentences or more. **
52. What tensions or stressful events were present in your life around the time this engagement was broken? Please explain!
53. Please describe the major disagreements you experienced with YOUR EX-FIANCE/E during the engagement period, in as much detail as possible. (NOTE: Disagreement includes any conflict, spat, minor differences, etc.)
54. Please describe the major disagreements you experienced with OTHERS (NOT your ex-fiance/e) during this engagement, in as much detail as possible. (NOTE: Disagreement includes any conflict, spat, minor differences, etc.)
55. Did anyone offer support for you, or make negative comments to you, after this engagement ended? Specifically, HOW was this conveyed? Please describe, in AS MUCH detail as possible, what happened after this engagement was broken. ** Please explain in 3 sentences or more. **
56. What has your relationship with YOUR EX-FIANCE/E been like since this engagement ended? Please check all that apply.
 - We have NOT communicated since
 - We have communicated a few times, but it has been mostly NEGATIVE
 - We have communicated a few times, but it has been mostly POSITIVE
 - We have remained friends
 - We are currently dating each other
 - We are currently engaged to each other
 - We are currently married to each other
 - We dated again, but have since broken up a second time
 - We were engaged again, but have since broken up a second time

- We were later married, but have since separated or divorced
 - OTHER (please describe in question 57)
57. If you answered "Other" in question 56, please describe what your relationship with YOUR EX-FIANCE/E has been like since this engagement ended. If you did NOT select "Other," leave this blank and move to the next page.
58. Looking back, what do you feel you learned from this relationship and the ending of this engagement? ** Please explain in 3 sentences or more. **
59. In at least 1 sentence, what advice would you give to someone who is considering breaking their engagement? Please explain!
60. Are there any questions that were NOT asked about broken engagements that should have been included? If so, please list and explain your suggestions; these questions may be used in follow up studies on this topic!
61. How would you like to see the results of this study used? Please explain!
62. How did you find out about this survey?

PAGE TWENTY-FOUR

If the participant did not meet the criterion to participate:

Thank you for your interest in this research project!

You have indicated that you do not wish to participate in this study, have not experienced at least one broken engagement, are not at least 18 years old, or do not currently live in the United States. These items are part of the approval for this particular study by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Denver.

Please feel free to forward the survey link to others who may be interested in this study. I appreciate the time you have taken to visit this website. Thanks again! :)

Best wishes,
Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD
Doctoral Candidate
University of Denver
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The screen all participants saw after finishing the survey:

Thank you for your responses! I know the survey is long, and deeply appreciate your contribution to this study.

I will contact you again at a later date if you chose to receive updates on future broken engagement studies, to have a synopsis of this study's findings mailed or emailed to you, or to be entered in the gift card drawing. If you elected NOT to be contacted in the future, again I offer my thanks and best wishes!

The drawing for a CHANCE to win one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to WalMart or Target will be held in August 2012 (pending enough responses are received by this time). The researcher will conduct the drawing using a random number generator. A letter and/or email will be sent to each of the 10 gift card winners, to verify the proper mailing address for each winning participant. Drawing winners will have ONE month to verify their address or another winner will be selected in their stead.

Finally, a prominent way to gain participants for this study is through word of mouth. If you know someone who has experienced at least one broken engagement, PLEASE send them the link to this survey! Thank you! :)

Many sincere thanks,
Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD
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APPENDIX C: LETTER TO DRAWING WINNERS

[DATE]

Name
Address

Re: Broken Engagements Study
Prize Drawing

Dear [NAME],

Over the past several years, I have been gathering data for my doctoral dissertation project on Broken Engagements through the University of Denver (DU); thank you again for your participation in this study! Upon completion of data collection, the drawing for one of ten \$25.00 gift cards to Walmart or Target was conducted, and your name was pulled as a winner. Congratulations!

Thank you again for your participation in my doctoral dissertation study. I am mailing the gift card you selected to the address provided in our recent email correspondence; please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional questions about the project. Best wishes to you!

With appreciation,

Chelsea A.H. Stow, ABD
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