

**BUT WHY DO I NEED AN EXCUSE?: WOMEN'S
GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF INITIATING A
RELATIONSHIP BREAKUP WITH A COMMITTED
PARTNER**

by

Megan Jane Bruneau
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APPROVAL

Name: Megan Jane Bruneau
Degree: Master of Arts
Title of Thesis: But Why do I Need an Excuse?: Women's gendered experience of initiating a relationship breakup with a committed partner

Examining Committee:

Chair: Geoffrey Madoc-Jones, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer

Patrice Keats, Ph.D.
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor of Counselling Psychology

Natalee Popadiuk, Ph.D., R. Psych
Supervisor
Assistant Professor of Counselling Psychology
University of Victoria

Erika Horwitz, Ph.D., R. Psych
External Examiner
Associate Director
SFU Health and Counselling Services

Date Defended/Approved: August 12th, 2011

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ABSTRACT

There is a lack of literature surrounding women’s experiences leaving romantic relationships. This study asks, “How do women experience the social and emotional consequences associated with their voluntary departure from a long-term, heterosexual romantic relationship?” Using a qualitative research methodology to allow for an in-depth exploration of their stories, nine women aged 20-29 were interviewed about their breakup experiences. A narrative analysis generated three themes: *active defiance of the socially understood female role in a relationship*; *absence of a socially understood anti-relational script available to women*; and *healing and growth experienced as results of validation, meaning-making, and script-creation*. These themes can be understood as functions of Social Role Theory—the idea that beliefs people hold about the sexes reflect and influence the sexual division of gender. Counselling implications include working through disenfranchised grief, managing anxiety, and facilitating methods of relational, intrapersonal, and observational validation.

DEDICATION

For all of my parents, who have supported and encouraged me through each personal and professional journey; for my girlfriends, who have been there for me infallibly as companions, counsellors, and crisis-managers; and for every woman and man who is struggling with having broken a heart or having a broken heart—may you find validation, self-compassion, and meaning in your story.

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“You don’t die of a broken heart. You only wish you did.” Author Marilyn Peterson’s quote bitterly captures the agony of heartbreak—punishment for trusting; for sharing insecurities and secrets; for planning; for naively feeling bound to another by an indestructible link—and watching it snap. The partner less prepared for the loss is thrown into a spin cycle of numbness, anguish, fury, confusion—but what about the partner who instigated the breakup? What is their experience? Surely, they are fine. After all, it was their choice.

1.1 My Story

The paragraph above illustrates how I once viewed the breakup experience. At eight years old, my father left my mother, and I watched my mother fall apart. I saw one side of the breakup: her side. It was the side of the person who was left. I did not witness my father’s experience. He was the one in control, so I assumed he was fine. As years passed, I continued to believe the experience of the leaver was uncomplicated. Movies, books, songs, and others’ stories consistently focused on the pain of the heartbroken, not the heartbreaker. It was not until my early twenties, when I found myself leaving a long-term relationship, that my understanding of the breakup experience was entirely uprooted.

I left my partner after two years of dating. We were living together at the time, and he was still fully committed. He was what you might call “perfect on paper”: brilliant, driven, athletic, funny—and he had never been unfaithful or physically harmful. But I was no longer satisfied in the relationship. He had become my best friend, and I was not ready to settle down with someone to whom I was no longer physically attracted. I battled with the thought that I did not have an excuse or acceptable reason to leave him. What would I tell my parents who loved him dearly? How would people view me? Where would I go? Even more so, I greatly feared the pain I might inflict on him. I battled these anxieties for months, questioning whether or not leaving would be worth experiencing such unknowns. But I did. I left. And I broke his heart.

I panicked in a place of uncertainty and isolation. I felt unsupported, ostracized, and judged. In a manic frenzy of guilt, regret, ambiguity, and sorrow, I felt as though I was stumbling blindly through a maze of uncertainty and isolation, not knowing who I could trust and by whom I had been shunned. I felt like I had “heartless” branded on my face—in fact, my former partner once referenced a song by that title in the process, telling me it would “speak” to me. I uneasily asked to sleep on a friend’s couch, hoping she would forget my distance in our friendship over the past two years, and from there embarked on an unmarked emotional journey.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Looking back, I realize I defied many stories, quotes, and songs describing the rules of love, societal norms that portray women as nurturers,

carers, mothers, and popular media that suggest women are incomplete without a partner. How did I cope with the consequences of my rebellious choice? The attention I bring to the heartbreaker's story is not intended to minimize the traumatic experience of the partner who is left; rather, I want to expose the unspoken suffering that accompanies a woman leaving her partner. In this paper, I focus specifically on heterosexual relationships and the socially constructed roles of women in general.

When I remember back to my experience, I wonder why it was so difficult to explain why I ended the relationship. Why did leaving because I was unhappy in the relationship not warrant my family's support? Why was I only allowed to escape without guilt if I had a "good" excuse, such as abuse or infidelity on his part? Did being a woman who chose to end a relationship with a man who was perfect "marriage material" underlie the nauseating guilt I felt? Was defying the social norm of being nurturant and caring, or a good potential wife and mother, what left me feeling void of identity, shameful and anxious? Perhaps I was not the only woman who has felt this way; perhaps there are women out there, caught or once caught in a similar vortex, waiting to be freed from their pain and given the permission to grow. Perhaps I could help these women achieve growth, by granting them a voice, a validating script, an external source of blame, and the support of other stories similar to their own. Perhaps I could give counsellors insight into women's experience of leaving a relationship, and provide permission for women to receive counselling while experiencing the

ramifications. I felt compelled to make women's experiences heard, and so I undertook the study that is the subject of this paper.

1.3 Gaps in the Literature

I strove to answer the questions that emerged from my experience, and so I turned to current research on the subject. However, despite the relevance of the topic to human experience (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008) that led me to expect a plethora of literature on romantic relationship breakups, the body of research is disappointingly deficient. The majority of the available literature focuses solely on the breakup or breakup rationale—for example, relationship satisfaction (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), communicative strategies employed (e.g., Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Sprecher, 1994; Wilmot, Carabaugh, & Baxter, 1985) or attributional dimensions (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995; Hortacsu & Karanci, 1987). I was interested in the woman's experience of leaving beyond the breakup itself—the period before, including, and after ending the relationship. Although there is some literature on this topic, there are gaps in our knowledge. First, mixed outcomes have emerged in attempts to understand the differing experiences of the person who chooses to leave the romantic relationship and the person who is left (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999; Buchler, 1987; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1991; Dailey, Rosetto, Pfeister, & Surra, 2009; Doering, 2010; Eastwick et al., 2008; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher, Felmee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998; Walker & Macdonald, 2010). Second, few of these researchers have investigated differences between the female experience of relationship

dissolution and the male experience of relationship dissolution, and the few studies that have been done have yielded mixed outcomes (Ayduk & Downey, 1999; Helgeson, 1994; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998). Third, the majority of the aforementioned studies are quantitative in nature. Although quantitative studies can provide us with valuable findings in the area of romantic relationships, qualitative inquiry is a useful method of capturing the richness of women's experiences of choosing to leave a relationship on a personal and emotional level. Furthermore, a qualitative study might provide more detail and depth for understanding women's experiences.

Additionally, there appears to be a lack of literature that focuses on experiences of growth and coping during the breakup experience (Hebert & Popadiuk, 2004). Such research might provide valuable suggestions for coping and counselling implications. There is also little attention given to the role social support in the breakup process. Perilloux and Buss (2008) suggest those who choose to leave their relationship experience a loss of shared friends. I propose that the negative feedback following the end of a relationship might extend to the temporary loss of support from family as well. As such, social support is another important area of exploration in the experience following relationship dissolution. Yet another area in which the literature is sparse is the examination of the experience of the person who chooses to leave the relationship. Researchers agree that the experience of the person who leaves is often wrought with negative emotions, yet the experience has not been deeply explored—again, this could provide insights and result in counselling implications.

1.4 Locating Myself

In contrast to positivist or post-positivist paradigms that seek to exhibit truth, I approached my research question from a constructivist paradigm (Gergen, 1991). Constructivism suggests that reality is subjective—the discovery of objective “truths” in research is not possible (Riessman, 1993), and a researcher cannot stand outside her own experience. So, regardless of any attempt to remain objective, my beliefs, biases, and values will inevitably present themselves during the research. Three years after my breakup, I still struggle with detaching myself emotionally from the experience, and this has no doubt impacted the design and results of my study. Impassioned by my experience, I might have asked questions in an attempt to elicit descriptions of experiences similar to the ones I suffered. In doing so, I might have been searching for what did not, does not, or will not exist within the interviewee. Aware of this possibility, I sought to remain open to whatever experience my interviewee illustrated. Additionally, there were times when I felt triggered, confused, sad, or angry while conducting my research. I strove to manage such emotions using skills I have developed as a counsellor—checking in with my own biases, reactions, and agendas in the interview. Still, I am aware that there is nothing I could do to entirely free myself from my biases and experiences. This thwarts the possibility of producing objective and generalizable research, which, to the positivist reader, might detract from the significance of my findings; in accord with constructivism, however, I believe that admitting the power of subjectivity in research strengthens the product. I accepted and embraced the presence of these

subjective elements, therefore recognizing and acknowledging their influence and their credibility and authenticity in my work.

1.5 The Research Question

I explored women's experiences using the following research question: "How do women experience the social and emotional consequences associated with their voluntary departure from a long-term, heterosexual romantic relationship?"

I strove to provide an answer for this question—an interpretation based on the experiences of the women included in my study—in this paper. The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize (Merril & West, 2009); rather, the goal is to generate a text rich in experience, intensity, and insight. I have not sought to provide generalizable conclusions from my research, but hope to put forth possible theoretical claims and create a starting point for future research (Riessman, 1993).

1.6 Organization of This Paper

In the following chapter, I review current literature relevant to this study with regards to the content of women's experiences as well as the theoretical interpretations derived. In Chapter 3, I explain and detail the methodology I used in seeking answers to my research question. In Chapter 4, I illustrate the results that emerged from my study. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss theoretical interpretations of the data, counselling implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I first discuss shared expectations, or gender norms, that I have uncovered in the available literature. I will then discuss current findings in the literature surrounding the breakup experience and relevant themes pertaining to my study. In the context of this paper, *script* will refer to “the social role or behaviour appropriate to particular situations that an individual absorbs through cultural influences and association with others” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

2.1 Gender Norms

A *norm* is a standard or pattern, especially of social behaviour, that is typical or expected of a group. A *role* is a culturally understood set of connected behaviours, rights and obligations for a person in situations. Essentially, norms are compilations of roles. Socially-constructed gender roles in relationships might influence the experience of the female leaver. Role congruity theory, which I will discuss thoroughly in Chapter 5, suggests that when a group’s characteristics are viewed as being in accordance with their typical social role, the group will be evaluated positively (Diekmann & Goodfried, 2006). For example, if a woman acts in a way that aligns with the culturally and socially understood expectations of her role as a woman, she will experience positive feedback from members of her social group and evaluate herself positively. In contrast, if she acts in a way that conflicts with the culturally and socially

understood expectations of her role as a woman, she might receive negative feedback from members of her social group, and might evaluate herself negatively. To illustrate how role congruity theory might influence women's experiences of leaving a committed relationship, I will highlight several studies that have attempted to expose socially accepted gender norms in the paragraphs below.

In their study of post-divorce narratives, Walzer and Oles (2003) uncovered that men are more likely to identify as leavers than are women, even when there appears to be little evidence for their claim. In contrast, women are less willing to identify themselves as leavers, since this action conflicts with culturally dominant expectations of the female role. There is a bevy of research finding consensus in what is considered normative of women in relationships. The roles for women of feminine identity have been constructed historically around motherhood, emphasizing relational connections, dependence, nurturance (providing physical and emotional care), and warmth (Gillespie, 2003). Culturally romantic scripts emphasize male initiative and female passivity (Holland, 1992; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Sanchez, Crocker, & Burke, 2005). For example, women who are more agentic are more likely to be evaluated unfavourably (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), and women are more likely to be passive and compliant sexually in relationships (Impett & Peplau, 2003).

In their attempt to develop an inventory of female norms, Mahalik, Morray, Coonerty-Femiano, Ludlow, Slattery, and Smiley (2005) identified several expectations. Amongst others, notable norms included, "be relational-

connected,” “be dependent,” “be married,” “rely on men,” “be pleasant,” and “defer to men.” Gillespie and Eisler (1992) studied fears of defying gender roles and how doing so affects women. Notable fears of “acts of defiance” included “fear of not being nurturant”, and “fear of behaving assertively.” The act of leaving a relationship overtly defies such norms and creates realization of the women’s fears, which increases role-stress and, consequently, increases depression (Gillespie & Eisler, 1992). Furthermore, following gender roles can result in acceptance and approval (Sanchez et al., 2005). However, women who adhere to such norms also tend to worry about what others think and let the evaluation determine their self-worth.

Women are not alone in holding such beliefs about how they should behave in relationships. In their 2010 study, Smiler and Kubotera explored the expectations held for women in relationships by unmarried, heterosexual young adult men. They found that the men expected women to demonstrate more expressive traits—such as those previously mentioned—in romantic contexts, which was related to their overall beliefs about women’s roles in general. In the context of the uncovered gender norms, it is reasonable to consider leaving a committed romantic relationship a socially defiant act. Though it is likely difficult for both men and women to leave a relationship, the aforementioned expectations that women be “nurturant” and “relational” suggests that leaving a relationship might be that much more anxiety-provoking and conflict-producing for women. Therefore, choosing to explore specifically women’s experience of leaving a committed relationship is a reasonable endeavour.

2.2 Prevalent Themes in the Literature

In spite of absence of literature specific to the female leaver, I have uncovered themes present in the leaver's experience. Collectively, these themes comprise two categories: *negative consequences* and *positive consequences*. I will discuss each theme and the corresponding gender differences that support my interest in the female's experience.

The negative consequences. A review of the literature suggests there are several predominant themes that can be categorized as negative consequences: negative affect, which includes guilt, depression, anxiety, and grief; a loss of resources, a negative effect on social support, and the absence of permission or validation from society for their choice to leave.

Negative affect. Undoubtedly, the most predominant theme in the post-relationship dissolution literature concerns negative affect. Research suggests that both the person who leaves the relationship and the person who is left typically experience significant levels of distress and negative affect (Ayduk, et al., 1999; Buchler, 1987; Dailey et al., 2009; Doering, 2010; Eastwick et al., 2008; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1991; Perrilloux & Buss, 2008; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Walker & Macdonald, 2010). However, contradictory findings appear in the literature concerning whether or not the person who is left experiences more distress and negative affect than the person who leaves (Ayduk, et al., 1999; Buchler, 1987; Dailey et al., 2009; Doering, 2010; Eastwick et al., 2008; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1991; Perrilloux & Buss, 2008; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Walker &

Macdonald, 2010). Tashiro and Frazier (2003) found that, following a breakup, the person who chooses to leave the relationship and the person who is left report experiencing the same levels of distress, yet Perilloux and Buss (2008) found that the person who is left experiences significantly more negative affect than the person who chooses to leave. Inconsistencies in the literature also appear regarding gender differences in the experience following relationship dissolution (Baumesister, Wotman, & Stillweel, 2003; Buss, 2008; Choo, Levine, & Hatfield, 1996; Field, Diego, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009; Horacsu & Karanci, 1987; Mearns, 1991; Smith & Cohen, 1993). Choo, Levine, and Hatfield (1996) state that women experience more positive emotions than men following a non-marital breakup; opposing findings, however, were reported by Field and colleagues (2009), Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993), Buss (2008), and Mearns (1991), who found women experience more negative emotions than men following a non-marital breakup. Similarly, Smith and Cohen (1993) found women were more upset by the breakup, assigned more importance to it, and scored higher than men on an impact of events scale. Hortacsu and Karanci (1987), however, found that the gender of the subject did not have an effect on affective reaction, and Sprecher (1994) suggested that men and women experience similar levels of distress following a breakup. It seems women's experiences following non-marital relationship breakups warrant exploration. Although negative affect encompasses a slew of emotions, *guilt*, *depression*, *anxiety*, and *grief* appear most evident in the experience of the person who chooses to leave the relationship. I will explore the current research on each of

these emotions within the context of the experience following relationship dissolution, and I will highlight the gender differences noted by the authors.

Guilt. Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) showed that those who leave a romantic relationship experience more guilt than those who are left. Similar to Hill et al. (1976), the investigations that followed grouped together both those who chose to leave the relationship and those who were left. In some of the following studies, the person who chose to leave and the person who was left were considered separately; most studies, however, grouped the two together or focused quantitatively on the experience of the person who was left.

Baumeister et al. (1993) conducted an in-depth study of people who rejected their pursuer in cases of unrequited love. Since it likely would have been too difficult to recruit the pursuer from each participant's experience, participants were asked to write two stories—one from the perspective of the person who rejected the suitor, and one from the pursuer's perspective to illustrate their experience of being the object of a one-sided attraction. Although many of the stories began as casual dating that became a one-sided attraction, several participants had never been romantically involved with the person whom they ultimately rejected. This, of course, makes it difficult to argue the relevance of such a study to the investigation of the experience following relationship dissolution. There are parallels, however, in that the guilt feelings experienced are attributable to one person feeling compelled to end the relationship. I believe that, following the breakup of a romantic relationship, the guilt feelings experienced from rejecting a suitor's advances can only be intensified because of

the higher degree of intimacy. Baumeister et al. (1993) found that the person who rejects the suitor is subject to a moral dilemma, knowing it was wrong to hurt someone but also knowing it was wrong to allow someone to fall in love—or stay in love—in vain. The person who rejected the suitor's advances was subsequently more likely than the pursuer to experience guilt, and Baumeister et al. (1993) found that men were more likely to blame themselves than women. This contradicts with previous gendered findings. Further limiting Baumeister and colleagues' research is the telling of both sides of the story subjectively, even though we can only truly understand the account of the person who rejects the suitor's advances. In addition to qualitative measures, the researchers quantified the experience using interval scales: they asked participants to provide a rating of their self-esteem changes, guilt feelings, key events, emotions, and mutual perceptions. The choices of emotions might have triggered false recollections within the person who rejects the suitor's advances—emotions that he or she might feel obliged to have experienced and thereby report experiencing, depending on when the survey was administered.

Perilloux and Buss (2008) distinguished between the two undeniably different experiences. The researchers asked participants—the majority of whom had chosen to end the relationship—to self-report the degree to which they had engaged in certain strategies or suffered certain costs. They found that, often characterized as villains by their peers, the person who chooses to leave might be subject to reputational damage. As a result, they experience a stronger sense of guilt and the cost of being seen as more cruel than the person who is left

(Perilloux & Buss, 2008). With regards to gender differences, they reported that men who left the relationship were happier and more indifferent than women who left the relationship. This finding intrigues me since I wonder whether this might be a result of society's pressure on women to be characteristically caring and nurturant. Or, perhaps it is a result of society's pressure on men to mask negative emotions for fear of appearing weak or irrational.

Finally, Choo et al. (1996) found contradictory results in their study of the good, bad, and guilt emotions of 250 university students who had recently experienced a breakup. Of the students they studied, the majority had chosen to instigate the breakup. Men and women did not differ on their scores of feeling guilt. The studies I located that look at gender differences in affect following breakup are contradictory in terms of their findings. The variety of these findings points to a need for further investigation.

Depression. Guilt and depression, above all, seemed to dominate the experience of the person who chose to leave the relationship. Perilloux and Buss (2008) found that those who were left experienced more depression, rumination, and decreased self-esteem following the breakup than those who chose to leave the romantic relationship. However, in comparison to male leavers, female leavers reported more rumination, crying, pleading with the ex-partner for understanding or forgiveness, discussing breakup with family and friends, and shopping following the breakup. This is supported by Baumeister (1993) who found that women rated their experience rejecting pursuers' advances as more of an "emotional roller coaster" than do men. Tashiro and

Frazier (2003) also found that women reported higher scores on the Brief Symptom Inventory for Depression following a romantic breakup, and Mearns (1991) found that women reported higher scores than men on the Depression Symptoms Inventory. Choo, et al.'s (1996) study of emotions and coping strategies, however, both supports and refutes the aforementioned findings. These researchers found that men and women did not differ on their scores of negative affect, including anxiety, sadness, and anger. Additionally, men actually had significantly lower scores than women on the factor assessing good feelings.

Depression following relationship appears to be apparent physiologically. Najib, Lorberbaum, Kose, Bohning, and George (2004) completed a study on regional brain activity in women following relationship dissolution. The eleven right-handed women who participated in their study completed *the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale*, *the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale*, *the Beck Depression Inventory*, *Slonginger's Temperament and Character Inventory*, and a modified version of the *Inventory of Complicated Grief*; the women also underwent an MRI. Results showed that, in the two weeks following their breakup, almost all of the women met the criteria for clinical depression. The women had altered activity in their cerebellum, anterior temporal cortex, insula, anterior cingulate, and prefrontal cortex, and reported ruminative thoughts such as "our mutual dreams—not a shared dream anymore;" "losing him as a boyfriend and a good friend;" and "I am alone again—maybe I'll always be." It is necessary to point out the possibility that the women's physiological brain activity was influenced because of being primed to think of ruminative thoughts.

Furthermore, the quantitative and medical nature of the study risks constraining the women's natural experience of emotions.

Another study that explored the experience of depression following relationship dissolution was undertaken by Sbarra and Emery (2005). They compared the experiences of participants who had been through a romantic breakup within the past two weeks, with the experiences of participants whose romantic relationships were intact. Of the 48 women and 10 men who had experienced a romantic breakup, the majority had chosen to leave the relationship. Subjects filled out a modified version of Kitson's Acceptance of Marital Termination scale. This scale consisted of a daily diary for reporting emotions, and the 15-item Horowitz Impact of Events Scale—a questionnaire assessing emotions, intrusion, and avoidance that is typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Results showed that those who had recently experienced a romantic breakup reported significantly higher levels of sadness, negative affect, and variance in emotions. Sex differences could not be examined because the sample consisted primarily of women. Sbarra and Emery (2005) noted that, by the end of the study, the dissolution participants' average daily sadness did not differ from that of the individuals in intact relationships. This contradicts the notion partnered or married women are happier than those who are single (Stutzer & Frey, 2006).

In contrast to the previous studies, Chung and colleagues (2002), found that depression was not as much of a problem as anxiety, which will be discussed in the following section.

Anxiety. Baumeister et al. (1993) found that the person who rejects the pursuer's advances experiences a strong sense of anxiety in not knowing how to act or not having a script to follow in the rejecting process. He explains that although people are aware of stories, songs, and movies involving heartbreak, they do not know how to break someone's heart (Baumeister & Dhavale, 2001). Thus, extreme anxiety and uncertainty are provoked within the person who rejects the pursuer's advances.

Chung et al. (2002) studied the experience of anxiety in relationship dissolution in their exploration of posttraumatic stress symptoms and romantic relationship breakups. They measured intrusive memories and avoidance behaviour in first-year medical students who had dissected their first cadaver and participants who had recently experienced a romantic breakup. Both groups experienced virtually the same degree of avoidance behaviours and intrusive memories associated with posttraumatic stress. The participants also filled out the General Health Questionnaire, a screening device used to identify minor psychiatric disorders that assesses anxiety, social dysfunction, somatic problems, and depression. Results showed both groups experienced primarily anxiety, followed by social dysfunction and somatic problems following their experience (of either dissecting a cadaver or ending their relationship). As their study was correlational in nature, causation cannot be inferred from these findings. The participants had not been measured on the scales prior to their experience, so I cannot suggest whether it was the breakup or cadaver dissection that caused the post-traumatic symptoms. Additionally, medical

students who had dissected their first cadaver might have attempted to dilute the negativity of their experience to rationalize their choice of profession. They might have felt pressured to minimize the intensity of their experience to prove to themselves or others that they are emotionally strong enough to enter the medical field. Likewise, those who selected themselves to take part in the study might have experienced particularly negative breakups, considering the criteria extended as far as 24 months following their breakup. As a result, the negativity of the collective breakup experience might have been overstated, while the collective experience of dissecting cadavers might have been understated. Finally, those who leave the relationship and those who are left were not considered separately in this study. Still, Chung et al. (2002) showed that posttraumatic stress symptoms are present following a romantic relationship breakup, and this provides insight into the severity of anxiety experienced following the end of a romantic relationship.

Finally, participants of Hebert and Popadiuk's (2008) qualitative study reported experiencing anxiety as the greatest negative change in their breakup experiences. This anxiety, however, was reported as struggles in finding a new partner or trusting a new partner following the experience of infidelity.

Grief. Although grief might be experienced more intensely by the person who is left, it is still a notable part of the leaver's experience. *Grief* is consistently highlighted as thematic in the breakup experience (Weber, 1998; Boelen & van de Hout, 2010). It is possible that the leaver experiences grief as intensely as the person who is left; however, similar to losing a loved one to terminal illness,

she experiences anticipatory grief and begins the grieving process prior to ending the relationship. As Boelen (2010) showed, grief scores are negatively correlated with time since the breakup. When studies that quantify grief measure the intensity of the grief of the leaver and the person who is left, the leaver might be weeks, months, or years ahead of her former partner in the grieving process.

Boelen (2010) carried out a recent study that explored relationship dissolution, grief, and the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS), which refers to the inclusion of a close other's identities, perspectives, and resources in one's own experience. When an individual experiences the loss of relationship with a close other, she might lose such identities, perspectives, and resources, which will likely result in a sense of grief or loss. Boelen (2010) measured IOS and grief, and found that those who experienced more interconnectedness between self and former partner experienced more grief. This outcome remained even when taking into account who left and who was left. Because society highly values women's relational roles, prizing independent traits in men and dependent or relational traits in women, (Mahalik et al., 2005), I suggest women are more likely to define themselves in relation to others. As a result, it is possible that women experience stronger grief reactions to relationship dissolution and thereby rate higher on IOS scales than do men.

Loss of resources. In addition to the emotional consequences experienced as a result of leaving their relationship, people reported a loss of resources as a negative consequence (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Although men and women reported loss of sexual access, loss of ex-partner's resources, and

loss of shared friends, women reported another cost in conjunction with their sadness: loss of protection. This concern might become a barrier to ending a relationship, as women might think they need to be joined to a man to feel safe and complete.

The effects of breakup experience on social support. Relationship breakups certainly have an effect on social support (Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeekle, & Shu, 2006; Hulbert & Acock, 1990). In their study of how divorce affects social networks, Sprecher et al. (2006) found that divorce leads to a decline in social relationships. Furthermore, the social networks of divorced or separated individuals are both less dense and less enduring, and include fewer kin than those of married or widowed individuals (Hurlbert & Acock, 1990). Because the research generating such findings focuses on married individuals, it would be interesting to see if women experience changes in their social networks following a relationship breakup.

No excuse. In a most recent and relevant study, Doering (2010) uncovered account strategies employed by individuals attempting to make sense of or explain their breakup experience. He explored stories of the leaver, the left, and those who reported mutual agreement ending their relationships, eventually developing a typology of breakup accounts. It is unsurprising that he asserted breaking up is hard for both sides—the leaver, he explained, doesn't have the "privilege" of merely being a victim of the process. The researcher interviewed three men and three women in Germany, each of whom had experienced 3-6 relationship dissolutions. He collected multiple uninterrupted narratives, and

found themes present in the narratives of the leaver, the left, and those who were in consensus. Doering (2010) found the leaver's stories consistently emphasize empathy with the former partner, downplayed or exaggerated conflicts in the relationship, and externalized blame of the relationship breakup to factors beyond their control. They denied responsibility for the relationship dissolution, choosing to discredit their former partner or blame someone or something else. This is likely due to the construction that leaving a relationship might appear egoistic or cruel (Doering, 2010)—an act of instrumentality and not expressiveness. As a result, the leaver seeks to give rationale for his or her actions or provide a “socially acceptable” excuse (Vaughan, 1986). So, the experience of leaving a relationship might be fraught with conflict or an absence of permission when not cushioned with an “acceptable” excuse.

The positive consequences. Under the overarching category of positive consequences of the breakup, the following themes were apparent: growth, coping, and the effect of social support on the breakup experience.

Growth. Since romantic breakups might be viewed as a negative experience, one critical aspect that has received relatively little attention in the literature is *growth*. Weber (1998) stated that coping with non-marital breakups creates havoc for those involved, namely crises in personal and social development, intimacy, and expectations about future development. In experiencing and surviving such crises, there lies the opportunity for self-discovery, grief experience, and trust that recovery is possible.

In a recent online study, Miller (2010) investigated growth of individuals who had experienced a recent romantic relationship breakup. She looked at both relationship-relevant growth and general growth. Men and women who had ended a romantic relationship provided information regarding personality characteristics, past relationship experience, coping, impact of breakup, demographics, and details of their current relationship if relevant. Participants reported growth in relationship-relevant areas as well as generally, but negative change was reported as well. Miller found that growth was positively related to a number of personality variables, notably: sense of control, perceived agency in the breakup, self-esteem, support, attachment security, active coping, adaptation or moving forward, and forgiveness. Tashiro and Frazier (2003) looked at growth in a more in-depth, mixed methods research design. Participants, most of whom had initiated their recent breakup, were first assessed on their growth using qualitative measures. Researchers asked, “Briefly describe what positive changes, if any, have happened as a result of your breakup that might serve to improve your future romantic relationships.” Growth was then assessed using quantitative measures with the completion of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory Scale, a 21-item scale that indicates life change following a crisis. Responses from the participants were then coded for the type of growth experienced: “person,” which was defined as growth of their own characteristics or traits; “other,” which was defined as growth that would cause improvement of future romantic relationships; “relational,” which was defined as growth of the individual within any relational context (e.g., communication with others); and

“environmental,” which was defined as a change in the participants’ current environment not concerning direct interaction (e.g., feeling closer to family). Each participant reported an average of five positive changes resulting from their breakup that would improve their future relationships. The most common type of relational growth was gaining relational wisdom. The most common type of environmental positive change was improvements in friendships following the breakup. An interesting finding is that those who attributed their relationship dissolution to environmental factors reported more growth, whereas those who attributed the dissolution to themselves reported less growth. Perhaps those who feel responsible for the relationship dissolution experience guilt which stunts the growth experience. Tashiro and Frazier (2003) found that females who chose to leave the romantic relationship did not report significantly more positive changes than did males who left; women did, however, report more growth than males following relationship dissolution. This finding was replicated by Miller (2010) who also found women reported more growth than men following a breakup.

Although Tashiro and Frazier’s (2003) study raises awareness of the positive changes experienced as the result of a breakup, there are limitations to the study. First, their research question primes participants to search for positive changes even if they might not have thought any existed prior to being asked the question. The researchers did add “if any” to their research question, but participants might have still felt compelled to give a positive response. If they realized they have not grown since their breakup, they might have fabricated a

positive response to alleviate possible negative feelings they might have experienced upon coming to that conclusion. A more appropriate question to ask might have been, "Briefly describe what changes, if any, have resulted from your breakup that might affect your future romantic relationships." Another limitation to the study is that most of the participants had yet to enter into a new romantic relationship, since their breakup had occurred fairly recently. Although there is certainly potential for recognizing growth in oneself and in relation to others, those who had not entered a new relationship might not yet have noticed changes in themselves that might become more evident once in a new relationship. Finally, growth does not occur overnight. The average time since the breakup moment was three months; thus, it is a possibility that some participants were still in a grieving or distressed state and had yet to achieve or become aware of the positive consequences resulting from their breakup.

Banks, Altendorf, Greene, and Cody (1987) conducted a study that brought attention to positive consequences of the breakup. Undergraduate students who had recently left a relationship completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire assessed phenomena (e.g., felt freedom) that had occurred in and following their relationship. Two notable findings emerged: first, the more a participant felt constrained during a relationship, the more freedom they felt following the breakup; and second, the more a participant used negative identity management tactics (e.g., "I want you to date other people") the more freedom they felt following the breakup. I suggest more constraint in the relationship might foster more certainty in their decision to leave before actually ending the

relationship. The more certain participants were about their decision to leave a relationship, the more freedom and less anxiety they feel upon its termination. Although gender differences are not noted in this study, it would be interesting to see whether women or men experienced more felt freedom. I speculate that women might be more likely to feel constrained in their relationships for fear of defying social norms, and might think it necessary to feel a complete and absolute certainty before ending the relationship. At this point, participants might have considered the outcomes of breaking up (e.g., dating others, partner dating others) and be quicker to use negative identity management and then feel higher levels of freedom. Finally, I believe that another limitation to this study is its quantitative measures. As the experience of a romantic relationship breakup is a multifaceted emotional experience, there might be a greater gain in understanding of the experience using qualitative methods to explore these experiences more deeply. Also, because of the correlational nature of the study, it is difficult to make inferences as to whether the constraint in the relationship caused felt freedom, or the felt freedom following the relationship created a recollection of constraint.

From a qualitative perspective, Hebert and Popadiuk (2008) explored growth following non-marital breakups using a grounded theory approach. During interviews, six female and five male undergraduate students were asked about their experiences of outcomes following breakups. These participants shared which of those outcomes had the most impact on their life and how those impacts developed. Answers were coded and categorized through textual

analysis. The most commonly cited changes were (a) relevant learning for future relationships; (b) an improved ability to be able to handle stressful events and greater inner strength; (c) greater independence or felt freedom; (d) greater self-awareness and maturity; and (e) a priority shift. Relevant learning for future relationships supports Tashiro and Frazier's (2003) findings, while a greater sense of felt freedom is consistent with Banks et al.'s (1987) research. Hebert and Popadiuk's study provides us with a deeper, qualitative understanding of the breakup experience. It does not, however, consider separately the experience of the leaver and the left, nor does it focus exclusively on the woman's experience. Finally, in a fascinating study that will be explored later, Doering (2010) found that respondents had "epiphanies" from breakups that help with meaning-making and important lessons.

Coping. Coping with an emotional breakup is yet another area integral to counselling that appears to be relatively under-researched. McCarthy, Lambert, and Brack (1997) looked at preventive and combative coping resources and how they affected emotions over time. Preventive coping strategies are those that are internal and cognitive in nature. Combative coping strategies are those that are external, physical and action-oriented. Two hundred thirty-one participants' coping strategies were measure quantitatively and qualitatively. First provided with a list of emotions, participants were asked to identify the emotions associated with their breakup and the period following. They were then asked to tell the story of what happened when their relationship ended, and what it was in the situation that caused them to feel the emotions they had experienced. In a

second part of the study, participants were asked their cognitive appraisals of the events—whether they were consistent or inconsistent with what the participants had wanted. McCarthy et al. (1997) differentiated between preventive coping mechanisms (e.g., self-directedness, confidence, acceptance, financial freedom, physical health) and combative coping mechanisms (e.g., self-disclosure, social support, physical fitness, tension control, problem-solving). Results were consistent with expectations that coping resources would be positively associated with positive emotions and negatively associated with negative emotions. Preventive coping resources had an effect at the initial time of the breakup, whereas combative measures were more likely to be useful in the period following. Furthermore, people's expectations as to whether their coping resources would be effective had a direct impact on their mood. In other words, the mere commitment to executing a coping strategy alleviated negative feelings to some degree.

Mearns (1991) looked at particular types of coping and their connection to negative mood regulation. Participants completed the Coping Behaviors Inventory, which assessed for active coping such as discussing with friends, and avoidant coping such as exercising or drinking alcohol. Participants who believed their coping mechanisms would be effective experienced an improvement in depressive moods. Furthermore, they were more likely to engage in active coping strategies. Mearns (1991) found interesting results from this research. He showed that women rated higher than men on active coping, and men rated higher than women on avoidant coping. There are limitations to

this method of determining coping behaviours, however, because men might feel pressure to appear strong, and masculine, (e.g., “playing sports” as a coping mechanism, rather than “discussing my feelings with friends”). Still, this is an interesting area to explore in understanding women’s experience of coping following a romantic relationship breakup.

The effects of social support on breakup experience. Integral to the growth and positive coping experience is the presence of social support (Koopman, Hermanson, Diamond, Angell, & Spiegel, 1998; Runtz & Schallow, 1997). High levels of social support have been associated with better adjustment facing stressful life events, and lower levels of social support have been associated with loneliness, anxiety, and depression. More recent findings, however, have suggested that social support as an isolated construct might not play a role in adjustment following a relationship breakup. Moller, Foulardi, McCarthy, and Hatch (2003) investigated whether social support affects adjustment when not accompanied with a secure attachment style. Two-hundred and sixty three undergraduate students who had experienced a relationship breakup in the past year participated in the study, which took the form of several questionnaires measuring various aspects—*general attachment style; attachment to peers, parents, and partners; perceived social support* (how much the individuals perceives his or her needs for feedback, support, and information are met by friends and family); *social connectedness* (how interpersonally close an individual feels in his or her social environment); and *adjustment measures* (self reported loneliness, helplessness, perceived stress, and symptomology).

The results showed that *perceived social support* did not, in fact, predict adjustment following the breakup unless accompanied by a secure attachment style. To reiterate, attachment predicted *adjustment*, but *perceived social support* did not. *Social connectedness*, however, did contribute to *adjustment*. The researchers suggest this might be due to the fact that *attachment* and *social connectedness* both highlight the formation of fairly stable schemata that influence our beliefs about the self, others, and the social environment; *perceived social support*, rather, is a more fluid and unstable concept.

Although this study suggests otherwise, there is still ample research supporting the idea that social support plays a significant role in growth and coping (Koopman, Hermanson, Diamond, Angell, & Spiegel, 1998; Runtz & Schallow, 1997). In addition to other methods of coping explored earlier, it would be interesting to learn anecdotally how social support affects women's experiences of relationship breakup.

This chapter highlighted literature associated with gender norms and findings in current literature related to relationship breakups. Although I uncovered several themes, which I organized according to positive consequences or negative consequences, there are six significant gaps in the literature: (a) the breakup experience in its entirety (before, during, and following the breakup) is under-researched; (b) mixed outcomes have emerged regarding the experiences of the person who leaves and the person who is left; (c) there is a lack of exploration into women's experiences of breakups; (d) there is a lack of focus on experience of the person who leaves a relationship; (e) there is a lack of

attention paid to positive consequences such as growth and coping that emerge from the breakup experience; and (f) there is a lack of qualitative studies that delve into the rich, descriptive stories of the breakup experience. I sought to fill these gaps in my study, which I describe in the following chapter.

3: METHOD

3.1 Narrative Theory

Proponents of narrative theory suggest that individuals create and make sense of their worlds through narrative accounts, or stories. Within these stories, identity is formed and maintained (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Language and story have existed throughout history, for history could not exist without stories. So, how might one define a story? Gergen (1991) suggests that stories are the artefacts of interpersonal interaction, existing cultural and historical accounts, and individual interpretation. This individual interpretation would not be possible without knowledge resulting from social interaction. As such, narrative theory aligns with a social constructionist perspective, which falls under a constructivist paradigm (Lieblich et al., 1998). Contrary to positivist and post-positivist paradigms that assume there is an objective reality, constructivism assumes that there are no absolute truths, and advocates pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity (Lieblich et al, 1998). The former makes no distinction between interpretation and fact; constructivism, however, recognizes that interpretation is inevitable during the process of narration, from the individual's interpretation of their reality to the listener's interpretation of the narrator's story (Riessman, 1993).

3.2 Narrative Research

Clandinin (2007) suggests that two decades ago, the “narrative turn” influenced a shift towards the use of postmodern, constructivist, qualitative methods including narrative inquiry. As researchers began to recognize possible strengths in qualitative research, including the belief that the researcher cannot objectively stand outside the experience of the researched, a recognition that quantitative forms of analysis risk losing important pieces of language that describe human experience, a shift from a goal of creating generalizable research to understanding the power of rich and detailed singular experience, and less focus on traditional measures of validity. With narrative inquiry, it is acknowledged that alternate views exist, and knowing is a result of authenticity.

Currently, narrative research embodies any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials, which can take textual, visual, or audio form (Lieblich et al., 2008). These stories, in whatever form they take, simultaneously imitate and shape the narrator’s perceived reality and personality. Essentially, narrative and identity share a bidirectional relationship wherein each influences the other. So, researchers strive to understand the narrator’s personal identity and historical and cultural world from narrators’ stories.

Narrative researchers do not strive to extract truth from narratives, as narrative truth and historical truth might not align (Lieblich et al., 2008). Additionally, narratives are fluid and changing—time, context, mood, experience, and perspective are only some of the things that might greatly influence the plot (the component of a narrative that creates causality) and flavour of a narrative.

As narrative researchers, we are privileged to hear a person's story—to be privy to their expression of identity, experience, and interpretation.

In order to extract the narratives that were the basis of my study, I asked women to tell me the story of their breakup experience—the period before, during, and after the event. This gave the women the freedom to emphasize and include what they believed to be important in the chronology and of their story. I then probed into aspects of their experience using a list of predetermined, semi-structured questions (see Appendix A). I will further detail my data collection process shortly.

3.3 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis investigates the story itself (Riessman, 1993). It strives to systematically interpret individuals' interpretations of their realities. Though narrative analysis can take many forms, I chose to follow a categorical-content model, or to perform a content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). The procedure of content analysis consists of breaking the text into smaller units of content, such as sentences or paragraphs. The process requires the researcher to openly read the text before assigning categories or "codes" to each selected unit. As the philosophical underpinnings of the research deny the possibility of entirely "open" or objective reading of text, it is necessary to continually reflect on biases or predetermined interpretations. This is often achieved through memoing, journaling, considering multiple categories under which the segment might fall, and repeating the process so as to make room for alternate interpretations. After each segment is given a "code," the segments are organized into categories,

and, from such categories, themes emerge and conclusions are drawn (Lieblich et al., 1998). Riessman (1993) suggests that narrative analysis is well suited to feminist studies and studies of identity. Because my research focused on women's silenced stories and sought to understand their experience and identity, I believe narrative analysis was an appropriate choice of method.

As Riessman (1993) asserts, there is no single representation of spoken language, and multiple interpretations might emerge from one story. If another researcher had been listening to the women I interviewed, it is unlikely that he or she would have reacted in same exact way that I did, internally and externally. The story that develops in an interview is a result of an interactive process between the listener and the teller (Riessman, 1993), and so the women's stories I transcribed are artefacts of our interaction. I, the researcher, then undertook the coding process, transforming the original story into what Reismman titles a "metastory." The metastory is the product of my interpretation of the narratives—the themes I have chosen to highlight are the result of the meaning I have derived from the stories. Finally, being that "meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal" (Riessman, 1993), these stories told in a different context or at a different time might have produced or resulted in a different metastory.

3.4 Participants

While gathering participants, I remained consistent with the descriptive, qualitative nature of my study. I used purposive recruiting (Mason, 2002) to search for participants from whom I was likely to hear rich, significant narratives. With purposive recruiting, the researcher intentionally seeks out participants

whose stories will be likely to answer the research question. This is accomplished by applying specific recruitment criteria (inclusion and exclusion criteria), which I will specify shortly. I also used snowball recruiting techniques, which involve asking friends, colleagues, and participants to “spread the word” to individuals who might be appropriate participants. Rather than hearing stories of their entire lives, I focused primarily on the romantic relationship narratives of these women. I recruited participants by posting advertisements around campus, by sending email advertisements to graduate students in social sciences, and by advertising online through the popular social networking site, *Facebook*. I offered no tangible form of compensation for participating and made clear the voluntary nature of the study.

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study involved age, partner choice, duration of relationship, time since breakup, and the absence of relationship trauma. First, the women I recruited were between the ages of 20-29 at the time of their breakup—an age consistent with most definitions of young adulthood. The women were heterosexual, and had initiated the breakup voluntarily between two years and three months prior to the interview. I chose this time period since I hoped it would allow adequate time for growth, reflection, and certainty, yet still be within a period of recollection. Additionally, I was concerned that interviewing participants without allowing significant time to pass might be disrespectful or potentially harmful. As Boelen (2010) suggested, grief decreases with time. I chose to recruit only participants who had ended their relationships within the past two years; I believe that their memory of the experience might not have

produced as rich and detailed of a story if it had been more than two years since the event. Additionally, their relationship had to have been considered by the participants as long-term—self reported as at least two years in duration. Finally, since I conducted face-to-face interviews, my participants were English-speaking and resided in the Greater Vancouver area.

Exclusion criteria included a history of physical abuse during the relationship, any infidelity for the duration of the relationship, and children by either partner in the relationship. By excluding women who have experienced these situations, I was able to focus primarily on stories of women who chose to leave their relationship without commonly socially-recognized justifications for doing so.

3.5 Data Collection

I received interest from fifteen women in total, each of whom I prescreened by telephone to ensure their story would be appropriate for my study based on the criteria. The pre-contact interview also included information about the study, the necessity of their informed consent to participate, and their expected time commitment in relation to the study procedures. Of those fifteen potential participants, nine were appropriate for interviews.

Participant demographics. Participants ranged from 22 to 29 years of age at the time of their breakup, with the mean age being 25 years old. The length of their relationships ranged from 2.25 years to 8 years, with the mean length of relationship being 4.25 years. Four of the women identified as

“Canadian,” two as “Chinese Canadian,” one as “Polish Canadian,” one as “German Canadian,” and one as “Latin.” Eight were bilingual, one was trilingual, and one was unilingual. Four identified as Christian, two as Roman Catholic, and three as having no religious affiliations. Three of the women possessed Doctorate degrees, three possessed Masters degrees, and the remaining three held Bachelors degrees. All of the participants had been sexually active with their partner, and five had cohabited with their partner.

Pre-contact. After receiving responses from interested potential participants, I requested a brief prescreening telephone interview with the women. The goals of this interview were to ensure that the women would meet the required criteria, to give the women more information about the study, to inform the women what they could expect if they did decide to participate, and to potentially set up a face-to-face interview.

Contact. The first in-person contact took place at the time of the interview. Although we had previous interaction during the prior telephone interview, the women were aware that the first time we would be meeting would be at the onset of the interview. Aware of the possibility that the women might have been apprehensive about sharing their story with a stranger, I attempted to make the experience as welcoming as possible.

Introduction. The interviews took place either in a private room on campus or at the participant’s home as suggested by her. I introduced myself and welcomed the interviewee, offered bottled water that I had brought with me, and provided her with a consent form to read and sign. I restated the confidential

parameters under which the information she divulged would be used and gave the opportunity for questions before beginning the interview.

Interviewing. I used a semi-structured interview process that did not require strict adherence to an agenda. Primarily, the interview was guided by two overarching questions. The first question was the main research question: How do women experience social and emotional consequences associated with their voluntary departure from a long-term heterosexual romantic relationship? The second question was a supplementary question probing societal, familial, and media influences: How do these women make sense of their experience through cultural and familial influence? From these two questions, I developed a series of related open-ended questions (see Appendix A) that would allow for deeper explorations of the topic. Finally, participants were encouraged to add anything else to their story that I might not have covered and which they deemed important. This more flexible structure was necessary to create a comfortable atmosphere and produce relevant results. The interviews ranged from 55 minutes to 104 minutes in duration, with the average interview being 68 minutes in duration.

3.6 Data Analysis

I transcribed the interviews verbatim to prevent editing my participants' stories. Following transcription, I employed the method of narrative analysis described above (Lieblich et al., 1998). To elaborate, I first printed out the transcripts on paper, leaving a 2-inch margin on the right side. I then read through the transcripts several times, familiarizing myself with the data and

recording in my journal any biases or emotional reactions that came up for me while reading. Next, I read through the transcripts more closely, this time highlighting seemingly meaningful sections of the women's stories. These sections ranged from short sentences to paragraphs. I then read through the transcripts again, this time assigning the highlighted and non-highlighted text a *code*—a key word or phrase that captures the essence of the sentence or paragraph.

As I coded the transcripts a first time, I recorded my initial thoughts and questions as memos on the transcripts. I returned to the transcripts several weeks later, this time using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, MAX Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA, 2010). Using this program made assigning codes easier and more efficient because the documents, code system, and segments of the participants' stories were visible on the computer screen. I was able to navigate them using the mouse and organize them reliably. I relied on this technology because the nine interviews I had carried out had generated an overwhelming amount of data. Although I had considered the traditional cutting and pasting method to continue coding the transcripts, the software program seemed more efficient, organized, and appropriate for my study.

After inputting the transcripts into the program, I reread the transcripts, this time electronically coding sentences and paragraphs of the women's stories. This is referred to as second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). I ensured that all of the women's words were eventually coded, as I wanted to remain as open as

possible to emerging themes. Because several weeks had passed between first and second cycle coding, I was pleased to notice that I could not remember what codes I had originally given the data and was therefore not consciously influenced by the initial coding process.

After completing the electronic coding process, I compared the codes I had originally assigned to the hard-copy transcripts during first-cycle coding with the codes I had assigned electronically. I noticed overwhelming congruence in the codes given to the electronic documents and the codes given to the hard-copy documents. Where there were incongruencies, I deliberated over which of the assigned codes fit better, or whether there might be another code that better captured the theme of the segment. After I had decided on an appropriate code for each section, I grouped the several hundred codes into categories (Lieblich et al., 1998; Saldaña, 2009). To illustrate, the codes *desire to be married, he knows best, no voice, it's important that people support me, I want to feel protected, and lack of confidence in self* were categorized as *Voiced Dependence*. Examples of other categories included *Constraints to Leaving, Feelings Prior to Breakup, Feelings After Breakup, Distressful Consequences, and Coping Strategies after Leaving*. I then read through the categories, looking for similarities or themes. I extracted 20 powerful quotes and discussed them with my Senior Supervisor. We explored our reactions to the quotes and considered possible themes.

I continued to reflect on the data for two weeks, contemplating possible themes that captured the data inclusively. At times, I thought about possible

themes less deliberately during my daily routine. Other times, I recorded ideas on paper to organize my thoughts and actively explore the possible themes. Finally, I decided on three themes that I believed illustrated the codes sufficiently. I discussed these themes with my senior supervisor, who supported the themes I had chosen. I will discuss the details of the themes that emerged in Chapter 4. To ensure the themes fit with the coded segments, I created a document with three tables—one for each proposed theme—and organized each coded segment under its appropriate theme. I was able to refer to this table for illustrative quotes when writing the Results section of this paper.

3.7 Measures for Ensuring Quality

Rigour in qualitative research depends on trustworthiness and authenticity in the work (Clifton & Ronald, 2006). It is essential that the researcher incorporate strategies to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the research process. I mindfully incorporated these measures into my study.

I established credibility using several methods. First, I familiarized myself with the phenomenon by thoroughly reviewing the literature on the topic. Second, I positioned myself in the text by telling my story, acknowledging that my subjective biases would influence the social construction of the research. Third, I used my counselling skills to create a safe, comfortable space for participants to tell their stories. By doing this, I was able to investigate the women's experiences more thoroughly. Finally, I conveyed my process and findings using rich, thick description to illustrate my careful adherence to narrative theory.

I established transferability in using multiple means. First, I collected stories from 9 women, hearing multiple voices. Second, I made a thorough translation of my findings so that others can use them personally or professionally. Specifically, I applied the results to a therapeutic setting, rather than the interview setting in which they were discovered. Finally, after deriving themes in the data, I reviewed literature that related to such themes and explored and how my results compared.

I established dependability using several strategies. First, I specified the theoretical and analytical frameworks relevant to the study. Second, I ensured the study design – narrative methodology – was congruent with my research question. Third, I received consistent and stable responses between and across participants during the interviews. Finally, I shared and discussed the results with my supervisor.

Finally, I established confirmability by employing several methods. First, I transcribed the interviews verbatim to ensure I did not “edit” the women’s stories. Second, I utilized several strategies for confronting my biases. I revisited my experience with the phenomenon thoroughly, and I became aware of meaningful aspects of my story that I might search for in the women’s stories. To prevent such from occurring, I actively sought alternate interpretations of their experiences. I recorded lists of other possibilities and discussed the results with my supervisor. I documented my research journey using a reflexive journal, in which I recorded my observations concerning the interactions with and behaviours of my participants, personal reactions, and feelings that arose during

the study. The journal helped prevent my biases from overtly seeping into the data, as my awareness of the biases allowed me to actively resist them. I also recorded personal memos during the coding process when questions, thoughts, or possibilities arose based on my interpretation of the data. I revisited these memos when searching for themes in the data, comparing my initial interpretations with those I held at the time. I allowed sufficient time to lapse between first and second cycle coding to ensure my initial interpretations of the transcripts did not influence the second interpretation. Additionally, I ensured all of the data was coded. Doing so ensured I was not selecting phrases or paragraphs that I personally deemed meaningful. Finally, I meticulously illustrated how I designed the study and collected and analyzed the data, and provided rationale for my interpretations and conclusions.

The constructivist view suggests validity can never be achieved, but requires endless checking instead (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Although I employed a set of methods to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, consequential validity—the consequences of applying the conclusion, interpretations, and recommendations of the work—will be the strongest measure to suggest validity.

4: RESULTS

4.1 Emergent Themes

As mentioned, after coding the data I developed categories. After immersing myself in the categories as I described in the previous chapter, I noticed three major themes: (a) active defiance of the socially understood female role in a relationship; (b) lack of script to support anti-relational behaviour available to women; and (c) healing and growth experienced as results of validation, meaning-making, and script-creation.

Active defiance of socially understood female relationship narrative.

Women in this study told a story that appeared to defy the socially accepted narrative that relates to norms around women in relationships (e.g., nurturer, loyal companion). Their conscious defiance of the common narrative tended to create a sense of guilt or shame, since they believed they were doing something wrong. The results of women's experience of actively defying this socially understood narrative surfaced in one of three forms: internal or external disapproval of self; referencing the socially understood relational *script* they had been encouraged to follow as a constraint to leaving; or misalignment between expected experience and actual personal experience while in the relationship, resulting in either the dismissal of feelings or increased confidence to end the relationship. To elaborate, disapproval of self involved critical statements from the self or others suggesting the woman either engaged in delinquent behaviour

(e.g. “I should” or “You should” do/be/act a certain way) or possessed negative characteristics (e.g. “You are a bad person”/“I am selfish.”). Some of the women and those evaluating them believed that aspects of leaving their relationship broke social norms and made them morally flawed. Referencing the socially understood relational script they might have been encouraged to follow, but did not, showed their awareness that they were not behaving acceptably, according to society. A script is a guideline for behaviour in a situation (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). People develop scripts that guide their actions—generally the result of media, stories, and advice. Finally, dissonance occurred when there was a misalignment between expected experience and actual personal experience in the relationship. This conflict resulted in either dismissal of the woman’s feelings as invalid—a result of her irrational feelings or hormones—or it gave them increased confidence or motivation to end their relationship. Either way, they sought to alleviate their dissonance created by the unexpected personal experience.

(Potential) disapproval. Perceived or expected presence of disapproval seemed to be the most powerful piece of evidence showing women they were engaging in an undesirable act by breaking up. The disapproval appeared in two primary forms: perceived or expected disapproval from others, and present or expected disapproval of self.

Perceived or expected disapproval from others. Experiencing disapproval from others not only resulted in feelings of uncertainty or guilt for some of the

women, but it also resulted in a lack of support from the disapproving parties.

Heather talked about her experience of disapproval from her family members:

Yeah, well we broke up in April 2010, and I think it was around October 2009 that I started thinking I wanted to break up, and I remember talking to my mom, because I'm close with her, and almost feeling like a bit of, that she didn't want me to. And I was like, OK, this is, it kind of made me re-evaluate it and things like that, the fact that my mom wasn't overly supportive made me second guess it, and I think that kept me in it for some part, and made me doubt doing it as well. I think when I initially talked to her about it, that was a big reason that maybe I stayed in it for a while, because she's got good advice and I'm like well maybe I should stay in this for longer, but at the same time I wasn't doing what was right for me, and I was trying to please everybody else, I think. . . . [When we broke up] I remember when I told [my grandparents] my granddad was like, "well you're smart, so you know what you're doing, but you better have a really good reason for doing this." . . . going back to my parents, they were like, not supportive at first and that was the most frustrating thing . . . I always was like, mom, I'm your daughter. Support me! It feels like you're giving him more support right now, and I'm the one who's going through all this trouble and just support me with my decision, and I was just like, you're the last person I want to talk to right now, but you're the person who I trust the most out of everybody. So that was like so freaking frustrating.

Other women experienced real disapproval from those whom they had previously considered supports:

I had this other life of my family and friends in [my city] who'd known [my partner] and I as a couple when we first got together, and how we were when we first got together was a lot different than how we were after spending a couple of years apart and growing and changing. So I think I felt an obligation to this life. To this group of people. Like, "You guys are perfect together! You're best friends!" You know? Like my parents loved him. His parents loved me. It just felt like it should have been perfect. It should have been the right thing. [If I left] I would have felt like, I was a terrible person. I would have felt like everyone would have been mad, upset, angry. Um, judge me. Think I was flaky. Like we'd already planned a wedding...you can't cancel a wedding! You CAN, but I felt like I couldn't. Um, yeah I just felt like everyone would be disappointed and upset, and I didn't want to disappoint and upset anyone. . . . [I stayed] because I was scared how people would react, because I didn't want to look like a fool, because I knew I was going to feel guilty, because I didn't want to hurt him. . . . [When I left] It was terrifying. It was probably the hardest thing I've ever done, because that was the second time that we were going to get married. Like we'd already planned an initial wedding and that was the second one, and I was like, Holy crap. Like, I've already cancelled one wedding, and here I am wanting to cancel another one? People are going to think I'm some kind of freak. Like what is wrong with

this girl? She can't get married. . . . But I had a more difficult time knowing how he'd react, knowing how his family would react, and how our mutual friends would react. And, I was kind of justified in feeling that way, because a lot of our mutual friends were really upset. Like some of them still don't get it. Some of them still don't understand. They don't understand that you can't stay with someone just to make them happy. Um, but yeah, it was very difficult for me because I was really caught up about what everyone would think, and the responses I got from some people were really supportive and really awesome, and the responses I got from other people were, "You're a Bitch." "I can't believe you." "How could you do this to him?" "You broke his heart." Our mutual friends are no longer mutual. Like I definitely lost some friends in that.

It is not surprising that most of the women reported experiencing disapproval from their former partners. Although this might have been expected, it still had a powerful impact on the women. Jen told me about how her former partner had told her she was a "bad person" after she broke up, saying:

It made me sooo sad because I, like I knew we wouldn't be able to be friends, because he's not like, a very forgiving person so like, I just knew that would never happen but I was like, "I don't know, am I a bad person?" It really makes you question what you're doing and whatever. It's just sad to have someone you've spent 4 years with tell you you're a bad person

and all that stuff . . . I, that's just what sticks out to me but he said tons of other things. It's awful. It made me so sad.

Petra's former partner's words still stuck with her during our interview, as she told me she had felt like she had "given up:"

He made it feel like I was giving up, and so that made me feel like that I guess. So, yeah, I felt like I was giving up, because we had been together for a while and things were starting to just sort of go downhill, because I wasn't very into it, I guess, and he was always very adamant about putting more and more effort in and making it work one way or another kind of thing, and I was getting to the point where I was like it shouldn't be this much work at this stage—I shouldn't have to be worrying about this as much as I am. So I did feel like I gave up on it.

Some women were aware of the potential for external disapproval and, as a result, stayed in the relationship to avoid it. One participant said:

There were a lot of social expectations. I mean we were going out for six years. Everyone thinks we're going to get married. Everyone keeps talking about it, so I didn't want to let people down, so I was kind of struggling with that.

Another participant explained how she stayed with her partner

because of other people. I didn't want to let his family down. I thought I was going to let my family down, I thought I was going to let his friends down, and even me down, and like, I just thought I was going to let people

down. And I was like you know what you just have to suck it up. . . . He didn't do anything wrong and I didn't do anything wrong. This is how it goes, you know? Maybe this is how long term relationships go.

(Potential) disapproval of self. While external disapproval had a powerful negative impact, I believe the women's disapproving internal dialogue might have been even more detrimental. Understood by some as the "inner critic" (Elliot, 1992), this internal voice sounds negative predictions, and corrective or disparaging messages about thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. In a narrative context, these inescapable negative messages might result in a negative view of self, or a current life-story that conveys the person as a criminal or villain. Many of the women listened to their internal corrective or disparaging messages concerning leaving, and they remained in their dissatisfying relationships for some time. They did this to maintain a positive view of themselves. Because the female role is understood as nurturant and caring (Eagly et al., 2000), women might experience a loss of identity when engaging in behaviour that does not align with such qualities. For example, when asked what kept her in the relationship for so long in spite of her unhappiness, Maria stated,

The thought of breaking his heart. I just tried to stick with it for as long as I could and tried to make it work. . . . Things like that are really hard for me, because it's really hard for me to hurt someone's feelings, and I think that I take on a lot of pain just from the idea of hurting someone else. I don't know if that makes sense, but even the thought of, oh, I have to break someone's heart—I'd rather carry that pain a little bit.

Heather had a similar experience:

Um, but, at the actual time I felt just not pity for him, but I just felt so bad that I was hurting this guy who loved me so much. And I was the one who was creating the hurt. . . . [I felt] guilt that he treated me so well, that he loved me so much, that he's such a great guy that a lot of girls would probably love to be with him. . . . guilt that I just couldn't be with him. And I don't, like in my opinion, he's a way better person than I am. And so I was like why can't I be happy with this? Like why can't I be happy with you?

Every woman's story showed elements of guilt, and many of the women used strategies for alleviating their guilt. When women such as Maria and Heather did leave, it created a sense of *dissonance*, since their behaviour did not align with their personal narrative. Dissonance can be understood as the conflict experienced when behaviour does not align with a person's life-narrative (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Some women engaged in remedial behaviours to alleviate the dissonance that had been created by leaving their relationship. Petra believed she was being selfish because she was not acting in a way she believed she should in her relationship. Viewing herself as "selfish" or having "given up" punished her for acting in a socially undesirable way. Her internal disapproval of the person she had been in the relationship was apparent in her story:

I just felt like maybe I wasn't trying hard enough. . . . I was being really selfish. . . . I think it is being selfish, the fact that I didn't want to do something that would make him happy—going to his mom's birthday—I wanted to do something that would make me happy in going to Victoria or whatever. And that's kind of the way I was feeling about the relationship for quite some time: in a selfish way. I only wanted to do things that would make me happy, and I wasn't really doing things that would make me happy because I didn't care enough about it. And when I realized that, that was when I was like, OK, this really needs to stop.

Earlier in our interview, Petra had mentioned her tendency to “totally go out of [her] way for people,” such as volunteering at a local crisis line. Yet, when I asked how she might describe herself, she told me she considered herself to be a “selfish person.” This incongruence puzzled me, as the person in front of me seemed far from what I might typically consider selfish. I wonder if Petra managed her dissonance of leaving the relationship by labelling herself as selfish, so her negative evaluation of her behaviour in leaving the relationship aligned with a negative evaluation of herself as a person. Or, perhaps the negative self-evaluation of whom she had been while in the relationship allowed for a positive self-evaluation out of the relationship—perhaps it gave meaning to her experience. Emma, on the other hand, managed her dissonance differently:

A negative outcome is he left me with a lot of debt. We had a joint credit card and he left me with all of it, which sucked. Another negative was that I left everything there. I left all the furniture; I left the dishes; I left all the

appliances. I left everything and I had nothing [because of] guilt. Guilt. I felt bad that I'm leaving and I should just leave him with everything and, you know, make up for it as much as I can. The debt I'm not letting go. Like he's going to pay me back, but the stuff I'm just...whatever, just keep it . . . I felt bad because I'd let it go on so long, because I kind of knew for like 2 ½ years before I did it that I shouldn't have been doing it, so I wasted like 2 ½ years of our lives, so I felt bad about that. I felt bad because he didn't know it was coming. I felt bad for just leaving him. I felt bad for breaking his heart. I felt guilty for um, the fact that yeah, the fact that I had to do it. I just felt bad. Yeah. It's an awful experience hurting somebody, and hurting them that much, and seeing him cry. That sucked.

These women's experiences show that, if a woman's behaviour does not align with her expectations for herself and her own story, she might engage in a cognitive or behavioural strategy that makes sense of the experience and align with her own story—her *self-narrative*. A self-narrative is comparable to self-concept or identity—narrative theory suggests that stories are our identities, and therefore our identities are fluid concepts that are a compilation of our narratives (Polkinghorne, 1991). A woman might engage in behaviour that aligns with herself as a person (e.g., nurturing behaviour to parallel the nurturant person she believes herself to be), or she might change how she views herself (e.g. as a “selfish” person to align with the “selfish” behaviour she has enacted). While this is potentially an adaptive coping strategy to manage the sense of dissonance women experience when their behaviour and self-narrative do not align, I wonder

if there is a less self-depreciating strategy that focuses on positively integrating the negative behaviour into their self-narrative.

While the previous statements illustrate the guilt women experienced for hurting their partners, some women experienced internal disapproval for defying the relational plot. Emma, for example, believed leaving a relationship in which she was engaged to be married was even more socially unacceptable than leaving a relationship where she was not engaged:

So after that turning point, I stayed with him for another 2 ½ years, and it's mostly because we were engaged. It's different when you're engaged versus when you're just in a relationship, because you feel more...like you're supposed to be committed to that person and it's harder to get out. It really ISN'T harder to get out, and girls need to realize that. Like if you know it's not right you need to get out. But, because we were engaged, I had a ring, it was more like, cemented. I felt like it was more difficult to get away.

This statement portrays Emma's experience of the potential internal disapproval she expected if she were to actively defy the "engagement" story. Her expectations for internal disapproval did not fully align with her experience following the breakup since, ultimately, she did not experience it to be as difficult as she had expected. It is important to note, however, that her expected experience was a powerful constraint to leaving the relationship.

Some women referred to relational scripts as a guide for their behaviour; these scripts differ from Emma's experience because they are more general, and show that women do not report experiencing disapproval for defying such scripts.

Referencing socially-accepted female relational script. Women referred to an unwritten female role or relational script as something they were expected to fulfil. While the idea of not fulfilling the scripts led some to remain in their relationships for extended periods of time in spite of their dissatisfaction, they eventually did not follow such a script, or ceased following such a script when they left the relationship. Women seemed to become more aware of these types of scripts when they appeared to be engaging in behaviour that was socially undesirable according to this female relational script. Emma described the scripts:

Everyone's supposed to be matched with somebody, and of course I definitely do want to get married someday, but I'm also open to the idea that that might not happen for a while. Some people freak out if they're not married by a certain age and have kids by this age. There's this perfect like, pattern that everyone plans out.

Jen also indicated the idea of a script for women when she stated,

There's kind of rules—unspoken rules about what you need to do in a relationship before you can finally call it quits. Like it's bad if you don't try long enough or hard enough, and I think it's really, really crippling. I almost feel like it's even more for girls in a relationship. It's one of those rules almost where girls shouldn't be breaking up with their boyfriend.

Many of the women mentioned examples in the media that had contributed to the socially understood script they were expected to follow. When asked if there were any forms of media that stood out for her, Brianne exclaimed:

Every single movie by Disney because that's what they tell you when you're a little girl. I grew up watching the Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast and everything, and it's always about finding the right guy and being happy. So every single girl dreams about that. And I remember talking to girls being like oh well my wedding day is going to have a unicorn. Well my wedding is going to have, I don't know fairies. You always think of that. . . . I always had this idea like I need to find prince charming, and you know most movies are, at least chick flicks, are about um, you go and find a guy, he doesn't really like you, you go through something funny or sad, depending on the—and finally he likes you and you're done. There's always that girl that finally finds love.

Petra also referenced Disney movies as an example of the types of scripts women believed they should follow for social approval:

Disney movies, they're always the perfect romances, you know? There's always a big strong man and a girl who is like madly in love with this guy and, there's never any real conflict in the relationship. There's always a conflict around it, like Pocahontas or something. Or there's always a problem around the relationship, but nothing actually, there's nothing between the two people that's really wrong. So I think it kind of paints this picture of like, you need to find the perfect man, who you will be happy

with every minute of every day and be crazy in love with, you know? And, I mean, I think in reality no one actually believes that's gonna happen, but something to strive for. It's kind of the same thing with, even, even just like magazines or whatever. They're always pictures, well, maybe not so much now, but like there's a lot of media I think around the woman having to be protected by the guy, and it's like if you don't have that guy to protect you, then you're screwed.

Sarah, too, referenced media and the pressure it places on women to follow a relational script:

There's that understanding that sits, that really quiet, not spoken about, unspoken expectation in society that you're going to have a family, and that you're going to live in a nice house with a white picket fence around it you know and just be happily married after. . . . I guess I just really notice like the emphasis in movies in general there's a focus of love and relationships, whatever movie you watch there's that huge element of marriage. That's what I really notice it in, is in movies, even shows like the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, right? Like they're so focused on finding the partner and after like the 3 months of they're on the show, that expectation once again that, you know, this couple is, you know in love and they're going to have a life together. And when things don't work out everyone is like going crazy!

Evidently, these scripts are deeply embedded in our society. Whether they be manifest in media intended for children, teenagers, or adults, the cultural ideal of partnering is difficult to avoid.

Misalignment between actual personal experience and expected socially accepted female experience. The final point of reference women noted that showed they were actively defying the socially understood female role was the misalignment between their actual personal experience and the expected female experience. Upon realizing their experience was not in line with the socially accepted experience, the women either dismissed their feelings as invalid or used their feelings to gain confidence to leave their relationship.

Dismissing feelings. Initially, most of the women dismissed their feelings as invalid, thereby staying in the relationship in spite of their dissatisfaction. Some continued to ignore their uncertainty in the relationship for years. Petra said, “I was kind of back and forth about it for a long time. I mean we were together for 3 years, but I was always a little unsure, I think.” It appears their rationale for dismissing their feelings at that time involved referencing the relational narrative that suggested their partners were “perfect.” Heather referenced the relational narrative, saying, “He hadn’t cheated on me. He hadn’t hit me or anything. He was fine to me, And so that’s why I was like, why am I gonna break up with this guy who’s like actually got this perfect resume?” Similarly, Brianne explained,

He had perfect relationship etiquette. He’s respectful, he’s considerate, he’s loyal, he never plays mind games, not for a moment. Not from the

moment I met him. Never, let's see what she does if I do this. It's just very open. Which was at that point, incredibly refreshing after playing games and all those horrible things. It just seemed like a waste of – Every time one of my friends has issues with their spouse or boyfriend or husband or whatever, a lot of it has to do with the availability of the man emotionally, or the availability of the man, or loyalty, or . . . whereas in this, I had it in the sack. And I've been there! I've been on the other – I've been in the other relationship where all you want is security. I'll call you at 5. You wait 'til 6 and they call you. And it's fine, that's just the way it is. That's the way men function. He's what you want. He's the guy that calls you at 4:30.

Finally, Maria spoke of the blinding functionality of her relationship:

We had a really functional relationship. We never really fought. It was very smooth. We had the same values, same work ethic and schedules, we got up at the same time. We had similar hobbies. He was very understanding we could talk about anything he treated me amazingly we treated each other very well so well he would have never cheated on me. We were very accommodating of each others needs and he knew what to do to make me feel good.

In some cases, the women even blamed themselves for the perceived relationship malfunction, citing aspects of their female biology as being at the root of their dissatisfaction. Maria wondered whether she was just “looking for something wrong,” and decided she was “just being finicky and hormonal.”

The first time I really noticed something was wrong was when I went on a trip for Australia for 3 weeks and I didn't miss him. At all. I was actually happy. I was like aww I have my space this is awesome I love it. And then I started talking to my aunt about, is this wrong? Is this the way I'm supposed to be feeling? Shouldn't I miss him? I'm so far away from him. Calling him was such a burden, and I was like, is this wrong? And she was like no you're just normal you're not crazy like all the other people. And I found it really interesting that she said that Yeah that's the first time I really noticed it. And then I wasn't too excited when I saw him again, but still I didn't really . . . I still thought maybe it's not that bad maybe I'm just imagining all of this maybe I'm just being finicky and hormonal and irritated and I didn't clue in, and then I started thinking about all the good things, and I was like hmm I don't know, there's nothing wrong. Am I just looking for something wrong? And just tossed it away, and then, a little while later it came up again, but I could never figure out what it was. The relationship itself was really good, so it wasn't a reason for me to deeper question or think about it too much, I guess.

Petra believed that, because she did not want to have sex all the time, she was to blame. Perhaps the female narrative that illustrates women as seductresses should be to blame, evidenced by Petra's feelings of abnormality:

Well, basically that I was, I felt abnormal. That I was abnormal for not wanting to have sex all the time. Because obviously I, it's not something I talk to people about on a regular basis, even though I'm sitting here talking

to a complete stranger about it! So he is, or was, that person I talk to about sex the most. And so, yeah, I think having those conversations all the time with somebody who basically said you're weird for not wanting to do this made me feel like I was...I had to change. And I started going to a therapist. I started going to a sex therapist to try to increase my sex drive or something, because apparently it was my fault.

These women, intelligent and successful, did not trust their feelings. This shows the power of the relational narrative and its portrayal of how women should behave in our society.

Use feelings to gain confidence to leave relationship. Eventually, all of the women began to listen to their feelings of dissatisfaction. The previous quotations provided examples of dismissing feelings when experiencing misalignment with the relational female narrative; the following quotations give examples of women's experience of trusting their conflicted feelings, providing evidence for their dissatisfaction in the relationship and thereafter gaining confidence to leave the relationship. I find it interesting that some of the women began to trust their conflict when they were separated physically from their partners. I wonder if their ability to function while their partner was away proved aspects of their independence and alleviated some of their fears of being without him. Jen explained,

Yeah so he was from Michigan and I would come—like we'd be separate for Christmas and summers and all of that, and so it was over Christmas break in my fourth year and I came home, and I just remember being like

“Ahhh I should probably call him. I don’t really want to...like whatever I’ll just leave it,” and when he’d call I’d be like, “Ahhh I really don’t want to talk to him,” and he knew something was up, and I ended up breaking up with him over the phone because I, I just don’t, like I don’t even want to talk to you. I don’t feel like this is good anymore. I feel like we’re maybe best friends or something.

Related to the independence Jen might have felt when physically distant from her partner was Sophie’s experience of recognizing her independence in the relationship:

I felt myself venturing off into a different path, and what I mean by that is just being more independent. Really realizing that he had a role in my life but not really...like there wasn’t really much importance there, of him being in my life anymore, and I guess it was because we were you know, so far apart from each other. Um, so I was venturing off into a different path, and as I was just in school, focusing really on me.

Whereas the women in the previous section dismissed their feelings, some women used their experience of conflict as encouragement to leave their relationships. I find it intriguing, however, that it took an event or somewhat objectively observable situation to prove to the women their experience was valid (rather than the subjective observation of feelings). Petra noticed her lack of desire to go to certain events did not align with the expectations she had for a good relationship:

I realized that, you know, I should want to go to these events. I should want to go to his mom's birthday, and like, it was the fact that I didn't want to that was the real problem. And he deserves to be with somebody who wants to be with him and his family, and I realized it had gotten to that point where I was just being way too selfish, and it wasn't fair to him or me in a weird way.

Brianne reported that her relationship should have naturally resulted in marriage according to societal expectations, but she did not want to be married. This was the evidence she needed to end her relationship. She said, "You know, you're with someone for a year or two years. You love each other. You have the same cultural background. Your families work. Why wouldn't you get married?"

Finally, Karine noticed the infrequency of sexual intercourse in her relationship as well as her accompanying lack of desire for sex or ability to be aroused by sex.

This was a piece of evidence she needed to prove she was "better off" out of the relationship. She illustrated,

It got worse. Eventually I didn't want to have sex with him anymore. Um yeah, at first I would tell myself like, we're so good in bed I'll just keep doing it. It's really strange. I, I started using contraceptives, and I started having some issues. So I don't know if it was the contraceptives or just me psychologically not wanting to have sex with him, but it would be a little bit painful, and it would be, um, I don't know if it was the contraceptives or me being uncomfortable with him, or both, but it could be painful or just not comfortable physically, and I would be like oh stop. I

could be bored or no longer aroused by him, and in the end I no longer wanted to have sex with him, and I started making excuses like oh I'm busy today, or I'm not very, or I want to go talk to your mom or whatever. I remember saying one day we haven't had sex for so long that I think I already found god. I'm becoming a Buddah or something. I was already 25 and back where I come from at 25 women are either getting married or already married so I thought I'm going to marry this guy. Who's going to want to date a 25 year old girl whose already been with someone for so long? So I already thought...the idea of "I may find somebody else" wasn't really in my head it was just I'm better of lonely.

Lack of script to support anti-relational behaviour. The second major theme emerging from the women's stories was the lack of script to follow that supported women's anti-relational and agentic qualities such as independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness (Eagly et al., 1992). Similar to the active defiance of the usual relational script, this experience of *scriptlessness* occurred before, during, and after leaving the relationship.

There appears to be a lack of available stories that recognize the experience of a woman leaving a committed relationship; consequently, there is no script that suggests after women leave a relationship they might not necessarily be alone, find another partner, be all right, or be understood by their family, friends, and community. There also appears to be a lack of scripts that suggest a woman is all right if she chooses not to be in a relationship—whether

that be temporarily or permanently. While the previously explored active defiance of available relational scripts resulted in guilt for many of the women, the absence of a script to follow during the breakup experience appeared to result in anxiety for many of the women. Some even reported symptoms of *Generalized Anxiety Disorder* and *Panic Disorder*, capturing in the intensity of their turmoil. Maria explained,

I woke up every morning with this anxiety attack and I just needed to have a cigarette. I jumped out of bed in the morning and had to have a cigarette and now when I think about it, it sounds so gross and disturbing (laughs). But yeah, it just controlled my life, this fear and this anxiety and claustrophobia. It just got so bad. I went to see a healer, and all these different, it's like you're trying to grasp for straws.

Another important impact of scriptlessness is the effect it has on the grieving process for the women. Because relationship loss can result in feelings of unacknowledged (*disenfranchised*) grief (Kaczmarek, Backlund, & Biemer, 1990), it is a process where individuals do not feel they are entitled to grieve. I posit that this scriptlessness, as experienced after leaving the relationship, contributes to the level of disenfranchisement experienced, since there is no available script to follow that encourages the leaver of the relationship to grieve. This experience might stall or inhibit the healing process and prevent adequate narrative reconstruction. Perhaps recognition for their loss would result in the ability to create a needed grief-based script at the time of the breakup.

The sense of scriptlessness occurred during two significant points in the breakup experience – while still in the relationship (women did not know how to manage or validate their feelings without a script), and after leaving the relationship (women were faced with an ominous “unknown,” and were uncertain how to behave).

Lack of script to refer to when faced with desire to leave relationship.

While still in the relationship, many of the women began experiencing feelings such as a desire for independence or dissatisfaction with their relationship. Since they could not validate such feelings with an available narrative, they experienced anxiety and uncertainty. Because people are likely to look to members of the same sex for guidance when faced with ambiguous or stressful situations (Eagly et al., 2000), some of the women reverted to typical gender roles when facing the anxiety-provoking situation of scriptlessness while in their relationship. Sophie explained,

I thought maybe this was normal to be feeling the way I was feeling because like well maybe you’ve been in a long term relationship; It’s natural to feel like everything has plateaued, and everything’s kind of routine and there’s no energy. Everything just kind of seemed like we were going through the motions of it, and I wasn’t sure.

While Sophie’s statement illustrates the experience of being unsure as to whether or not her feelings are valid, other women believed their feelings might be valid, yet continued to experience anxiety. The anxiety manifested

cognitively, through conscious fears, and *physically*, through emotions and bodily experiences.

Cognitive manifestation of anxiety. Anxiety manifested cognitively for the women through fear and apprehension of the repercussions of leaving their partners. Namely, the women reported either *fear of being alone*; *fear of being alone and not able to find another life partner who was as formidable*, or *fear of an unknown environment*. Concerning fear of being alone, Petra noted that she thought she would

be bored, cause it's always nice to sort of have somebody to spend time with when you have nothing better to do, and I was worried that I would spend a lot of time just sitting on my own at home and, that I would just become really sad about it, basically, and be really lonely.

Concerning fear of *being alone and not able to find another life partner who was as formidable*, Sarah stated, "Am I going to be OK? Am I ever going to find someone? Like where is this all going to take me? I think like, one word that comes to mind is just being worried, scared." Heather supported this fear when she stated,

[I worried I would feel] regret for losing somebody who had just loved me with all his heart, regret for losing somebody who's, he's gonna be successful regardless, he's going to have money, which is very important for everybody. Um, regret in like just losing, regret in maybe never finding somebody who was ever going to be like that to me again.

In terms of a fear of an unknown environment, Heather also stated that she “wanted to do it for a while but I was living with him at the time, and I felt like the hassle of moving out and figuring out where I was going to live was a big part of it.” The ambiguity and perceived stressors of moving out or adapting to a new environment was extremely anxiety-provoking for some of the women.

Physical manifestations of anxiety. As previously mentioned, some women reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety when faced with a lack of script to refer to when experiencing dissatisfaction in their relationships. Heather, for example, described her experience as a “mini-depression.” However, some of the symptoms she mentions (catastrophizing, underfocusing, wanting to cry for no apparent reason) are concurrent with excessive symptoms of anxiety:

When I was thinking about doing this breakup, it was almost like going through a mini-depression again, and I thought about using counselling services. . . . In hindsight I probably should have used them because it might have taken some pressure and stress off me, but at the same time, even thinking about it now, I probably would have felt like guilty and selfish using those services. . . . [My mini-depression] was this feeling of um, I think the word they use is like catastrophizing? Is that the word? Like a little thing in our relationship, maybe like that I’d perceived in a weird way, I’d like spiral that into making it a way bigger deal in my mind I’d make that into a way bigger thing. . . . The feeling that I couldn’t really focus on lots, because the whole me wanting to get out of this relationship

was taking a lot out of my mind, so I couldn't really focus on school or anything like that.

Maria also reported physical symptoms as a result of her feelings of conflict:

It really freaked me out being in that state of not knowing. It's that whole thing of do I love him do I not love him? What does love mean? How should I be feeling, why am I not feeling that way? All these circulating thoughts. I woke up every morning at 5, heart pounding in my chest, freaking out. Freaking out right next to him, and I had nightmares all night like oh you have to leave him you have to leave him and I just couldn't be around him. I had a really hard time grounding myself. It was horrible because I couldn't think straight anymore. I didn't know what was right and what was wrong anymore and I started getting anxiety attacks later. . . . And this went on for months. I was a mess I couldn't stop crying I would just randomly burst into tears. . . . It made me really depressed and it messed up my system a lot. . . . I think I just reached a point where I just couldn't do it anymore. I just...I was so in the ground. I started smoking again.

Lack of script to cope after leaving relationship. After they had left their relationships, the women again experienced a sense of scriptlessness. They spoke of a script to follow after having their hearts broken, but no script available to follow after breaking a heart. For example, Petra explains this experience in terms of music about love and breakups:

In past relationships, I've usually been the one who's been dumped, and I always found listening to music somehow helped me because there's all these sappy songs about the person who gets dumped and being sad, but in this case I realized that the only songs that are out there are the songs about the person who got dumped being sad, or songs about the person who did the dumping being really happy, or better off without them, and I was like, how come there aren't any songs for my situation? I was like, I couldn't find one, because they don't seem to exist out there!

Listening to music can be a powerful method of coping. For Petra, it had been helpful when she was left. Petra's experience of being unable to find any songs that embodied her situation is indicative of the absence of available scripts that tell the story of the female leaver. Had she been able to experience the validation of listening to songs that echoed her story, Petra might have felt more supported or normal.

Some women believe there is an available script for the male heartbreaker, present in media and in women's love stories. The narrative of the heart-breaking man further solidifies the narrative of the heartbroken woman. Perhaps the strong socially understood narrative of the heartbroken woman contributes to the admonishment of the female leaver. Emma and Jen brought attention to this experience of differences between scripts for men and women. First, Emma stated,

I guess because more often girls are the ones who get their hearts broken because sometimes we can be naive and like think that we're gonna

marry this guy, but really, he's not as into it as we are. That's never really happened to me, but I think that, I know that happens to a lot of girls so maybe just as a girl that's what you're kind of warned about, like "watch out for boys! This is what they do!" but I don't think there was ever much discussion around me breaking a heart.

Second, Jen explains that,

People always think of it being like the guy breaks up with the girl and the girl cries about it, you know what I mean? It's like this weird image of how a breakup should go. It's just kind of a random image. It's a weird thing, though. You always think of like a girl crying to her friends and like eating ice cream. It's this weird thing that we've built up.

These experiences illustrate how women are unable to rely on a story that supports their actions. Thus, when unable to find approval or validation for their behaviour, some question their decision to breakup:

Did I just make the biggest mistake of my life? I started wondering if I should just be going back and apologizing and sort of reversing everything and, because it was comfortable, you know? Being with him was always comfortable. And I had my daily routine. . . . The thought that I'd just left like, I kind of felt like I'd just left the best person I could ever have, like, I was like well he's, he is a great guy, and I just chose to leave that, all because of a stupid, selfish need to go do my own thing.

In addition to experiencing emotional consequences to their decision, the women experienced logistical consequences of not knowing how to go about their lives.

Maria found herself paralyzed, unable to get through the day:

Yeah you sit there for 2 hours crying and you look in the mirror you look like shit you have these big puffy eyes and you have all this stuff to do for the next day and you just have no energy whatsoever, and you wake up the next morning and all you feel like doing is crying and you try not to and you try to find some way to get through the day and you go home and you cry again and it's just exhausting.

Brianne talked about the unspoken logistics accompanying the breakup experience—how, in reality, it was not the “clean break” that we see in the movies:

It was actually, the breakup part too, when I said I'm moving out, in movies it's always like, you move out and that's it. But unfortunately in reality it's not like that. You have to come back. You have to move your bills. It takes a while. It's a bit absurd but it's true. I'm moving. Are you done with that towel, because I'm taking it? It's my stuff. I'm taking it. It's not that clean. So the fact is it took me like two weeks because I got the apartment and then you never move in the first day. I found the place and they were like, OK you get the keys in two weeks, and I was like, what the balls am I going to do for two weeks? We have one room, we have one bed. His parents are on our floor on an air mattress in an apartment this size. We're not together. But we've got one bed, so, he's gone out with

his friends and I'm at home with his parents. Like can you imagine?

They're watching TV. I'm sitting in my room at like 8:00. He's out. I'm not getting bullied out of my own house. It was horrible.

Sarah shared her experience of negotiating the confusion relating to her partner after breaking up:

It was just a bunch of hurt, and that was confusing, because for both of us we were thinking like, how are we going to navigate ourselves during Christmas holidays? Because, and were we going to like, have sex? Like where was this all going to go, right? And there was a lot of discussion around what we would do about that. There was a lot of like, confusion for a bit. Um, right after we broke up, about how we were going to manage, like are we friends? And I guess like, we were a little bit more than friends? Like I don't know, it was all very confusing right? . . . I think a little bit of the feeling that was coming up for me at the time was around worry Worry was a big one as well, because I wasn't sure how our friends, like which friends were going to take it. Like was there going to be judgment? I broke up with him, and I was a bitch for doing so, like all kinds of things, right? So that judgment piece, it was a little bit concerning.

Some women, who had lived a relational narrative for years, spoke of the foreign experience of being single. For these women, scriptlessness was not exclusive to healing from their loss of that specific person. Rather, it was present in every

aspect of their lives as they reconstructed their identity to become an individual, untied to another. Jen explained:

Well I guess like, when I was with him we spent all our time either studying or doing something with each other so, like we'd do stuff with friends but it would always be with each other and our friends so like, my life was very centred around my relationship with him. So it left me feeling really scattered and in limbo with like no anchor when we, when broke up at first because I was like, I don't really know what to do with myself and I would have all this time on my hands that would normally be filled by someone.

Another feature of the scriptlessness women experienced was being unable to justify their actions. As many of the women mentioned previously, they did not believe they had a valid excuse for their behaviour. Because it is generally accepted to leave a relationship in which a woman experiences abuse or infidelity, but not generally accepted to leave a relationship in which a woman's partner has a "perfect resume," some of the women found it difficult to explain their reasons for leaving to others. Sarah stated,

I felt like I need to – I didn't want people to think I'm a bad person. Like how can you end it after 6 years, and what's going on? And a lot of people like, what triggered it? Well like nothing really triggered it per se. Did something happen? Well no. It's something that's been developing over time, so I think that I felt I had to write a lot or talk a lot to justify it. And a lot of things I would talk about the response would be so subjective. Like I would say things like we weren't on par when it came to discussing

things like I couldn't debate with him, I couldn't discuss my ideas. Basically whenever we talked I was having a conversation with myself because he didn't know how to respond. We couldn't talk! Right? And he couldn't challenge me with interesting questions and even doing things and going out and experiencing things was very different . . . we had NOTHING. And so it was really hard 'cause when someone says, yeah he cheated on me it's like ok fine! It's a moral flaw, right? And he did something immoral, but when it's something that's not immoral, like we're different, it's all of a sudden like, is that really a good reason?

Healing and growth experienced as results of validation, meaning-making, and script creation. A third and final theme that emerged while analyzing the women's stories was the evidence that growth and healing resulted from making sense of their experience and creating a script to guide their actions. They validated their breakup experience, constructed a script to guide their actions, and reconstructed their breakup story so it aligned with their personal narrative.

When asked how they managed their negative feelings and experience, there certainly were many who mentioned distraction as a coping strategy. However, there were also many who highlighted speaking with friends, family, or professionals, paying attention to and trusting their feelings, finding evidence supporting their decision by observing past experiences, others' experiences, or creating rational explanations to make sense of distressful situations. Similar to the previously mentioned themes, this validation occurred consistently

throughout the breakup experience—whilst still in the relationship, during, and following the breakup experience. I believe the meaning-making and script-creation that resulted from the *relational, intrapersonal, and observational* validations mentioned above can be viewed as coping strategies. Such strategies mediated the distressful consequences experienced as a result of defying the socially understood relational role that women inhabit, and the lack of existing scripts to validate their experience. I imagine these coping techniques emerged as the women told and retold their stories, constructing narratives that made sense of their experiences and aligned with their identities. Below, I explore and provide examples of the use of such relational, intrapersonal, and observational techniques:

Relational validation. Relational validation came in two distinct forms—personal and professional. Both forms, however, showed the presence, understanding, and unconditional positive regard of a supportive person who validated the woman's experience.

Personal relational validation. All of the women noted social support as being their central source of validation, while many additionally noted (primarily female) family members. For Sarah, friends were paramount:

Oh, definitely my friends here really helped me get through—especially one of my friends here. Really just like, bounced back a lot of like, not ideas, but just I told her everything like she knew about this other guy and, all of the things that happened between me and him, and then you know, what my feelings were like towards my um, my current relationship at the

time. Um, she really helped me like, figure things out, and gave me some sort of advice you know, things to think of.

In Sarah's experience, it seemed that friends played the role of a sounding board, gently raising ideas to think about. Jen, however, had a different but also positive experience of friends in her decision-making experience. Playing a more directive role, her friends said,

"This is crap. Like you don't need to put up with that," whereas my old friends would be like, "Well, I don't know, like that must be hard [for him]." Like, they didn't really say anything specific, so I finally had friends who were like, "You DON'T need to deal with that. What you're feeling is legitimate. That's not a good relationship. You're right." You know? So, I think that was helpful.

The statement "What you're feeling is legitimate" seems memorable for Jen, suggesting bringing attention to and validating her feelings helped fuel the confidence she needed to end her relationship.

Emma, too, mentioned friends as being a main source of support throughout the process, in addition to her parents she had frequent, "discussion and support from all my friends in [my home town], and I knew they were there for me, whatever I decided, they would support me, and I knew the same for my parents—they'd support me."

Professional relational validation. Professional support played a significant role in some of the women's coping. Petra stated:

I was actually talking to counsellor [when I was still in the relationship]. He didn't know I was talking to a counsellor, but I was. Um, about it all, and the counsellor kept telling me things like, "Well, what's the worst thing that could possibly happen if you are alone?" And I kept sort of running that through my head like, the worst thing that could happen is I would spend a night sitting on my couch watching T.V. Like is that really so bad? But I guess through talking to the counsellor and also talking to my sisters, I realized like, that even if that was the case and I was never going to meet somebody else, I would probably still be happier being alone than being in a relationship with someone who I didn't really want to be with. So, it was nice to be able to talk to someone and know that that's their job, to listen to what you have to tell them, and to know that they were just listening whole heartedly and putting all their effort into that. Yeah, I found it useful to like, have them point out things that should have been obvious to me as well, that weren't. Things like, you know the fact that being alone really isn't that bad. Or things like, um, well I mean he, I sort of became aware of things that I wasn't otherwise aware of, like, um like the fact that me and Sean were in such completely different place in our lives, you know? He wants to have a career and wants to, you know, settle down. He, like I said, he was starting to get ready to propose, he said, and he was talking about where he wants to live to have kids and stuff like that, and I am totally on the other side of the world from that. I want to go travel and don't really know where I want to go but just want to go have some fun,

and like maybe have kids somewhere down the road, but not even really thinking about that, and so the counsellor that I spoke to sort of made me more aware of that and was like, “That can be a big divide between two people.” So I knew there was things wrong in our relationship, but I don’t think I had really pinpointed all those things, so I think talking to a counsellor and talking through it all made me realize more specifically what I was unhappy about.

Maria spoke of her experience with a healer: “I started seeing this healer woman. She does energy healing, and I don’t know how much I believe in it, but it’s just nice to talk to someone.” Maria’s experience suggests being able to “talk to someone,” even if she does not “believe” in the listener’s healing techniques, can have a therapeutic impact. As previously mentioned, I imagine it is the presence of a supportive, nonjudgmental, emotionally-present individual that provides a corrective emotional experience to counter the guilt, anxiety, and shame the woman might be experiencing. Sarah illustrated her experience in counselling:

I was at a counselling centre at that time when I was like, processing things, and actually that’s another thing that did help me out in terms of um, figuring out where I’m goona go, because I think that was one of your questions around who or what resources helped you out or supported you, and so definitely I did seek counselling services at that time, where, you know, I was able to sort of get some things processed in therapy. Yeah. That helped me to process things—challenged me, like asked me

questions and different things to think of. Yeah, I think it gave me more confidence to trust myself, and that was one of the things I mentioned, right, so having that reassurance not only from your therapist, but also from your friends, too, that helped a lot.

Emma and her partner sought pastoral counselling when she began having doubts in the relationship:

When the Pastor called me one day, he didn't know we'd broken up, because we hadn't talked and it had just happened a couple of days before, he called me because we were supposed to meet him to do like a run through of the ceremony, and I had to tell him that we'd broken up, and he was like, "Oh, thank goodness." And then he brought me down to his office, and he was like, "You know when we were going through everything I could just tell that this wasn't right." He was like, "You guys were not on the same page. You weren't going the same direction." So that was really good to have that. That validation, and support, too, from a Pastor – That was really, really reassuring.

Intrapersonal validation. The second form of validation occurred intrapersonally. Intrapersonal validation displayed several different patterns: (a) women spoke of looking back on journals or text messages that provided evidence for their feelings (*intrapersonal review*); (b) giving attention to their feelings either by making artefacts of their dissatisfaction or observing and trusting their feelings (*intrapersonal attendance*); (c) and creating or recreating

narratives that made sense of the breakup experience and integrated the breakup event into their life story (*intrapersonal narrative reconstruction*). Intrapersonal narrative reconstruction was more apparent in the stories of the women who reported being relatively healed from their breakup experience. These women were able to see the breakup as a positive event in their life story, bringing attention to benefits of the experience. Although there did seem to be a positive correlation between amount of time lapsed since the breakup event and the evidence of intrapersonal narrative reconstruction, it was not exclusive.

Intrapersonal review. By paying attention to feelings they had experienced at previous times in their relationship, some women were able to find evidence that their feelings were significant, rather than unreliable or temporal. Petra explained,

I called my sister, but, and just talking it out with her I realized that like, even though I wanted to go back so badly I was like, ok, this is something I've been pondering for so long, like there's no way this decision can be wrong if I've been thinking about it for a year or whatever. 'Cause like how can it possibly just suddenly become wrong in the space of a few minutes? So I was like, "OK, maybe if I'm still feeling this way in a month, then maybe I can go back, but I need to really give this some time and let it kind of settle in before I make any rash decisions again." I mean I just made one big decision. I wasn't going to just – I couldn't just reverse it all, especially after all that time I'd spent thinking about it. And I started looking at old text messages in my phone from literally like a year before

when I'd started texting friends being like "Oh I don't know about this...I'm not sure," and I was like if I was sending these texts a year ago then why would I ever like, stay in it, you know?

For Petra, being reminded that she had experienced her feelings of dissatisfaction throughout the relationship gave credit to her emotions. In her words, there was "no way this decision can be wrong." If Petra had not been able to draw upon the resources of her sister's memory or the text messages in her phone, she might have continued to question the "rightness" of her feelings, and might have stayed, unhappily, in the relationship. Emma had a similar experience:

I was looking back through my diary one night, and I realized entries from like, 2008, 2009, about being upset. "He did this, and I felt like this or this," and I was like, "Wow. I have been so upset with this relationship for such a long time. Why am I still torturing myself with this?" And just like, reflecting back on those and how I was feeling now, that's really what pushed me to do it, because I was like, "I have been feeling unhappy now for like, 2 or 3 years. 2 ½, 3 years, and I was like, "This is ridiculous. That's not how it should be." So I think through journaling, that helped me to, to come to where I was in a place where I was like, "OK. This is what I need to do."

Some women brought attention to the internal debates that kept them from leaving. Many of the women mentioned being afraid of "being alone" or "not being able to ever find someone again." By bringing attention to these fears,

however, and assessing their plausibility, they were able to risk such an event occurring. Petra explained:

I was really scared of being just alone and not being able to ever find someone again, or whatever you want to call it, and, but then the more I thought about it, the more I was like, that's not realistic, because even in the three years I was in a relationship I was being asked out on dates and stuff like that, so I was like, there's no way I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life if I don't want to be. If I want to be alone, then fine, but if I don't, then I don't think there's any shortage of single bachelors out there.

It is important to note that I believe it was not the invalidation of her fear that gave her the courage to leave, since, until now I have been emphasizing the strengths of validation of feelings. Rather, it was the thoughtful exploration of her feelings – the curiosity of where they might be coming from and the suggestion of other possible outcomes – that allowed her to take such a risk.

Intrapersonal attendance. Intrapersonal attendance differs from intrapersonal review in that it is focused on validating the feeling(s) the woman is currently experiencing, rather than using memories or historical artefacts as evidence that her current feelings are not fleeting. In a sense, intrapersonal attendance supports the individual in creating a script that might guide her actions. One form of intrapersonal attendance a woman turned to for support was writing a letter for reference and encouragement as she engaged in the breakup process. Sarah illustrated,

I remember when I broke up with him, like I had like a letter and like I wrote a letter, read it to him, and as I'm reading I'm like shaking and crying and he was crying. It was really hard, right? You know, telling him what I wanted when I knew that in order for me to get everything out that I wanted to say, I wanted to have a letter in my hand, because I know that when I'm in that state of just like, a breakdown I just can't think, right? You're just not logical and organized. And so I had a letter in my hand and I told him the reasons and those reasons have always remained the same like, they have never changed.

It appears that writing had a powerful impact on Sarah's process, as it gave her the strength and support she needed to carry out the breakup. Other participants mentioned journaling as a form of intrapersonal attendance:

I journalled a lot. A lot of like, just journalling and self-reflecting and really knowing like, I'm not a bad person. This is awful and it's a bad situation now, but it's goona get better and it had to happen.

Again, in this case, journaling is considered intrapersonal attendance because it is taking place as the feelings are occurring, rather than being used as a reference to review past feelings. Finally, some women processed their feelings internally without paper. Jen, for example, shared:

I spent a lot of time like, just thinking about it and trying to remember why I did it and like, keep that in my mind, because when I thought about it, I knew it wasn't the right thing for me to like, be in that relationship.

Whether using paper, internal dialogue, or another form of expression, intrapersonal attendance seemed to benefit some of the women in validating their current emotions. In a society that often paints women as “irrational” or “emotional,” it is easy to dismiss one’s feelings as illegitimate. Attending to and validating one’s real, internal experience can provide necessary confidence for uncertain women.

Intrapersonal narrative reconstruction. Dominant narratives in society cause women who leave relationships to view themselves negatively; they believe that by not having an excuse to leave, they have committed a social offence (White & Epston, 1990). To regain a positive self-narrative, a woman must reconstruct the story that caused her to perceive herself negatively. Intrapersonal narrative reconstruction can be understood as the personal reconstruction of a situational or life-narrative. Because we already possess life narratives and situational narratives that make up our past, those stories cannot be constructed—only reconstructed. Before making meaning of the breakup experience, revisiting the breakup narrative might be an anxiety-provoking and shame-inducing experience for women. In order to adaptively integrate or reintegrate the breakup narrative into her life story, she must reconstruct the breakup narrative in a way that gives meaning to the experience. For example, a woman might currently tell her breakup narrative as one that casts her as a villain. When reflecting on her story, she might feel guilt or shame. The breakup story has the potential for narrative reconstruction. By finding meaning in the breakup or drawing positives from the breakup, the woman can integrate the

breakup narrative into her life-narrative adaptively and be at ease with her life-story and self-narrative. Several of the women described the breakup as being a positive event in their life overall, since it resulted in some form of growth. The following quotations from Sophie, Jen, and Emma's stories exemplify meaning-making as an avenue to intrapersonal narrative reconstruction. Sophie found meaning in the plan she believed a higher power held, explaining, "Well, I just kept saying, "I really don't think this is what God has in store for us," and "I really don't think this is his plan." Jen put meaning to her breakup experience by developing a narrative of being restricted or forced in the relationship and having freedom out of the relationship. She said that she

. . . spent some time thinking about like, the way I'd been before and all kinds of stuff that I did, and if that was actually what made me happy or if it was just what made me happy within the context of our relationship, so I found myself doing a lot of things that I hadn't done when I was with him because he didn't want me to do it or whatever, and after a little while – I mean it took a while – but after I was just SO much happier than I'd been in a while. Like I'm finally doing what I want to do for myself, and I finally know who I am on my own, without him kind of restricting me on that, and I think that's when I stopped feeling bad about breaking up with him.

While some women had put meaning directly to their relationship and breakup experience through narrative reconstruction, others put meaning to the negative aspects of their breakup such as feeling judged or unsupported. Emma shared:

I think at the end of the day I realized, you know, so be it. If they want to judge, they can, but they don't, they're not me. They don't know what it is that I want, and it's important to realize what it is that I want in the relationship. It's not about them, it's about me and my ex-boyfriend. Or, really, at the end of the day it's about me and what I want to do, right? So I kind of came to that realization, right? That um, you know, if they don't understand, they don't have to understand, but what's important is that I look after myself and I know what it is that I want in a relationship, and I know what it is that's not working and what is working. And again, it's like, if they stop being your friend because of that, then they weren't necessarily your true friend in the first place. So I just focus on the people that have supported me through this and the people that have been there for me. . . I also used to be extremely concerned what other people thought of me, and what I did, and I'm really in a place now where I'm like, what am I don't worry about it? Like why waste time? There are so many other people in the world that care, so if someone is rude or judging you for what you've done or whatever, just, why worry about them? So like I've definitely changed my mindset there. And I'm not saying like, oh I don't care about you, but I'm just more...open to the idea that I don't need everyone to accept me.

To review, intrapersonal narrative reconstruction occurs when the storyteller recreates (or "reconstructs") the breakup narrative to put meaning to the breakup. She might then integrate the breakup into her broader life story as

a positive life event, thereby reconstructing her life-narrative. Notable trends in reported positive results of the breakup are described below as freedom, independence, and freedom to be oneself.

Freedom manifested in different forms for different people. Emma shared her experience of the freedom to do what and go to where she wants. She described,

I've got to have more freedom. Like I'm a new grad. With jobs, I can do whatever I want. I don't have to worry about somebody else and if they are going to be happy with living in [a small town], or if they're going to move somewhere with me. I just worry about me, and that might be a bit selfish, but it's good.

For Jen, freedom surfaced somewhat differently. She found her breakup experience allowed her to develop a new perspective on life that released her from the chains of societal expectations. She explained,

I think it's definitely freed me in the way that I approach life and look at life, because a lot of people have these rules that govern life, especially around relationships, like, once you break up with someone, you can't get together with someone for a certain amount of time. Or in a relationship, you can't think about getting married for this amount of time . . . and some of them are my friends and my mom's another one, who's just like, "I don't understand how you have another boyfriend right now. This doesn't make any sense." And I'm like, well it doesn't make sense if you have rules

about it, but it makes sense for me because it's the exact right thing for me right now.

Whether the sense of freedom is physical or mental, it appears to be a positive result of the breakup experience and a sign of intrapersonal narrative reconstruction.

As with the experiences of freedom, experiences of independence materialized in different forms as well. For Sarah, she developed a sense trust in herself. She said,

I think one of the things is um, like I've realized or have learned that, you know, if I really want something done I can get it done, right? And no matter how hard it is, it's always important for me to look after yourself and really go with your gut instinct, dealing with your own feelings and thoughts, and a lesson that, you know I was really able to realize about myself was that if I listened to myself, you know, I can get it done and things will be OK. So, I guess I want to have more of an optimistic view of things, especially after a relationship. I know that it does take time to get yourself thinking more positively about life and being with someone else, and that's also part of the healing process, right? I guess one of the biggest things for me is going with your gut instinct, you know? Listen to yourself, and too, knowing that things will be OK.

Karine's experience of independence was more behavioural than cognitive. Rather than being reliant on another, she realized,

that I can take care of myself, because before that he took care of everything. He would drive me around to jobs, he could drive me to the interviews and support me or whatever, and I started doing things for myself. And I realized well, I'm smart enough and strong enough to just take care of myself. It was a very good discovery to find that out for myself.

Finally, Sophie felt empowered, evident when she said,

I guess I'm kind of proud of myself that I actually did it, because at the time I thought I was going against the grain – I actually wasn't, but I thought I was. And I thought I was, you know, I don't know, brave, I guess. And people have actually said that afterwards, that I was brave to actually do that. Um just 'cause everything was already kind of set, and so I'm really glad that I did that. Yeah, and I guess it kind of just reinforced in me that change is good. You don't have to stay in stuff if it doesn't feel right. I felt like it kind of strengthened me, too.

Although women's total independence is not generally celebrated in society, there is an understanding that women can be extremely relational. Women are often pathologized for being too "needy" or "emotional." Consequently, independence in women to a certain extent is reinforced in society. As such, the women were able to feel positively about their newfound independence.

Freedom to be oneself involved being able to do and be for oneself and not for another. Jen explained how she had

become a lot more focused on figuring out what actually makes me happy instead of what should make me happy. And I think some of that, like I've always had these ideas about things that should make me happy based on what other people say, or whatever, so I think I've kind of started trying to figure out what actually makes me happy and pursuing those things whether or not it seems like the right thing to someone else, which I couldn't do while in that relationship.

It is interesting that parallels can be drawn between the most referenced positive effects of the breakup and the most referenced fears of the breakup. Being free, independent, and free to be oneself share striking similarities with being alone and being in an uncontrolled environment, suggesting there is a possibility such fears could develop more positive connotations. I discuss the practical applications of this finding, along with other possible counselling implications, in the following chapter.

Finally, intrapersonal narrative reconstruction was evident in the women's integration of the breakup into their life story. Sarah, for example, had distanced herself from the original breakup narrative. It now sits, archived, in her life story:

As I'm telling you the story, I've healed from him. I've moved on. There are so many things I appreciate in that relationship, and there is so much more that I appreciate about myself, now, knowing that I've been able to go through that process and, you know, I'm at a place now where it's like, it's OK. I've survived. I've healed. I've moved forward.

Jen brought attention to the change in her breakup story over the past year, when asked how her story might have been different if asked to tell it then:

I think I would have been more likely to remember good things about him as well, whereas, like right after we broke up it was really easy to remember all the good things about him, and like, ah well am I ever going to find someone else who you know, would be like that and who would do that with me and whatever, whereas now, I don't really think about that at all. I just remember it as one of the best decisions of my life!

Heather had a similar experience:

I'm happier when I tell the story now, because I am so happy with that decision I made. I don't regret it. I'm all whatever happens in the end, this is, I absolutely needed this, and, so when I talk about the breakup, it's sad to me, but it's a little bit more amicable if that makes sense, and when it was fresh, it was like, I had a lot more doubt back then too, and now I don't have doubt.

An interesting intrapersonal narrative reconstruction technique Maria used was to name a chapter in her breakup narrative, highlighting a positive outcome of the breakup:

I think throughout the dancing and just having fun I became, I just returned to myself. That's how I call it: The Return to Maria. And yeah, I don't know how to describe it – just laughing endlessly and having a good time

and doing goofy things and doing silly things, doing things and not thinking about the repercussions and you just do it.

Petra, the woman for whom the least time had lapsed since her breakup, seemed to struggle with managing her desire to be independent with her desire for partnering. Since the experience was still quite fresh for her, I imagine she had not yet made sense of the disconcerting aspects of the experience. As such, she had not managed to integrate the breakup experience into her life story and identity. I believe Petra's conflict over her desire to be independent and her desire for partnering occurred because there are few scripts available to women that encourage independence within relationships. Rather, women tend to believe they must be either relational or independent, and for women, such independence translates into selfishness. Petra viewed her actions negatively, apparent when she described, ,

Like when I was in my relationship with Sean, I was always trying to become more independent, because I looked up to people who I pictured as independent, and, but now that I feel like I have that sense of independence, I'm like, maybe it's not such a good thing because maybe it's just another like, part of being selfish.

However, Sarah, the woman for whom the most time had lapsed since the breakup, had managed to integrate the breakup story into her identity as a woman. By making meaning through narrative reconstruction, she managed the

conflicting desires to embody both agentic qualities such as independence (Eagly et al., 2000), and communal qualities such as nurturance.

I feel really content in being a woman, and um, you know I think more and more as I'm getting older I'm realizing like the importance of looking after myself and love me, and caring after me. And so that's what I'm trying to do now is, you know, balance that out in my current relationship like about being there for us and for him, but at the same time recognizing that I cannot give my entire self up and it's important to keep an identity, and so I want that self care piece, so yeah, I think it's, I love being a woman but I think it's important for us to remember to look after ourselves . . . so I think for me that's really important about being a woman is to try and focus on ourselves and having that balance of looking after myself, but also feeling like I can give in my relationships with people, and also with my partner, right? And friends and family.

Observational validation. Finally, validation occurred through external observation—either by observing other women who had left a relationship and were not viewed negatively, or by looking to the sparse available media that conveys a similar experience and acceptable outcome and focuses on a single, independent female protagonist.

Referencing individuals who had shared a similar experience appeared to empower one woman:

It was scary. It was totally scary. Like I, it was that comfortable place that you get to where you, you don't know what else is out there kind of thing

until you experience it. Um, so yeah I mean more than anything it was just frightening. But I'd seen other people do it and I was like, it can't be that bad if other people can survive it, too.

Petra's statement is an example of observational validation by way of witnessing other women who had left relationships. Many women know of friends or acquaintances who successfully left a committed relationship. Being able to look to the experiences of such women provided reassurance, guidance, encouragement and validation for those contemplating leaving.

As Petra noted previously, there are no songs that validate the experience of the person who chooses to leave a committed relationship and experiences grief, guilt, and anxiety as a result. Similarly, there are few movies, television shows, books, or magazines that idealize images of women who choose to be independent. As an exception, two women mentioned Elizabeth Gilbert's (2006) Bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love* as being memorable in validating their breakup experience. Heather explained,

After I went through this whole process, when [Elizabeth] was breaking up with her husband and he was such a great guy, like nothing wrong or whatever, I kind of felt like similar to her, because I'm like, and she talked about how she was crying in the bathroom one night, and it was weird because I remember one night in my apartment and Evan was there, and he'd be gone a lot because he's in med school and he'd be gone a lot in the hospital at night, and I remember one night when he was there, I just

remember I was finishing up homework late and he'd gone to bed and I was just like crying on the couch and I was like why am I crying? Why am I so unhappy? I couldn't figure out why I was unhappy but I know this relationship is causing it, but there was no direct reason for the unhappiness.

While Heather referred to *Eat, Pray, Love* as a source of validation for her actions during her relationship, Petra referred to the novel as a source of comfort that she could be happy when not in a relationship. She stated,

You see movies like *Eat, Pray, Love*...I mean that's really new, but, like, it's a positive, happy story about someone who's out on their own...or like *Sex and The City* is a huge show. It's about those women, I mean not all of them, I mean yes it is about trying to find love, but they're pretty happy when they're not in love.

Other women spoke of fictional characters in media who had inspired their independence. Sophie referenced several fictional women whom she admired:

All the shows that I watch are like, *Gilmore Girls*, or *Dr. Quinn*, or *Anne of Green Gables*, all where the woman is the hero and can do everything. Like Loralie is a single mom who owns a hotel and has a daughter, and also Rory, who I identify with, too. And *Dr. Quinn*, she's like, the pioneer woman who's a doctor on the frontier and has to use all her like, she's a single mom, too, and has to take care of these kids and runs a clinic

during a time when women are not allowed to be doctors, and same with Anne of Green Gables, the orphan girl who has to struggle through life.

Similarly, Heather remembered a novel that had been meaningful in her youth.

She reflected,

I remember reading these Judy Blume books, and I can't remember who the chick was in it, but, oh man. It was kind of like she was this little renegade girl or whatever, and I think I looked up to her a lot.

Finally, Maria found solace in a story that empowered her to leave. She remembered,

. . . this book that actually triggered a lot of response to . . . do you know Ibsen's *A Doll's House*? Basically it's about this woman living in the 18th or 19th century in Sweden, and she's playing this role, and she thinks that her husband is going to be her saviour and her prince in shining armour that's always going to come to her rescue, but once it comes to reality he fails. I think she's dishonest or something, and he actually gets really mad, and her bubble bursts. He's not her image and her fairy tale bursts and he's not going to step up for her anymore, and she's not in this role of the cute, happy, entertaining housewife anymore, and she has this realization that she's been playing this role the entire time, and it's like an epiphany, and she realizes she can't do this anymore, and she leaves, and the response to the play was just outrage. People were outraged because no woman would leave her husband and her children behind, but

she left, because once she knew that she was stuck in this role, that she was playing a role – a doll’s house, right? She’s a doll in a house, and she could never go back.

In Chapter 5, I will explain the healing effects of relational, intrapersonal, and observational validation. I also draw from the women’s experiences, possible counselling implications, and suggestions for coping strategies.

5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview of Study

This study asked, “How do women experience the social and emotional consequences associated with their voluntary departure from a long-term, heterosexual romantic relationship?” As a beginning to answering this question I told my own personal story, which has elements of answers that other women expanded. Relevant themes include negative consequences, such as guilt, depression, anxiety, grief, the effect on social support, and a loss of resources. Positive consequences include growth, coping, and the effect of social support. Additionally, gender norms might relate to the women’s experience of leaving a relationship. For the purpose of this study, I used a qualitative, narrative methodology that delved richly into the women’s stories. I revealed the results of the study, interpreted through a narrative lens. In Chapter 5, I will explain social role theory and role congruity theory, the theoretical lenses through which I have conceptualized the women’s experiences. I will then discuss possible implications for counselling, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

5.2 Social Role Theory

Each of the themes explored in Chapter 4 can be explained using social role theory (SRT). In the 1980s, social psychologists noticed there appeared to

be a correlation between stereotypes and actual behaviour, and between social behaviour and personality. In an attempt to understand the causes of sex differences and similarities in social behaviour, a theory was born. The theory of social roles explains the beliefs people hold about the sexes as the result of observing the role performances of men and women, and that these beliefs both reflect and influence the sexual division of gender (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Proponents of the theory suggest there are two types of norms, or expectations for behaviour: *descriptive* and *injunctive*. Descriptive norms refer to agreed upon expectations concerning what members of a group actually do, while injunctive norms describe agreed upon expectations about what the group ideally would do or ought to do. In other words, descriptive norms are what we know as stereotypes, while injunctive norms contain a prescriptive component. Collectively, descriptive and injunctive norms are what make up gender roles.

According to SRT (Eagly et al., 2000), an observer would infer that a person's injunctive or descriptive behaviour and their inner disposition correspond. Given that men tend to occupy higher status roles including breadwinner, and women tend to occupy lower status roles including homemaker, the observer would infer that the inner attributes of the man or woman coincide with the behaviours their role demands. This results in the creation of gender stereotypes and their accompanying stereotypical characteristics. As mentioned in chapter two, communal characteristics such as being helpful, affection, kindness, interpersonal sensitivity, sympathy, gentleness, or nurturance are associated with women; agentic characteristics, such as being

assertive, independent, controlling, aggressive, self-sufficient, self-confident, or dominant are associated with men (Eagly et al., 2000). SRT differs from other social psychological theories in that it suggests these traits are not innate; rather, they are the product of adapting effectively to a role—a potential occupant of a role (wife, homemaker) seeks to acquire the skills that would best fit the role(s) available to him or her. Observation of persons in such roles further encourages stereotypical behaviour, since it provides an example to follow. Thus, the shared beliefs about the segregation of gender roles influence actual behavioural differences in society. Finally, SRT states that gender roles are a fluid, cultural aspect of society. They change over time in response to changes in family and work roles within the sexes. These ideas are relevant in this study because they align with the narrative theory and methodology I drew upon to complete the study and interpret the results; as previously mentioned, narrative theory suggests that our identities are a compilation of our life stories, cultural stories and myths (Polkinghorne, 1991). In accordance with narrative theory, SRT rejects the notion that behaviour is a reflection of innate characteristics and suggests that roles are created through observations of role performances. Since our lives are comprised of and surrounded by stories, they become the media for which we observe such role performances.

5.3 Role Congruity Theory

Role congruity theory (RCT) takes social role theory a step further by looking at the consistencies between gender roles and other roles (Diekmann & Goodfried, 2006). RCT suggests that if a person engages in behaviour that is

dissimilar to the expectations people hold for that particular role, he or she will experience judgment or negative evaluation. It is suggested that the observation of deviation from descriptive norms produces emotions such as confusion and surprise, while the observation of deviation from injunctive norms produces emotions such as moral disapproval. Alternatively, if a member of a group exhibits behaviours or characteristics that align with the group's typical social role, she will be positively evaluated. Since most people prefer to be positively evaluated, people are more likely to behave in ways that align with the collective expectations held for their role. Ultimately, it is expectancies that motivate people to behave in a gendered manner, and a fear of judgment or unknown that inhibits deviation. People regulate their behaviour to conform to gender stereotypes, looking to members of their own sex for guidance.

Furthermore, the theory suggests that people are particularly likely to turn to others for such guidance—to conform to sex-typical behaviours, if the situation is ambiguous, unfamiliar, or confusing. For example, in this study women noted that there was no script for being the person who leaves. Having never been in the situation before and having no narrative to reference, I propose the women might have considered their experiences to be ambiguous, unfamiliar, or confusing. In accordance with RCT (Diekmann & Goodfried, 2006), many of the women did turn to others for guidance, and did conform to sex-typical roles.

Recall Petra, who sought therapy for her “sexual dysfunction,” Maria, who saw a healer and a therapist trying to “fix” herself for the relationship, or Emma, whose

guilt resulted in her taking responsibility for her partner's and her shared credit card debt.

Role Congruity Theorists suggest the gender-corresponding role can be one of several types—occupational, organizational, relational, and so on. To illustrate, the role of a person voluntarily leaving a committed relationship does not typically align with the nurturant, dependent, relational female role. So, in accordance with RCT, if a woman chooses to leave a committed relationship, she will experience negative evaluation from members of her society. Furthermore, as gendered qualities comprise the self-concept, she might experience anxiety, guilty, shame, and confusion. I believe that SRT and its corresponding RCT are highly appropriate theories to further analyze the themes in this study.

5.4 Results understood in the context of Social Role Theory and Role Congruity Theory

To review, results revealed three primary themes in the women's experiences of leaving their relationships: (a) active defiance of the socially understood female role in a relationship (i.e., internal or external perceived or expected disapproval, misalignment between actual personal experience and expected relational experience, or referencing the socially understood relational plot); (b) the absence of a socially understood anti-relational *script* available to women (i.e., manifesting in cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety both before and after leaving the relationship); and (c) healing and growth experienced as results of validation, meaning-making, and script-creation (i.e.,

achieved through various forms of relational validation, intrapersonal validation, and observational validation). Elements of social role theory and role congruity theory are evident throughout the women's experiences.

Social role theory. In terms of SRT, (Eagly et al., 2000), the social role of women as nurturant, relational beings has been created and maintained through stereotypes in shared narratives and media. Because people look to others of the same gender to govern their behaviour, women draw upon these narratives for guidance, thereby reinforcing the socially understood expectations for behaviour.

The absence of a socially understood anti-relational script available to women further supports social role theory. The relational script available to women reinforces gender roles such as being nurturant and caring. Sophie illustrated living in accordance with this script when she said:

I try to be compassionate, and relationships mean a lot to me . . . so friendships or any kind of relationship with people means a lot to me. So I try my best to be compassionate and caring towards other people.

Unlike the relational script Sophie exemplifies in the quote above, there continues to be no acceptable anti-relational script for women. Committing an anti-relational act, such as leaving a relationship, is unfamiliar for women. As a result, the women in the study found themselves in a highly anxiety-provoking position. Because women tend to revert to familiar gender roles in anxiety-provoking situations (Eagly et al., 2000), many engaged in compensatory behaviours to align their life-narrative with their anti-relational act such as

seeking professional help, staying in the relationship in spite of their dissatisfaction, and blaming themselves.

Additionally, social role theory suggests that gender roles are fluid, cultural aspects of society that change over time. Since women who exhibited more evidence of interpersonal narrative reconstruction were able to integrate “independence” into their life-narrative (recall Sarah’s story), it can be assumed that the dynamic nature of social roles is at work. The women were able to transform their role from exclusively relational to a one that positively embodied both relational and independent characteristics.

Role congruity theory. In terms of RCT (Diekmann & Goodfried, 2006) and regarding the active defiance of the socially understood female role in a relationship, the internal or external disapproval experienced can be understood; because the women’s behaviour did not match the descriptive and injunctive norms that society holds, their actions were met with disapproval. Although role congruity theory has only been applied to external disapproval to this date, I posit it might operate internally, as well, in the form of the “internal critic” (Elliot, 1992). Additionally, women experienced internal and external perceived and expected disapproval from close supports, highlighting the power of the gender norms in society. Furthermore, the women’s misalignment between expected and actual experience in their relationships, as well as their tendency to reference the socially understood relational plot, conveys the accessibility of the mutually shared understanding of women’s social role to be in a relationship. Finally, the healing and growth that occurred through validation and meaning-making can be

understood as the result of the mediation of the effects of role congruity theory (guilt, shame, and anxiety), and the outcome of reconstructing a life-narrative into which the breakup narrative can be integrated. When the woman and those by whom she cares to be evaluated were able to view the breakup experience as compatible with her life-narrative, she no longer experienced perceived or expected internal or external disapproval.

5.5 Implications/Applications for Counselling

Interpersonal relationship difficulties are a common reason that clients seek counselling services (Deutsch, 1985; Richardson, Seim, Eddy & Brindley, 1985). As Baumeister and Dhavale (2001) state, and as my research suggests, the person who chooses to leave a relationship experiences multiple negative consequences: they are viewed as a villain; they lose friends and support during and following the breakup; they are isolated from the person they knew as a key source of support. As Hebert and Popadiuk (2008) discovered, and as the women in my study supported, many students felt a need to share their breakup experience. Having a person listen, empathize, and give advice was desirable.

At a time when they are in need of support, they might feel abandoned, isolated, and lost. Because of expectations and constrictions imposed on women culturally and socially, the experience following the choice to end an intact relationship might be particularly wrought with guilt, depression, and anxiety, and a decline in social support. Consequently, counsellors might be a primary source of support for the person who chooses to leave the relationship. As such, it is

important for counsellors to be familiar with and competent in collaborating on such a presenting problem.

Based on the results of this study, I provide several suggestions for counselling applications. Remaining consistent with the narrative nature of my work, I have identified “chapters” some women may experience during their breakup stories. These chapters are dynamic and mutually inclusive; to elaborate, while a woman might be primarily storying her life in a way that appears to be consistent with the themes of one chapter, she will likely still be partially immersed in other chapters as well. We are multi-storied individuals, and, as I suggest in this case, multi-chaptered individuals. The breakup story I have created is not meant to generalize or define the breakup experience; rather, I have developed chapters based on my interpretation of the experiences of the women in the study in an attempt to assist counsellors in organizing the counselling process and supporting their client. The chapters are titled Conflict, Turmoil, Healing, and Growth. Although each chapter is distinct, clients likely shift and vacillate between chapters and might portray characteristics of multiple chapters concurrently.

Chapter 1: Conflict: Client wants to leave relationship but doubts her instincts. At every point in the breakup process, I suggest a strong emphasis on validation. Empathic reflection, the basis of most counselling theories that conveys an understanding of the client’s experience, is central. Additionally, the methods for validation uncovered in this study can be implemented at each point in the counselling process.

While the client is still undecided as to whether or not she wants to leave her relationship, it is imperative that the counsellor attempt to abstain from consciously influencing the client's decision one way or another. It is reasonable to assume that individuals consider leaving relationships frequently, and the decision to remain in a relationship is not always due to societal expectations! So, I suggest the counsellor be tentative and tactful in utilizing validation strategies. Examples of relational validation during experiences of this chapter might be using active listening skills and encouraging the client to discuss the matter with supports if she feels safe to do so. Examples of observational validation might be to suggest the client speak about someone whom she holds in high regard, and theorize as to what advice that person might give her, or what that person might do in her situation. Intrapersonal validation is the most valuable form of validation during experiences of this chapter, as it is the chapter in which the client is most likely experiencing a misalignment of her experience and her expected relational experience, and she is likely to dismiss her feelings as a result. Therefore, it is essential that the counsellor provides the client a safe space to voice and explore her feelings, so she can determine for herself whether or not they will influence her behaviour.

Because intrapersonal validation draws from the client's internal resources, it is unlikely to be influenced by the counsellor's biases, and is therefore appropriate for the developing therapeutic alliance characteristic of this chapter in the breakup and counselling process stories. Intrapersonal validation consists of intrapersonal review, intrapersonal attendance, and intrapersonal

narrative reconstruction. At this point, only intrapersonal review and intrapersonal attendance can be of use in the counselling process because the client has yet to leave the relationship and therefore cannot construct or reconstruct a the breakup narrative. Examples of intrapersonal review might be drawing a relationship lifeline, reviewing journals, emails, or text messages, or writing a “life story” of the relationship to investigate whether the current feelings have been present significantly throughout the relationship. Examples of intrapersonal attendance might be journalling or another form of expression (e.g. art or music), verbalizing current thoughts and feelings in the counselling room, engaging in an experiential activity such as a two-chair dialogue, or asking the client what she might say to a friend in her position.

If internal disapproval is present, I suggest using deconstructive techniques such as asking the client to theorize why women feel compelled to be nurturant and caring. Finally, I suggest deconstructive techniques in the face of loaded language such as “selfish” and “independent.”

Chapter 2: Turmoil: Client has decided to end relationship. If the client has made the decision to end the relationship, script co-construction may begin. To elaborate, the counsellor and client might mutually create a script for the client to follow during the breakup process. This can be done using a combination of observational, relational, and intrapersonal validation techniques, as well as experimenting with brainstorming and creative techniques. Particularly empowering at this point might be sources of observational validation—heroines, friends, acquaintances or characters who succeeded in a challenging task, or

music or media that parallels the client's experience. With the counsellor's support, the client can "write" a script to guide her behaviour, which might alleviate some of the anxiety felt as a result of the scriptlessness she might be experiencing. For example, Sarah's decision to write a letter to encourage and support her during the breakup might be a valuable suggestion. Moreover, because it is likely the client is experiencing cognitive and physical manifestations of anxiety during experiences of this chapter, it might be appropriate to provide the client with anxiety-reducing and focusing techniques. Examples of these include mindfulness, breathing and grounding techniques as well as other arousal-reducing strategies that the client might take home for coping.

The ideas for relational, observational, and intrapersonal validation suggested for Chapter 1 might still be effective during experiences of this chapter as well, and I recommend that the counsellor encourage the client to continue utilizing such methods of validation.

Chapter 3: Healing: Client has recently ended relationship. Based on the possibility that experiences in this chapter might be wrought with emotion, the primary task of the counsellor is to support the client emotionally. Additionally, focus on supports, coping strategies, self-care, and the co-creation of a script for daily life might be of utmost importance. Necessary during this chapter, too, might be the creation of a grief script. Depending on the cognitive stability of the client, the counsellor might begin assisting the client in giving herself permission to grieve the relationship. The counsellor might suggest narrative grief strategies

adapted to their relationship, such as an epitaph, journal, eulogy, poem, or memorial to grieve the relationship (Niemeyer, 1999). Anxiety and dissonance might be present during experiences of this chapter due to the incongruence between behaviour and life-narrative. Although cognitive or behavioural strategies to align behaviour and life-narrative might alleviate the current anxiety, I recommend integrating the “compromising” behaviour into the life-narrative. This can be achieved by reminding the client of the transitory nature of a behaviour, focusing on the client’s positive or justifiable intentions at the root of the behaviour, and deconstructing the characteristic that the behaviour imitates (e.g. deconstruct the word “selfish”—is it really a negative characteristic? When might it be positive? What might be a positive synonym for “selfish?”)

Chapter 4: Meaning-making and growth: Client has ended relationship and is emotionally and cognitively ready to co-construct. Upon starting Chapter 4, it is necessary that the client considers herself healed enough from the breakup experience to begin making sense of it. That being said, making sense of the experience will likely contribute to healing, reinforcing that each chapter is a fluid and overlapping process. If healing has reached a point at which the client might begin to explore and make sense of the breakup experience, the counsellor can assist her in deriving positives from the relationship and from the breakup experience. Examples of questions the counsellor could ask might be, “What did you learn about yourself/the world during or as a result of this relationship?” “What do you notice about yourself/what do people notice about you since ending the relationship?” “What

has been a positive outcome of the breakup so far?” It is likely that more time lapsed between the breakup and such questions will result in more opportunities for positive outcomes of the breakup. Particularly important during this chapter might be the counsellor’s ability to deconstruct the client’s language—for example, if the client has mentioned outcomes such as being alone or in a new environment, the counsellor can use these as opportunities to explore the client’s newfound senses of independence and freedom. Eventually, the client and counsellor might work on the co-reconstruction of the client’s life-narrative so that it integrates the breakup experience. The therapist will know the client has fully integrated the experience when she can truthfully attest that the breakup was a positive decision.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

Due to the qualitative, subjective nature of my research, there are limits to my understanding of the phenomena. First, because I recruited participants from university communities, I heard only the voices of middle-class women. Had I interviewed women of varying socioeconomic statuses, differing results may have emerged. Second, due to semantic relativism, the idea that people living in different cultures might have different beliefs about the meaning of a word, I might have misinterpreted the stories of the participants for whom English is a second language. For example, the English translation of a Spanish word might not carry the same connotation the participant was intending to express. Finally, the story itself is the individual’s interpretation of their reality, with symbols (in this case, language) replacing experience. Although I transcribed the interviews

verbatim, there is a multitude of factors that might influence the stories to which I was privy. A participant's mood, experiences prior to our interview, reaction to me as an interviewer, comfort level in the interview, and cultural beliefs around disclosure are a few of the many factors that take part in the construction of the participant's story.

The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize (Merril & West, 2009), and generalizability is particularly unimportant for some biographers. Rather, the goal is to generate a sample rich in experience, intensity, and insight. I therefore had no intentions of formulating generalizable conclusions from my research. To some, this might be a limitation; however, it might not be possible to illustrate a personal and emotional phenomenon that can be generalized to the population who share similar criteria. Additionally, concrete individual experiences can be a point of reference for the general and universal because they provide shared in-depth examples of experiences, and such experiences can be considered starting points for further exploration of the topic.

5.7 Directions for Future Research

Future directions might include applying the suggested counselling implications and receiving feedback from clients and counsellors. An evaluation tool such as the Outcome Rating Scale (Miller & Duncan, 2002) might serve as a consistent scale to do so.

Additionally, I suggest a more thorough exploration of the types of validation uncovered in this study. Perhaps a qualitative study focusing specifically on people's experiences of feeling validated might provide a basis for

this exploration. I would be interested to investigate which form of validation (relational, interpersonal, observational), if any, is considered to be most powerful. It would also be interesting to see if gender has an impact on the power of validation (i.e., because society paints men as rational and women as emotional, does gender influence the strength of interpersonal validation in comparison to relational or observation validation?)

It might be significant to conduct a cross-cultural study that delves into women's scripts in other societies, and examines the relationship between culture and internal and external reactions to breakup. For example, a woman from a collectivistic culture might experience more negative internal and external evaluation after leaving a committed relationship.

Finally, a study that recruits participants of varying socioeconomic statuses and educational backgrounds might yield varying and interesting results. Because the women in the study had high levels of education, I suggest they may have been exposed to more feminist and independent stories that would validate their experience of leaving their relationships. Or, alternatively, perhaps they felt more constraint to leaving because failing to succeed in their relationships contradicted their high-achieving self-narratives. Either way, a similar study that hears the voices of women from varying educational and socioeconomic backgrounds could be a valuable endeavour.

5.8 Conclusion

Ironically, the conclusion of this study has coincided with my experience of being the person who is left. Broken and gutted, I find myself unexpectedly

weeping or feeling enraged. Yet, in spite of it all, there is something comforting in knowing the fate of the relationship was not in my hands. I could not make the “wrong” decision, because the breakup was not my choice. I do not fear regret because I had no control. Moreover, I have not experienced the unbearable guilt of hurting someone; instead, I feel like “the victim of a process” (Doering, 2010). Additionally, I feel reassured, being able to look to so many available narratives of others who have been left—I have updated my music playlist with anthems for my pain and anger, and look forward to moving onto songs that strengthen and empower me. Supports have flocked to my side, and I am able to express my pain and anger without shame or guilt. Ultimately, my current experience differs from my experience of leaving because this time I feel validated. My experience of leaving, however, involved none of these comforting elements, and my study illustrated that other women share similar experiences leaving their relationships. By bringing attention to and understanding their stories through a narrative lens, I sought to explore the less known experiences of the social and emotional consequences associated with women’s voluntary departure from a long-term, heterosexual romantic relationship. I strove to expose the erroneous idea that “a lot of people seem to think that if you’re the one that ended it, you’re obviously fine and you don’t need support” (Interview with Emma, August 2010). Although there is a need for further research in the area, I hope this study has created a foundation upon which professionals can stand and women can heal.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- 1) Tell me the story of your relationship—the beginning, middle, end, and period following.
- 2) What caused you to follow through on the decision? What resources did you look to?
- 3) What feelings do you remember as most salient in the time following the breakup?
- 4) What was your life like after the breakup? How did the people around you respond? What do you believe the reasons for this were?
- 5) How did you manage following the breakup? How did your life change? How did your relationships with other people change?
- 6) How would you describe, if any, changes in yourself that you have experienced because of your decision to leave the relationship?
- 7) Maybe – have there been consequences – positive or negative- that resulted from ending the relationship? Has your life changed, have you changed, have people changed the way they treat you?
- 8) If you were to have told me the story of your break up right after it happened rather than now X months/years later, how would it be different from what you've told me today?
- 9) Tell me a bit about how and where you were raised – I'd like to learn about your culture and the environment in which you grew up. how was gender viewed?

10)How would you describe your personality? Name three positive adjectives and three negative adjectives. How would you describe yourself as a woman?

11) Did you utilize any counselling services?

12)Tell me about influences in the media or society that have contributed to your view of yourself as a woman—what are these sources and what have they taught you?

Are there any other comments you would like to add, or pieces of information you would like to tell me?

Appendix 2: Recruitment Advertisement

Are you a female aged 20 to 29? Have you experienced breaking a man's heart by ending a long-term relationship?

Perhaps you...

-Loved him, but were no longer "in love" with him

-No longer feeling physically attracted to him

-found him perfect on paper, but not perfect for you

-wanted him as a friend, no longer a lover

-considered staying to prevent hurting him

If so, you may be eligible to participate in my research study on women's gendered experience of initiating a relationship breakup with a committed partner

Participation involves a single interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. During the interview, you will have the opportunity to share the story of your relationship, breakup, and your experience following

If you are interested in learning more about the research or in participating, please contact Megan Bruneau at mjb12@sfu.ca.

Student Investigator:

Megan Bruneau B.A.
Faculty of Education (M.A. Student)
Counselling Psychology Program
Simon Fraser University
mjb12@sfu.ca

Thesis Supervisor:

Dr. Patrice Keats, Ph.D., R. Psych
Faculty of Education)
Counselling Psychology Program
Simon Fraser University
pkeats@sfu.ca

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