"WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?" A GROUNDED THEORY OF
DISTRESS, CHANGE, AND PERSONAL GROWTH FOLLOWING THE
DISSOLUTION OF NON-MARITAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

By

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ABSTRACT

As the average age of first marriage increases, young adults may experience more non-marital breakups. Previous non-marital breakup research has focused on distress and negative outcomes, but has rarely examined the positive consequences or personal growth aspects of the experience. In this study, I explored the changes that undergraduate university students reported experiencing as a result of a non-marital breakup and how those changes arose. A qualitative grounded theory methodology, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), was used. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who had recently experienced a non-marital breakup. From these interviews, I constructed a grounded theoretical model of change and personal growth following non-marital breakups, containing three interrelated phases: *Experiencing a loss, pulling apart, and moving beyond.* In this model, I assert that students may experience stress-related growth after a breakup and provide an explanation for these changes. Implications for counselling are also discussed.

To Phil,

for your relentless love, support, and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Over the past few decades, the average age of North Americans entering into their first marriage has increased steadily (Smock, 2004). Recent data from the Government of British Columbia revealed that the mean age at first marriage is 30.9 years for men and 28.7 years for women (Government of British Columbia, 2003). In 1977, these figures were 25.2 and 22.5, respectively. As a result of this shift in age at first marriage, North Americans tend to have a relatively prolonged period in which to engage in non-marital romantic relationships, and may therefore experience a greater number of relationship terminations.

Some believe that non-marital breakups are simply hardships that people need to overcome, whereas others view them as potential catalysts for growth and personal change. The psychological literature tends to focus much more on the distress caused by these events than on any positive outcomes or instances of growth. More recently, however, several researchers have argued that non-marital separations may function as impetuses for personal growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). The process through which this is thought to occur is called stress-related growth, a phenomenon that refers to the idea that people may actually grow beyond their previous level of psychological functioning as a result of a highly stressful life event (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). This process is sometimes referred to as "posttraumatic growth," or "thriving," terms that are often used interchangeably with stress-related growth (Tedeschi et al., 1998). For a more detailed discussion and definition of this construct, please refer to chapter two.

Considering the relative paucity of literature in the area of positive outcomes and personal growth following non-marital breakups, the present inquiry focused on the kinds of changes, consequences, or both that people report as a result of this type of separation, as well as on the explanations that they provide for these changes. In selecting this focus, I hoped to make a contribution to the current understanding of these phenomena in a way that would result in practical implications for helping professionals.

Purpose of the Study

Responding to the lack of research in this area, the overall purpose of the present study was to develop a grounded theory that explains change and growth in the aftermath of non-marital romantic relationship dissolution. The research entailed meeting with people who had recently gone through the dissolution of a non-marital romantic relationship, and trying to understand their experiences from a participant-centred perspective. With this aim, I conducted 11 interviews that included, but were not limited to, what people found helpful and unhelpful after their breakup and, for those who reported changes in the aftermath, how they believe this occurred.

It is my hope that the knowledge gained through this research will ultimately help both people who are experiencing a difficult breakup, as well as the helpers who work with them. By increasing understanding of the kinds of positive outcomes that may arise as a result of this challenging occurrence, people who find themselves in the aftermath of a breakup may gain a greater sense of hope that they will be able to move through, and possibly even beyond this experience.

Demographic Characteristics

Consistent with the purpose of this study, the specific population that was chosen

for participation comprised both male and female traditionally aged university students

(18-23 years) living in Canada. Due to their relatively young age, this population tends to

be less experienced with loss than older demographic groups and may suffer the

dissolution of an important relationship with a heightened sense of isolation and

hopelessness (Toth, Stockton, & Browne, 2000). Consequently, breakups may be

particularly salient for Canadian undergraduates and may therefore serve as important

catalysts for growth.

Conceptualization of Non-Marital Relationships

Crucial to the exploration of non-marital breakups is a clear definition of non-

marital relationships. Weber (1998) asserts that these are more than casual attractions, but

less than commitments with respect to future stability and security. They tend to be

distinguished from cohabitations and marriages based on levels of support, intimacy, and

legal commitments (Overbeek, Volleburgh, Engels, & Meeus, 2003). Considering the

financial, familial, and social implications of many divorces and cohabitating partner

breakups, these relationship dissolutions are often of a different nature than non-marital

separations (McGinnis, 2003). For this reason, the divorce and cohabitation literature was

not included in the review presented in chapter two.

Studies of romantic relationships among high school students were also omitted

from the review. These dating unions tend to be shorter lived and less committed than the

romantic relationships that are experienced in adulthood (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002).

Thus, it cannot be assumed that the breakup outcomes of high school students are similar

to those of university students. It is important to note, however, that three of the relationships that are discussed in the present study began when the participants were high school students. Since these relationships continued well beyond secondary school, the accounts of these participants were included in the study. For these students, the unions that they formed during their high school years were clearly longer and involved at least a temporal commitment.

Significance of the Study

Gaining a deeper understanding of non-marital breakups within the young adult university student population is important for a number of reasons. Romantic relationship issues are among the most common concerns brought to university counselling centres (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003; McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997). Considering the prevalence of breakups, university counsellors will often encounter students who are coping with this hardship. Creating a theoretical map of young adults' experiences in the aftermath of these events may help counsellors to provide better services for these students. Also, if it is the case that personal growth may be possible through a breakup, clinicians may be able to use this possibility as a way of instilling hope in a client. Of course, people should not be expected to grow as a result of their separation or be criticized for not doing so, but this knowledge may nevertheless help a student to gather strength in the face of their distress.

Understanding the outcomes of non-marital breakups among university students is also important because non-marital relationships are often seen as a type of "trial and error" experience that contributes to discovering what may work for future relationships (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Weber, 1998). There may be some truth to the folk statement

"the best divorce is the one you get before you get married." The question that arises from this idea though is how, exactly, do people change in the aftermath of a breakup and, what, if anything, do they learn from this separation?

Research Questions

Stemming from the question posed above, there were two initial research questions that guided this investigation. The first was: *What kind of changes (if any) do students report experiencing as a result of their breakup?* The sub-questions for this item included: To the extent that the students do report changes: (a) Do these tend to be of a positive or negative nature?, and (b) Are these changes primarily intrapsychic or are they related more to external circumstances?

The second research question was: *To the extent that students do report changes as a result of their breakup: Based on the students subjective explanations of change, what is the process through which this occurred?* The sub-questions for this item included: (a) What caused these changes?, (b) What were the major events or benchmarks in the process?, and (c) What contextual factors and intervening conditions seem to have influenced this process?

Overview of the Study

This thesis report is structured into five chapters. In chapter one, I present an introduction and rationale, purpose of the study, demographic of interest, conceptual boundaries of non-marital romantic relationships, significance of the study, and initial research questions that guided the inquiry. In chapter two, I offer a review of existing literature in the area of non-marital relationship breakups and stress-related growth. Methodological and conceptual limitations of existing studies are examined in order to

provide context for the current investigation. In chapter three, the rationale for the chosen research method is presented, as well as a description of how this method was utilized in the present study. Chapter four, the findings of the study, consists of a descriptive section outlining the types of changes that participants reported, followed by a grounded theoretical model of change and personal growth in the aftermath of non-marital romantic relationship dissolution. This theory is conveyed through the presentation of three phases, as well as through conceptualization of the core category. In chapter five, this grounded theoretical model is compared to other models of growth and the major findings are discussed in the context of existing literature. Finally, this thesis includes a discussion of the implications that arise for helpers, the limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research in this area.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to young adults'

experiences in the aftermath of non-marital romantic relationship dissolution. At the

beginning of this review, I present evidence for the distress and negative outcomes that

may arise in the aftermath of this type of separation. The focus then shifts to the little that

is known about positive emotions and changes that may occur. This literature is outlined

and linked with the current understanding of stress-related growth. Finally, some of the

methodological and conceptual limitations of existing research are discussed, with

particular attention to issues that informed the design of the present study.

Distress

The aftermath of a non-marital breakup can be highly distressing for many

undergraduate students. As mentioned earlier, romantic relationship difficulties are

among the most common reasons that students seek university counselling services

(Benton et al., 2003). In a study of 282 female college students, breakups were rated as

more stressful than serious injury, illness, or both, being a victim of crime, and parental

divorce or separation (Frazier & Schauben, 1994). The stress caused by breakups has

been found to affect major aspects of students' lives, including academic performance,

life satisfaction, and mental health (Okun, Taub, & Wittmer, 1986, cited in Kaczmarek,

Backlund, & Biemer, 1990; Simpson, 1987; Weber, 1998).

Non-marital relationship dissolutions have been associated with grief responses

(Kaczmarek et al., 1990), as well as with increased levels of depression and anxiety in

both genders (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Mearns, 1991). One noteworthy study

examined the adjustment of 88 American university students who had experienced the

breakup of a non-marital relationship within the past 24 months (Chung, Farmer, Grant, Newton, Payne, Perry et al., 2003). This sample exhibited symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress that were almost as high as those found for a stress clinic patient comparison group comprised of people who had experienced either bereavement or serious personal injury. For some of these students, breakups were clearly a very difficult experience.

One relevant longitudinal study followed 1581 Dutch adults (18-34), over a period of three years, assessing them each year on a number of measures, including mental health indicators and levels of substance abuse (Overbeek et al., 2003). The authors found that, following a non-marital dissolution, the participants were at heightened risk for increased substance use, or the onset of substance abuse (cigarettes, alcohol, and/or illegal drugs). Combining this research with the distress and grief findings discussed above, this supports the notion that non-marital dissolution can not only be an extremely difficult experience, but can also lead to a variety of post-breakup difficulties.

Adjustment Following a Relationship Loss

The negative emotions and high stress levels that make breakups distressing experiences may also cause them to function as catalysts for personal growth. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about how university students manage to overcome a non-marital breakup, and, even less is understood about the potential for a breakup to stimulate personal growth. The results of a recent survey (Knox, Zusman, Kaluzny, & Cooper, 2000) show that both genders tend to report the passage of time and a new relationship as the most helpful means of getting over a breakup, but how, exactly, does this process occur? Some of the only available evidence for adjustment and personal growth is anecdotal in nature, provided by counsellors practicing in the area. The

following is the observation of a prominent clinician who has witnessed many positive changes in the university students that she has counselled: "Surviving a non-marital breakup provides opportunities for self discovery, generosity, dignity and nobility of grief and promise of recovery" (Weber, 1998, p. 269). The focus of the remainder of this literature review will be centred on these ideas of recovery and the potential for growth following breakups.

<div align="center">Towards Recovery: Coping Efforts</div>

When facing the aftermath of a breakup, students may cope with their loss in various ways. With respect to gender, women are more likely to seek social support from friends or family, whereas men tend to seek distraction in work or hobbies (Choo, Levine, & Hatfield, 1996; Knox et al., 2000; Sorenson, Russell, Harkness, & Harvey, 1993). Coping responses to a breakup can also be distinguished by the cognitive patterns that characterize them. Active coping is often associated with a problem-solving approach, whereas more passive coping tends not to involve problem-solving, but rather prolonged dwelling on and intrusive thoughts about the breakup (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002).

Through numerous reviews of the coping with loss literature, Wortman and Silver (2001) concluded that there is no single way of coping that is highly effective or associated with better outcomes. These researchers challenge the widely held idea that one must work through a loss and that behaviours designed to distract from or to avoid the loss are necessarily detrimental to an individual's outcome. Consistent with this assertion, many researchers examining stress-related growth have found that no one coping response is related to higher levels of growth (Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996;

Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001; Park et al., 1996; Park & Fenster, 2004). Park and

Fenster found that those who engaged in disengagement coping (denial and/or avoidance)

were equally likely to report growth as those who engaged in mastery coping (a more

active approach).

In the context of the present inquiry, the findings discussed above suggest that

there may be many ways of coping with a non-marital breakup that can result in positive

outcomes and, possibly, personal growth.

<div align="center">Definition of Personal Growth</div>

At this point, it is important to discuss the conceptualization of personal growth.

When this phenomenon follows in the wake of a stressful event, it is often called stress-

related growth, referring to the notion that people may grow beyond their previous level

of psychological functioning as the result of a highly stressful event (Tedeschi &

Calhoun, 2004). As mentioned earlier, terms that are often used interchangeably with

stress-related growth include "posttraumatic growth" and "thriving" (Tedeschi et al.,

1998). In the present investigation, the term "stress-related growth" seemed most suited

for the discussion of non-marital breakups, as these experiences are seen as stressors

rather than traumas, and may involve personal change that is most aptly described

through use of the term "growth." Regardless of the chosen language, however, inherent

in all of these terms is the assumption that major life stressors can, in fact, function as

impetuses for positive personal change.

Research in this domain has undoubtedly been hindered by ambiguities regarding

what exactly constitutes personal growth following a crisis (Wortman, 2004). Most

researchers, however, agree that it comprises some lasting improvement beyond previous

levels in terms of behaviour, cognition, and/or emotions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The most commonly reported types of stress-related growth consist of changes in

interpersonal relationships (e.g., increased intimacy), life perspective (e.g., different

priorities, altered life philosophy), empathy (increased ability to empathize with others),

and self perception (e.g., increased self-confidence) (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Since the

present investigation involved participant self-report during interviews, positive change

or growth was assessed through interviewees' reports of any personal changes or learning

that occurred as a result of their breakup.

<div align="center">Personal Growth and Distress</div>

With respect to the relationship between personal growth and distress, findings

suggest that these constructs may occur concurrently and that they do not fall at opposite

ends of the same continuum. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) demonstrated

that decreases in the distress of participants following the death of a family member do

not necessarily lead to personal growth. Similarly, personal growth may occur while a

person is experiencing moderate levels of distress (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001).

Working with victims of sexual assault, Frazier et al. (2001) found that some participants

report substantial personal growth within as little as a week after this traumatic event.

The changes that were reported during the first two weeks following the assault tended to

relate to increased empathy, improved interpersonal relationships, and gaining a greater

appreciation for life. It is important to note that no attempt was made to explain or

account for these findings, and they may not generalize beyond the experiences of the

few victims of sexual assault that were interviewed for the study. These findings do,

nevertheless, raise questions about the possibility that stress-related growth may begin shortly after a breakup.

The studies cited above have important implications for the current inquiry because they imply that there may be no need to impose a "minimum time since breakup" criterion for participant selection. Without evidence to suggest a need for this parameter, time since breakup was not a criterion incorporated into the present research.

Evidence for Stress-Related Growth

Research on stress-related growth indicates that many individuals who have experienced highly stressful events do report positive life changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Descriptive data derived from participants experiencing a range of stressors, including relationship dissolution, suggest that growth often occurs within three domains: the self, interpersonal relationships, and philosophy of life (Tedeschi et al., 1998).

The majority of stress-related growth research has focused on life crises such as bereavement, serious illness, injury, and victimization (see Linley & Joseph, 2004 for a review). Very few studies have examined this phenomenon in the aftermath of a non-marital breakup (for exceptions, see Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Park et al., 1996). Although I believe that, on many levels, the traumas mentioned above cannot be compared to non-marital dissolution, there remains a strong possibility that breakups can, in fact, spur personal growth.

Within the stress-related growth literature, there is evidence to support this contention. It should also be noted that no studies or articles were found to refute it. Researchers who have compared the prevalence of growth across events have found that those who experience the loss of a relationship report similar levels of growth as those

experiencing other kinds of stressors (e.g., Park et al., 1996). One study queried a sample

of university students, all of whom had recently experienced a non-marital breakup

(Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). When asked about any positive outcomes, the participants in

this study identified an average of five positive changes to every negative change, lending

support to the idea that students may indeed experience personal growth following the

loss of a romantic union.

A Sample of Current Stress-Related Growth Models

Since I have argued that stress-related growth may be experienced in the

aftermath of a breakup and that it is not simply the result of a reduction in distress levels,

it is important to now ask "how" this process works. As discussed earlier, many studies

have documented stress-related personal growth, but there has been relatively little

development pertaining to how these changes occur. At the present time, there is no

widely accepted framework that clearly connects all of the constructs and variables

involved in the study of this process (Wortman, 2004). Researchers in this field believe

that the study of stress-related growth is only in its infancy, hindered by lack of

significant theoretical development (Ty Tashiro, personal communication, March 10,

2005). Despite this discouraging overview of the field, there are some existing models of

stress-related growth that may inform research in this domain. Although they are not all

encompassing and do not explain all types of personal growth, they are nevertheless

relevant to the current investigation.

Schaefer and Moos' (1992) model of life crises and personal growth emphasizes

the importance of personal and environmental systems in influencing how a stressful

event is experienced, as well as the outcome of this hardship. Primary personal systems

include cognitive ability, temperament, health status, motivation, self-efficacy, and prior experience with similar crises. Environmental systems are comprised of social support, life stage, finances, and community assets (Schaefer & Moos, 1992). The model proposes that people will experience varying levels of stress-related growth, depending on the personal and environmental factors mentioned above. For these researchers, the nature of the stressful event is less important than the personal characteristics and ecological systems of the person experiencing it.

Schaefer and Moos' model (1992) may inform our understanding of personal growth following breakups because of the emphasis that they place on personal and environmental variables in the aftermath of a non-marital dissolution. Support for this idea comes from a study which demonstrated that college students tend to report more post breakup growth when they perceive themselves as having strong social support, a primary environmental variable in Schaefer and Moos' model (Valentiner, Holohan, & Moos, 1994).

Horowitz (1986) presented another model of response to stressors, trauma, or both that is based on the stress response sequence. This sequence consists of a stressor (internal or external event that activates the sequence), a person's response(s) to the stressor, and the consequences of these responses. Over time and with repeated exposure to a stressor, Horowitz argues that a person's response(s) may change in a way that helps them to cope more effectively with the same or similar hardships. Through the stress response sequence, a person would therefore experience personal growth to the extent that they were able to respond more effectively to subsequent stressors. Applied to non-marital breakups, Horowitz's model suggests that the experience of going through a

breakup may help people to become better prepared and more able to cope during future breakups.

Before outlining the third model, it is important to consider the assumptions inherent in the use of the term *coping more effectively*. The word *effectively* seems to imply a judgment that there exists a right way to cope with a breakup that people may move towards once they gain experience with this stressor. Given the participant-centred perspective that I have tried to assume throughout this study, this terms loses its meaning when used outside of the context of participants' subjective experiences. Thus, in subsequent sections of this thesis, I have avoided using this term outside of this context.

Janoff-Bulman's assumptive world model (1992) explains personal growth in terms of meaning making and the rebuilding of shattered assumptions. She proposes that one of the negative effects of traumatic life events is a shattering of one's fundamental assumptions about the world, including self-concept and self-efficacy. According to this model, individuals may grow when they are able to rebuild their fundamental assumptions and make meaning of a stressful experience. Through this process, a person may emerge with a new outlook in various areas of their life and with an improved ability to cope with future concerns.

With respect to non-marital breakups, there is some evidence to support Janoff-Bulman's model. One study found that changes in fundamental beliefs are commonly reported by students who report the most positive changes as a result of their breakup (Parkes, 1994). In addition, Sorenson et al. (1993) found that the participants who had been able to make the most meaning of their ended relationship tended to experience the most positive outcomes. Here, meaning was operationalized as the completeness of the

accounts provided by the participants when asked about their breakup. Since accounts are meanings organized into a story (Sorenson et al.), more complete accounts are thought to represent a greater degree of meaning making.

Methodological and Conceptual Limitations of Reviewed Studies

When we consider the methodological and conceptual limitations of the studies included in this review, important directions for the present research emerge. Most of the cited studies, for example, derived some of their hypotheses, predictions, or both from the divorce literature (e.g., Knox et al., 2000; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Many also included university participants who had ended a marriage as opposed to a non-marital relationship. Since I argue that these can be fundamentally different experiences, the present investigation examined only those participants who reported a recent non-marital separation.

Another limitation found in many studies is the way in which the researchers ask participants about growth, distress, or both. The majority of investigations have primed participants about their experiences by asking them directly about *growth* or *positive* outcomes, or about *distress* or *negative* outcomes (e.g., Knox et al., 2000; Pistole, 1995; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). When a researcher queries about particular kinds of outcomes, they may unintentionally encourage a participant to emphasize aspects of their breakup that are not personally salient for them. By asking in a less specific manner (e.g., "do you think that you have experienced any changes as a result of your breakup?") about the *outcomes* or *changes* that have been experienced, a participant may choose to speak about positive aspects, negative aspects, or both. For this reason, the latter approach was used in this investigation.

Personal Growth or Positive Illusions?

One controversy that permeates the field of stress-related growth concerns the veracity of self-reported growth. A number of researchers have produced compelling evidence to suggest that some reports of growth may not represent true changes but, instead, positive illusions that help people to cope with stressful circumstances (e.g., McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001). McFarland and Alvaro (2000), through a series of experiments, demonstrated that some of the self-reported growth in undergraduate students is actually positive illusions that act to increase their sense of self-worth. By manipulating whether participants focused on a mild or severe negative life event, the researchers found that victims of relatively severe life events tend to derogate their pre-life-event self in order to create the perception of greater self-improvement. In addition, McFarland and Alvaro had an acquaintance of a person who had gone through a relatively severe life event rate that person on certain attributes, both before and after the event. Since both ratings were done on the same day, the acquaintances completed the pre-event ratings retrospectively. The attributes that were rated comprised a 47-item scale that the researchers organized within the following five categories: "Positive Social Orientation, Wisdom and Skills, Self-Insight and Appreciativeness, Honesty and Reliability, and General Well-Being" (p. 332). In analyzing their results, McFarland and Alvaro found that the acquaintances tended to report either no improvement or negative changes in the person who had experienced the negative life event.

Despite these findings, there is substantial support for the veracity of many subjective accounts of personal growth. Contrary to McFarland and Alvaro's (2000) findings, a relatively large proportion of self-reported growth has been shown to

corroborate with reports from friends, family and close others (Park et al., 1996). Even positive illusions of growth may motivate people towards active goal attainment, leading them towards more lasting positive changes in emotions, cognitions, or behaviours (Bonanno, 2004; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). Also, those who do report growth, even if it is positive illusions, tend to be better adjusted (psychologically, emotionally and/or physically) than those who report no growth (Affleck, Tennen, & Rowe, 1991; McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997, cited in Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004). Considering this finding, researchers currently studying in the field of stress-related growth might benefit from assuming a more participant-centred approach, adjusting their research criteria to better reflect the subjective reports of the people that they study.

Although it is important to be aware of the growth or positive illusions controversy, I do not believe that it is a vital issue for the present qualitative investigation. The focus of the present research is not on the validation of any reports of positive change but, rather, on the subjective experiences of the participants. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) suggest, "Within the framework of qualitative studies and their guiding assumptions, the debate over the degree to which growth is illusory or real becomes less meaningful" (p. 192).

The Need for Qualitative Investigations

The studies reviewed up to this point have been quantitative in design, driven by a priori hypotheses and using statistical analysis to test data against these pre-formed predictions. Even researchers who collect qualitative data have coded it in a manner that facilitates statistical analysis (e.g., Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Diverging from this trend, I believe that the study of non-marital breakup outcomes could be enriched considerably

by the introduction of qualitative methods. In support of this contention, Tedeschi et al. (1998) suggest that unstructured interviews and qualitative analysis of accounts of experience are methodologies that are ideally suited for the study of stress-related growth. Saakvitne, Tennen, and Affleck (1998) extend this idea, suggesting that researchers should not attempt to operationalize the construct of stress-related growth until more descriptive and qualitative work has been done.

Consistent with these suggestions, the present investigation adopts a qualitative design of this nature, beginning without hypotheses or explicit predictions. Instead of first hypothesizing about the nature of the experience of a non-marital breakup, I let participant stories generated through interviews guide the formation of hypotheses and, eventually, of theory.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology used in the present research, including background information regarding the chosen research method, grounded theory, as well as a rationale for the use of this approach. This is followed by a discussion of sampling criteria and procedure, as well as participant demographics. Interview construction and methods are also considered. The chapter finishes with an outline of the criteria used in order to address both the rigour and quality of the research project.

Research Design and Rationale

Grounded Theory: A Background

Of the many possible qualitative paradigms, grounded theory methodology seemed to fit most closely with my chosen research objectives. The grounded theory approach was originally developed by two sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967). They derived the name *grounded theory* from the process of generating theory that is grounded in data. The roots of this perspective can be traced to symbolic interactionism (Dey, 1999), a theory which assumes that social processes can only be comprehended through understanding the meanings that are experienced by participants, within a particular context (Schwandt, 1994). In symbolic interactionism, the researcher is seen as a participant in the world of his or her participants, trying to gain understanding from their perspective.

Before expanding on the details of grounded theory, it is important to note that, since their initial publication, Glaser and Strauss have diverged in a number of important ways (Corbin & Holt, 2005). Of particular importance to the present research is the

notion of the constructivist versus emergent view of theory development. According to

Glaser (1992), the task of the researcher is to discover the one truth that is embedded in

the research data. Conversely, Strauss, in staying consistent with his intellectual roots in

symbolic interactionism, avoids an objective, positivistic view of phenomena (Charmaz,

2005). Instead, he tends to focus on meaning, action, and process. Strauss and Corbin

(1998) argue that there are many ways of generating theory from a particular set of data.

Their stance on research falls within the contextualist epistemology (Madill, Jordan, &

Shirley, 2000), an approach that assumes that the researcher imposes meaning on the data

and constructs his/her analysis. This crucial theoretical difference translates into Strauss

and Corbin's emphasis on analytical tools, such as diagrams and posing questions, and on

Glaser's rejection of these methods (Corbin & Holt, 2005).

With regards to this issue, my fundamental epistemological assumptions are more

aligned with Strauss and Corbin's constructivist view of theory development. I believe

that there exists no universal method for deriving theory from data and that any theory is

necessarily the result of the construction of inter-subjective meanings. Also, as a

beginning researcher, the analytical tools that Strauss and Corbin (1998) offer were

appealing in their ability to help to focus and guide my analysis throughout the research

process. For these reasons, I chose to conduct my study according to the grounded theory

approach that is outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1998).

In addition to epistemological considerations, the grounded theory method is

ideally situated to make substantial contributions in areas where limited research has been

compiled (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Since little is presently known about the topic of

adjustment and growth following non-marital breakups, grounded theory methodology

was well suited for this investigation. It allowed for detailed and information-rich data generation, making the present study a potentially fertile source for future research directions and ideas in the area of non-marital relationship dissolution.

Sample and Population

Theoretical Sampling

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory studies are "carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme." (p. 10). In order to achieve this aim, a sampling technique called theoretical sampling is employed. This approach uses the developing concepts as a means of providing direction for data collection (Corbin & Holt, 2005). As a study ensues, the grounded theory researcher seeks sites, people, and events that will enable further comparisons of data. Grounded theory investigations are therefore characterized by the continuous interplay of data gathering, data analysis, and the selection of participants who are able to advance theory development. This constant comparison allows the process to change and evolve as the research progresses.

Sampling Procedure

Despite the fact that sampling will tend to become more focused as research advances, it is important for a researcher to set initial guidelines that will provide them with a sense of direction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The sample for the present inquiry was drawn from the student population at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Prior to conducting this study, ethical approval was obtained through the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University. Throughout all stages of the research,

participants were treated according to principles one through six in the Canadian

Counselling Association's Code of Ethics, section for researchers (Section E).

After obtaining ethical approval, a number of written announcements were posted

on campus, and online announcements were made on the Simon Fraser University

Website. Between December, 2005 and July, 2006, 36 people responded to the

announcements, expressing an interest in participating in the study. I contacted these

individuals in chronological order of their inquiries, arranging for initial phone

consultations. At this point, participants were selected based on a number of pre-

determined criteria. From the 36 respondents, the final sample comprised a total of 11

participants.

Criteria for Participation

As discussed in chapter two, in order to participate in the study a participant must

have reported having recently undergone the breakup of a non-marital, non-cohabitating

romantic relationship. To expand on the word "recently," there was no restriction for

minimum time since breakup. With respect to a maximum time limit, a period had to be

chosen that would allow for any changes to occur while, at the same time, ensuring that

participants had not forgotten the details and outcomes of their breakup. Although

somewhat arbitrary, the most common time used in prior research has been one year (e.g.

Drew, Heesacker, Frost, & Oelke, 2004; Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003;

Pistole, 1995). As such, the present research adopted this one year maximum time since

breakup criterion.

In addition to these guidelines, criteria regarding characteristics of the past

romantic relationship were also necessary. Participants who dated their ex-partner only

casually and for a short period of time, for example, would not be expected to have the same experiences in the aftermath of a breakup as those who dated for a longer period of time. As such, the minimum period of dating for the present study was arbitrarily set at six months.

In addition to relationship length, an important characteristic of a past romantic relationship is whether the ex-couple was sexually intimate. Sexual involvement has a significant and positive effect on relationship stability and is likely to intensify a person's commitment to a relationship (Simpson, 1987). Breakup outcomes could therefore be expected to differ among participants who were sexually involved with their ex-partner and those who were not. For this reason, the participants in the present study were required to have answered "yes" to the question of whether they were sexually involved with their ex-partner during their relationship. This phrase seemed to be the most appropriate because, among North American university students, the term "sexual involvement" is most often associated with either oral sex or sexual intercourse (Knox, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001). In order to prevent respondents from feeling uncomfortable with this question, I indicated that it was for selection purposes only and that they would not be asked about their sexual experiences during the research interview. Nevertheless, participants were not discouraged from speaking about this topic if they choose to broach it during the interview.

I realize that by imposing this sexual involvement criterion, I excluded those who did not engage in sex before marriage and those who, for any other reason, did not have a sexual relationship with their partner. Although this may impose a cultural bias into my sampling, I believe that this criterion was necessary. As discussed above, sexually

involved relationships seem to be qualitatively different from those that do not involve some level of sexual intimacy. Unfortunately, an investigation of these differences with respect to breakup outcomes is beyond the scope of this study.

In addition to the criteria discussed above, I chose to interview an equal number of men and women. As mentioned earlier, males and females tend to cope differently with a breakup (Choo et al., 1996), and women tend to report more positive growth than men in the aftermath of this event (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Considering these potential differences, an equal gender ratio was expected to allow for a more complete exploration of both men and women's experiences.

Participant Characteristics

From the 36 people who responded to the announcements for the current investigation, a final sample of 11 students was recruited for interviews. This group was comprised of six women and five men. One additional woman was interviewed because, towards the end of the study, I was not expecting to be able to find a fifth male participant. For this reason, I interviewed an additional woman before I was able to recruit a fifth man for the final interview, bringing the total number of participants to 11. The sixth interview was coded and included in this study in order to provide further verification sources for the emerging theory.

Overall, the selection and interviewing process occurred from December, 2005 to July, 2006. The eight month time span was used in order to allow for theoretical sampling and concurrent data analysis. Please refer to Table 1 on the following page for a listing of participant demographics. The actual names of participants have been omitted and replaced with pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Length of time in Relationship	Length of time since breakup (at the time of the interview)
Hannah	F	22	Caucasian	36 months	2.5 months
Ron	M	23	Asian	42 months	11 months
Ben	M	19	Indo-Canadian	18 months	9 months
Will	M	22	Caucasian	42 months	3.5 months
Lillian	F	23	Caucasian	9 months	2 months
Arleen	F	19	Caucasian	42 months	1.5 months
Anna	F	21	Asian	6 months	1.5 months
Beth	F	21	Asian	7 months	5 months
James	M	24	Asian	48 months	3 months
Sofia	F	19	Caucasian	11.5 months	1.5 months
Warren	M	20	Caucasian	30 months	4.5 months

As shown in *Table 1*, the age of the participants ranged from 19 to 24, with an average of 21.2 years. The range of the dissolved romantic relationship varied from six months to four years, with an average of 2.2 years. At the time of the interview, participants reported having been separated from their ex-partner for a period ranging between 1.5 and 11 months, with a mean of 4.1 months. All of the participants said that their ex-partner had been a member of the opposite sex.

Interview Methodology

Interview Construction

Within the present inquiry, I used a semi-structured interview format to allow for coverage of all areas relevant to the study while, at the same time, providing flexibility for the unique experiences that each participant brings to the research setting. I chose not to use a fully-structured format because this method can result in responses that are more the result of interviewer construction than of respondent perception (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Based on the purpose of the investigation and the initial research questions, I chose five interview questions to guide the overall structure and format of the process. These were concerned with the participant's experience in the aftermath of their breakup, whether they noted any changes arising as a result of their breakup, and, if they did, how they thought these changes arose. Please refer to Appendix A for the complete interview schedule.

In order to bolster the effectiveness of the initial interview questions, I began by conducting pilot interviews with two participants who satisfied the criteria for inclusion in the study. After these pilots, the participants were given a written copy of the interview schedule. They were asked for their general comments about the questions, as well as whether they found any of them to be confusing, ambiguous, or leading. Since the participants expressed no confusion or dissatisfaction with the interview schedule, it was not edited or revised beyond the pilot interviews. This allowed for one of the pilot interviewees to be included as a participant in the overall analysis. The second interview, due to unintelligible sound on the audiotape, was not used beyond the pilot stage.

Interview Procedure

Once a participant completed the phone consultation and was found to meet all of the required criteria for participation, they were asked to choose an interview time that was convenient for them. All interviews were conducted at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby campus. As part of the informed consent form and procedure, each participant was also asked for their permission to record an audiotape of the session. All participants agreed and every interview session was taped.

During these meetings, the entire interview schedule was included, with participants being asked questions in the indicated order. Additional information was obtained through open-ended questions and through the use of prompts included under each question. Please refer to Appendix A for a list of prompts for each question. Some examples of open-ended questions that were used include the following: "I'm wondering what that was like for you," "you said that you were emotionally all over the place and I'm wondering what that means for you," "I'm curious about how you were feeling at that time." Use of these techniques helped to ensure that my perception of the participant's message was as close as possible to their own. When asking the participants questions about outcomes of their breakup, I tried to avoid leading or loaded questions, including any reference to growth following a breakup, as well as anything pertaining to distress or negative consequences (e.g., "I am wondering what the positive outcomes of your breakup have been"). By using this approach, I hoped to decrease the amount that I primed participants or nudged them towards my personal biases.

Since grounded theory research involves constant comparison, this methodology required me to adjust my interviewing and observation styles as the research progressed

and the analysis becomes more focused (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Certain questions or initial areas of focus were dropped, refined, or expanded as concept and category development continued. Consistent with this approach, my interview schedule evolved over the course of the investigation. I asked the same five core questions to each participant but began to expand on certain prompts in order to aid in my analysis and category development. For example, one initial prompt I used was: "Can you tell me about the relationship that you currently have with your ex-partner." Once I began to develop the category pertaining to contact with an ex-partner, I continued to use this prompt but also expanded on it with the following inquiry: "Some of the interviewees in this study said that they found it difficult to maintain regular contact with their ex-partner. Do you find this or has your experience been different?"

By expanding on certain prompts, I am aware that the probability of forcing interpretations through leading or loaded responses increased. I tried to minimize this interview pitfall by asking the initial prompt first. When I followed with an additional question, I also made a consistent effort to pose it in a tentative and curious way, rather than in an authoritative or suggestive manner. From student responses, I noticed that many were able to express how their experience had differed from what was suggested within the prompts. This divergence helped me both to improve my understanding of an individual student's experience, as well as to build variation and complexity into my developing theory.

Data Analysis and Theory Building

Coding

As mentioned earlier, the grounded theory method requires that data collection, coding, and analysis be carried out simultaneously. By coding, I am referring to the procedures outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1998). These techniques involve breaking down the data from interviews and notes, generating concepts and categories, and reassembling the categories back together in the form of a theory that clearly delineates their relationship to each other. The following three sections present an outline of grounded theory coding procedures, comprised of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Although they are presented as discrete points in the analysis, they do not always progress in a step-wise manner (Corbin & Holt, 2005). Within a single session of analysis, a researcher often moves between different types of coding.

Open Coding

In open coding, the researcher's aim is to identify concepts and categories directly from the raw data and to determine the properties and dimensions of each category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within every interview transcription and field note, the data are broken down into incidents. Comparisons are made from incident to incident, allowing for the generation of concepts. As the coding progresses, incidents are compared to concepts and subsequent categories to generate development of the properties and dimensions.

For maximal number and variety of concepts, Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend line-by-line analysis. Although the most detailed and time-intensive type of

analysis, this technique was used for the present study because Strauss and Corbin recommend it for beginners who are learning the coding procedures for the first time.

In preparation for open coding, I transcribed each interview tape verbatim, within a week of conducting the interview. The transcription was verified by listening to the tape a second time and each transcript was re-read several times before concepts were generated. As I read a transcript, I asked myself questions such as: What is going on here? What is this participant trying to say? I recorded my initial impressions and referred back to them throughout the coding process.

I began open coding by creating wide margins on my interview transcripts and writing concepts directly on the paper. In choosing my concepts, I followed the suggestions of Charmaz (1994a), trying to code for "processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences rather than for topics." (p. 81). Consistent with this approach, I chose words or phrases that identified in as succinct a manner as possible the process that the data in question indicated. The names that I gave to concepts were often constructed using words or phrases that conveyed action. Examples include "comparing to others," "protecting self," and "eliciting emotional support." Where appropriate, I used the exact words of the participants, creating in-vivo codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Next, concepts were compared to each other by asking if they pertained to the same or a different phenomenon (constant comparison). Those that shared conceptual similarities were grouped together. One such grouping, for example, was constructed when several transcripts contained incidents where participants compared themselves to other people who faced what they viewed as more difficult circumstances. Once I had

grouped these conceptually related incidents together, I was then able to begin category development in this area.

From the concept groups that were formed, categories were developed and given more conceptual and abstract names than the concepts. The concepts "noting single status," "implications for self," and "taking stock," for example, were all associated with strategies used to assess the initial implications of the breakup. Once these were grouped together, they formed a category that was named *surveying the damage*.

After the categories were developed, open coding also involved determining the properties and dimensions of each. Properties are defined as "attributes or characteristics pertaining to a category" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 61). The process of generating these attributes was crucial because it allowed for further development of the categories, as well as for the creation of subcategories. In many instances, the properties that were developed in the present investigation fell along certain continua. The characteristics of frequency and timing, for example, both pertained to the category *grieving*, and appeared to have a range of possible dimensions. The frequency of *grieving* ranged from shorter to longer term, and the timing varied from before to after the breakup. The development of these properties helped both to more fully enrich this category, and also to account for a greater amount of variation in participant experience.

Memos

Beginning at the outset of open coding and continuing through until the end of the sorting and writing process, I recorded memos on index cards. According to Charmaz (1994b), "through memo-writing, the researcher takes his or her emerging ideas apart, checks them, and outlines further data collection" (p. 85). Memos are also important

because they provide an audit trail that accounts for and delineates the researcher's analysis of their data (Corbin & Holt, 2005).

In the present inquiry, my memo-writing was comprised of code notes, theoretical notes, and operational notes, as described in Strauss and Corbin (1998). The code notes contained the actual products of the three types of grounded theory coding. The theoretical notes were more abstract and conceptual, containing my ideas about categories and their properties, dimensions, relationships, and processes. In operational memos, I recorded directions for future work and outstanding questions that I had. These were designed to aid in later sampling, interviewing, and analyzing sessions. Weekly review of operational memos helped to ensure that I followed new ideas and expanded interview prompts in a manner that facilitated ongoing category development.

Axial Coding

Once open coding had facilitated initial category and property development, I was able to begin to discern the complex relationships between various categories and between a given category and its subcategories. This activity is called axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The primary goal during this phase of analysis is to construct, through asking questions and making comparisons, how the categories relate to each other.

The Paradigm Model

The relationships between categories, and categories and their subcategories were conceptualized and structured according to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) paradigm model. This model enables a researcher to think systematically about his or her data and to conceptualize complex relationships within it. It posits that, for a given phenomenon

(category), one must consider the context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences that pertain to it.

The context is the specific set of properties within which a category is embedded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The intervening conditions are the broad factors that act either to facilitate or constrain the strategies that are taken in a given context. The action/interaction strategies refer to how a particular phenomenon is handled or managed, pertaining both to what participants do and fail to do. Charmaz (2005) highlights the idea that we cannot assume that anything labelled as an action/interaction strategy is automatically an intentional action, carried out with a specific purpose. Thus, in the present investigation, the term "strategies" denotes both explicit tactical schemes, as well as habits that may be unintentional and unnoticed by the participant. These action/interaction strategies lead to the final component of the paradigm model, the consequence(s). It is important to note that, in a given theory, consequences of a particular phenomenon may become intervening conditions for a different phenomenon.

During axial coding, I compared each category and its properties to the paradigm model. I asked questions about how they fit with each other and returned to my data often in order to find evidence that either supported or refuted my ideas. The aim here was not solely to negate certain ideas or questions that I was developing, but also to add variation and depth of understanding to my analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For each negative or alternative incident (one that did not fit), I asked myself more questions, often leading to further refinement of a category, its properties and dimensions, or both. An example of this process is provided in the paragraph below.

When I considered the category, *connecting to self*, I asked myself whether it was a context, intervening condition, an action/interaction strategy, or a consequence of strategies taken. With this specific question in mind, I returned to my data to find incidents pertaining to this category. Through this process, I was able to decide that *connecting to self* was a context of the phenomenon *moving beyond*. The strategy of *focusing on self* was embedded in this context.

<div align="center">*Selective Coding*</div>

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define the next phase, selective coding, as "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (p. 116). It is through these interrelated steps that the developing theory is elaborated and expanded and that the core category is chosen.

The Core Category

I began selective coding by thinking about the central phenomenon of the study and by trying to create a narrative that adequately described it. Here, I sought to explain and account for the factors involved in change and personal growth in the aftermath of a breakup. As I continued to write and to ask myself conceptually-oriented questions, the story became more abstract and theoretical. Review of this developing theory helped in the selection of the core category for the study, *moving-self-forward*.

In grounded theory research, the core category conceptualizes the basic process addressed by the theory, providing an integrative framework for analytical development (Dey, 1999). When choosing this category, I posed the questions outlined in Dey's publication. These included whether a given category was central to the data, was a

recurrent pattern in the data, had a great deal of explanatory power, and whether it was sensitive to variations in the data.

After the core category for the present inquiry was chosen, it was developed in terms of its properties, and other categories were integrated into the theory using a similar process to that used in axial coding. Through the paradigm model, all categories and their properties were related to the core category and relationships were delineated. Once again, this involved forming questions and ideas and returning to the data to find evidence to support or refute them. I also used this process to develop categories that, at this point, were still poorly developed.

The "paradigmatic relationships" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124) of categories and their subcategories were changed many times over the course of the analysis to yield a final theory that offered the best possible fit with the central storyline of the research. In this instance, the process entailed the conceptualization of three interrelated and cyclical phases.

Theoretical Saturation

Since grounded theory research involves coding and analyzing data while engaged in sampling, a researcher must follow certain guidelines when determining the point when it is appropriate to end data collection (Corbin & Holt, 2005). The criteria used for deciding when to discontinue sampling according to a particular category is the theoretical saturation of that category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Saturation occurs when the data being generated do not allow for further development of the properties or dimensions of a category. The most important categories that a researcher should aim towards saturating are the core theoretical categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In my

investigation, this involved the core category (*moving-self-forward*), as well as the

categories (e.g., *romantic relationship dissolution, grieving, focusing on self*) that fit

within the framework surrounding it.

Memo Sorting and Integration

Later in the analytical process, the accumulated memos are sorted. Here, a

researcher groups those that elucidate the same category and, when analyzing a process,

sorts them into phases of that process (Charmaz, 1994b). I began to sort my memos after

the seventh interview, organizing and ordering them in a way that provided a theoretical

outline and prepared me for theory-writing. In preparation for this process, I spread the

index cards containing my memos across a large area of floor. Next, memos were

grouped according to similar categories or properties that they addressed. Using these

groups, I then arranged the index cards across the floor in a manner that reflected their

conceptualized relationships. This allowed me to further construct connections and to

develop relationships between various categories. I continued to sort and re-arrange in

this manner beyond the eleventh interview and, eventually, gathered the cards in a

sequence that was used to write the theory. This sequence consisted of three separate

piles that I conceptualized as the three phases of the theory that is presented in the

following chapter.

Evaluating the Research: Rigour and Quality Checks

In quantitative research, the criteria that are typically used to judge the rigour of a

study include internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Corbin &

Holt, 2005). Since the goals of a qualitative study tend to differ substantially from those

of a quantitative study, this leads to important implications for the evaluation of grounded

theory research (Gall et al., 2003). Many of the criteria mentioned above lose much of their meaning when applied to a qualitative research situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Madill et al., 2000).

An example of this tension includes the primarily quantitative concept of generalizability, a term that refers to the ability of a theory or a set of findings to apply to a wider target population that is represented by a given sample. Grounded theory studies can rarely be generalized in this way because they typically include only a small number of participants, too few for generalization, but enough to allow for the formation of substantive theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Considering the objectives and goals of a grounded theory study, however, the importance of forming a coherent explanation for the phenomenon of interest assumes precedence over any concerns of generalizing beyond the study sample. In this situation, it would be inappropriate to evaluate a grounded theory study according to principles of generalizability.

In response to issues of rigour in qualitative studies, qualitative researchers have identified standards that are more appropriate for naturalistic inquiries (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is important to note, however, that a great deal of controversy still exists regarding what constitutes rigour in qualitative research (Rolfe, 2004). For the purpose of the present investigation, I chose to focus on standards that are commonly applied to current grounded theory research (Corbin & Holt, 2005; Finlay, 2002; Morrow & Smith, 1995). The following section provides an outline of the concept of trustworthiness. This is followed by an explanation of how trustworthiness was verified in the present investigation, with particular attention being paid to the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Trustworthiness

In grounded theory research, the term *theoretical sensitivity* approximates the meaning of trustworthiness (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It refers to "a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data." (p. 41). In the current inquiry, trustworthiness was bolstered through the use of guidelines presented in Finlay (2002) and Guba and Lincoln (1989).

In order to satisfy the need for prolonged engagement or immersion in the culture of university student breakups, I have become actively engaged in this area through numerous personal and professional experiences. On an individual level, I have been a part of this culture and have personally experienced several non-marital breakups. Professionally, I chose to complete my practicum in counselling psychology at a university counselling centre. Through this experience, I had the opportunity to work with many students who sought counselling services in the aftermath of a non-marital breakup. Finally, as part of this investigation, I have conducted a thorough literature review in the area of non-marital separations among young adults.

According to Finlay (2002), the integrity and trustworthiness of a study can be bolstered through the recording of a reflective diary throughout the research process. In accordance with this assumption, I maintained a journal over the course of this study, recording entries on a regular basis. Through this writing, I explored my personal process, reactions, and impressions, helping me both to remain more reflexive about my position as researcher, and to prevent biases from entering into the analysis.

As an additional means of strengthening the trustworthiness of my findings, the current investigation incorporated the use of a *peer debriefing strategy* (Guba & Lincoln,

1989; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Consistent with the

quantitative/qualitative issue discussed earlier, the purpose of this debriefing was not to

establish reliability by demonstrating the repeatability and consistency of my findings.

Madill et al. (2000) argue that this type of reliability criterion is only appropriate for

studies conducted within a realist framework that emphasizes a single truth(s) that is

discovered. Since I am aligned with a constructivist view of the research process, I

employed a peer debriefing strategy for the purpose of using another person's perspective

to review and think more critically about the meaning that I had ascribed to my

transcripts.

In preparation for the debriefing, I created two separate lists, one containing 39

participant quotes, drawn equally from all transcripts, and the other containing a list of 24

concepts that I had assigned to those 39 quotes. These lists were given to a peer, in this

case, a fellow graduate student who was also in the process of completing a qualitative

study. Drawing from the 24 concepts that were provided, she assigned one or more

code(s) to each of the 39 quoted passages. After she had coded the participant quotes, we

reviewed the lists together and discussed any areas where our coding had differed.

This debriefing discussion was extremely valuable, as it allowed the emerging

analyses to be challenged, and alternate explanations to be explored. This led, eventually,

to the refinement and further development of some of the categories that had been

generated. The following is an example of this process: In a couple of quotes, my peer

debriefing partner included the category *managing residual pain,* when I had not. As she

explained her understanding and rationale, I began to think that the properties and

dimensions that I had developed for this category were too narrow to capture the range of

experience reported by the interviewees. As a result, I expanded this category, ultimately leading to the development of one additional subcategory.

Credibility/Dependability of Findings

Often categorized under the umbrella of trustworthiness, the credibility or dependability of a study is concerned with the believability of the findings (Sharts-Hopko, 2002), and the extent to which the data speaks to the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In addressing these criteria, I engaged in a number of activities, including the use of tools to account for my findings, as well as the use of methods to better discern participant perspectives.

To provide an "audit trail" of my research process, I was committed to continuous record keeping. This consisted of all memos that were taken throughout the study, tracking the evolution of my ideas and of the developing theory. When considering the thoroughness of my memo-writing, I followed the guidelines of Guba and Lincoln (1989), who recommend that records be detailed enough in order to permit a review of both the processes and products of a given investigation.

Participant Perspective

Some researchers argue that, since the construct of credibility concerns whether the results of the study are credible or believable from the perspective of the participants, only the participants can bolster a study's credibility (Madill et al., 2000). In response to this assertion, I incorporated four practices which allowed me to check with participants at various points throughout the research process: providing a summary of the interview, asking about any impact that the interview may have had, incorporating a member check, and including the use of participant quotes in the final theory.

At the end of each interview, I provided interviewees with a verbal summary of what I viewed as the predominant storyline or narrative in their account. This comprised my understanding of the outcomes that participants experienced following their breakup, as well as the manner in which these outcomes arose. After I spoke about this, I gave participants the opportunity to respond to my summary, asking them to make any changes or to add any details that would allow me to better understand their perspective. In response, many participants elaborated on their view of the main themes in their story, allowing me to check my comprehension of the meaning of their accounts.

Since I believe that as a researcher, I am not an objective observer but, rather, play an active role in the co-construction of meaning, I chose to ask participants about any impact that the interview may have had on them. After they had responded to the summary, I asked each interviewee the following question: "I am wondering what, if any, impact you think that this conversation has had on you." All participants recognized and shared some form of impact. Their answers were surprisingly consistent and converged around the theme of gaining clarity. Nine of the participants spoke of the effect of talking about their breakup "out loud." Most said that, through this meeting, they were able to experience greater clarity surrounding their pre-existing ideas. One man, for example, noted the following when asked about any impact that the interview had on him: "I knew that this breakup taught me loads of stuff but saying it all out loud really made me realize how much I've learned. I can see it all in my head." This account is consistent with the notion of the interview not as a neutral and one-sided account of events but, rather, as a conversation that is coauthored by both the interviewer and interviewee.

Another important method for increasing the credibility and dependability of findings is through the use of member checks (Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In grounded theory research, this usually involves having participants review the emerging theory in order to check whether categories, interpretations, and theory development are consistent with their experience (Dey, 1999). In the present inquiry, a narrative summary of my initial theory was sent to participants, explaining the purpose of the check, and inviting them to contact me with any feedback that they were willing to provide. Since the theory was general and non confidential in nature, it was sent through electronic mail. This ensured that the participants, all frequent internet users with computer accessibility, had a convenient means of responding.

In the three weeks that ensued, only three participants replied to my query. The interviewees that responded stated that the theory was consistent with their experiences. No suggestions for adding to or modifying the theory were provided.

The final method used to bolster the credibility and dependability of the findings was the use of direct participant quotations. Throughout the research process, quotes were selected and catalogued according to conceptual similarities. As category and subcategory development deepened, passages were often shuffled within the catalogue.

In choosing the quotes that would be included in the final thesis, I made an effort to select statements equally from all of the transcripts. This ensured that the voices of all participants would be present in my writing, and allowed for approximately equal gender representation within the thesis. When selecting among several relevant passages, I attempted to keep my research questions in the forefront, considering how the data related to them. If two quotations from the same participant were similar, I asked which

of the two retained more of the "essential character" of the theme, category, or both in consideration (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997, p. 193). Considered together, these procedures ultimately helped to bolster the credibility of the study.

Section Summary

In this chapter, I provided a rationale for the use of the grounded theory method, as well as an outline of this methodology, based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) guidelines. An overview of data collection and analysis was also included. The chapter finished with a discussion of the quality checks that were taken in order to increase the rigour and trustworthiness of the present investigation.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

A GROUNDED THEORETICAL MODEL OF CHANGE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

IN THE AFTERMATH OF NON-MARITAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

DISSOLUTION

This chapter, the results of the study, is divided into two sections. First, a

description of the changes that the participants reported experiencing as a result of their

breakup is presented, followed by a grounded theoretical model of change and personal

growth in the aftermath of non-marital romantic relationship dissolution. The former

section is mostly descriptive in nature, whereas the latter moves beyond description to

involve conceptualization and theory.

A Summary of Reported Changes

This section addresses the answers that participants provided after being asked the

following question: Do you think that you have experienced any changes as a result of

the breakup? Combining the accounts of the 11 interviewees, 69 changes were reported,

with 64 being of a positive nature and five of a negative nature. This proportion is similar

to that obtained by Tashiro and Frazier (2003).

Of the reported positive changes, 51 were intrapsychic in nature. By intrapsychic,

I refer to shifts that occurred within a person's mind or self. These included references to

learning, and changes in personal traits, abilities, and beliefs. The remaining 13 positive

changes were primarily externally-oriented, not entailing shifts within the mind or self.

These encompassed changes outside of the participant, pertaining to external

circumstances, relationships, or both, such as reconnecting with old friends or having

more free time. Please see Table 2 for a tabular representation of commonly reported positive changes.

With respect to the five negative changes that were shared during the interviews, these were reported by participants who also identified positive changes as arising from their breakup. Whereas the positive shifts tended to be depicted as relatively enduring, the participants described the negative changes as more temporary. Among the five that were reported, three involved feeling initial anxiety around the formation of new romantic relationships, and two related to having temporary doubts of being able to trust new romantic partners after the experience of infidelity. Please see Table 2 on the following page for tabular representation of these negative changes.

Although one might not expect the trust difficulties caused by the experience of infidelity to be transitory in nature, they may have been reported in this manner because the participants were providing retrospective accounts of their breakup experiences. Since they had ended their relationship months before, the newly emerging positive changes seemed to be the most salient for the students at the time of the interviews. Of the participants who reported changes as a result of their breakup, all chose a positive change when asked the following question: "Out of all the changes that you mentioned, which has had the most significant impact on your life? Because?" As a result, the grounded theory that I articulate in the following section is focused primarily on changes of a positive nature.

Table 2

Commonly Reported Positive and Negative Changes

Type of change	Examples
Intrapsychically-oriented positive changes	Increased inner strength and ability to handle future stressful events
	Increased self-confidence
	Feeling more independent/free
	Learning relevant to future romantic relationships
	Gaining maturity/an expanded perspective
	Increased self-awareness
	More focused on school/career
Externally-oriented positive changes	Improved relationships with friends and/or family
	An increase in free time
	Saving extra money
Negative changes	Anxiety around "finding someone new"
	Anxiety related to the prospect of getting to know a new partner in the more intimate way that they knew their ex-partner
	Doubts around trusting a new partner after experiencing infidelity

Change and Growth in the Aftermath of Non-marital Romantic Relationship Dissolution

In this section, I present a grounded theory of personal growth in the aftermath of

non-marital relationship dissolution, constructed from participant interviews, as well as

from field notes that I recorded throughout the research process. It begins with a

discussion of the theory format, followed by a clarification of key terms. Next, the

grounded theory is presented, organized into three interrelated phases: *Experiencing a*

loss, pulling apart, and *moving beyond.* Once each of these is outlined, I describe the core

category of the theory, *moving-self-forward.*

I chose to conceptualize through the use of phases because these phenomena are

not linear but, rather, cyclical and concurrent. As Cochran (1990) explains, "there is no

radical discontinuity between phases. One blends into another, is incorporated and

transformed into another" (p. 179). Consistent with these characteristics, it is important to

remember that participants varied a great deal in the time frame within which they

experienced various phenomena. They may have entered into a phase or moved out of

one at any point leading up to (for those who initiated the breakup) or following their

relationship dissolution. To allow for the range of temporal variation demonstrated in

participant accounts, I often use terms that are more general and undifferentiated when

describing time frames. I adopted the phrase "aftermath" of the breakup, for example, to

denote any time between the breakup and the time of the interview.

Clarification of Key Terms

Before outlining the grounded theory of change and personal growth in the

aftermath of non-marital dissolution, it is important to define and clarify some of the

terms that are used throughout the narrative. By recovery, I refer to a process that

involves resolving emotional consequences of the breakup and gaining an increased sense

of closure (the meaning of closure is elaborated below). In this theory, recovery was seen

more as a process rather than an outcome. This is due to the fact that complete recovery

did not seem necessary for growth and movement beyond the breakup to occur. The term

closure, as used in the present inquiry, means gaining a greater acceptance of the

breakup, often described by participants as a subjective feeling of being "over" an ex-

partner. Closure was conceptualized as comprising one component of the recovery process.

Finally, "movement beyond the breakup" is a phrase which refers broadly to both the process and outcome of any positive change(s) or growth that arise beyond recovery from a breakup. Whereas recovery involves returning to pre-breakup levels of emotion, cognition, and/or behaviour, movement beyond denotes any new positive changes within these domains that were not present before the breakup. Since movement beyond can occur even under the condition of only partial recovery, the processes involved in recovery and movement beyond a breakup are at least partially independent from each other. Both of these phenomena are articulated in the framework that follows.

The Grounded Theoretical Model

In this section, I present a grounded theory that explains how change and personal growth can arise through the experience of a non-marital breakup. Within each of the three phases of the theory, categories and subcategories are organized according to Strauss and Corbin's paradigm model (1998), as discussed in chapter two of this paper. For heuristic purposes, the connections and relationships between categories and subcategories are presented in tabular form at the beginning of the model, as well as at the beginning of each phase within the model. The tables were included before the text in order to serve as advanced organizers, affording the reader a visual conceptualization of the model before they are presented with more detailed narrative information. Please see Table 3 on the following two pages for tabular representation of all three phases.

Table 3

The Categories and Subcategories of the Three Phases.

Phase	Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Phase 1: Experiencing a loss	Context	Romantic relationship dissolution	Multiple losses
	Intervening Conditions	Initiator status	
	Strategies/Actions	Surveying the damage	
	Consequences	Discerning finality	
Phase 2: Pulling apart	Context	Grieving	Anger Distress
	Intervening Conditions	Experience Level of contact Perceived rules Time	
	Strategies/Actions	Managing emotions	Cognitive strategies Behavioural strategies
		Making sense	Asking questions Forming attribution(s)
		Connecting socially	Presence of others Eliciting emotional support
	Consequences	Initial changes	Learning Lifestyle Finding freedom

Phase	Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Phase 3: Moving beyond	Context	Connecting to self	
	Intervening Conditions	Initial changes Distress reduction	
	Strategies/Actions	Focusing on self	Self-reflection
		Seeking novelty	
	Consequences	Changing sense of self	Self-confidence Awareness

Phase 1: Experiencing a Loss

The beginning of Phase One was marked by the participant's loss of a non-marital romantic relationship. The phase name, *experiencing a loss*, refers both to this event and to the participants' initial reaction to their breakup. This phase involved the immediate processing of the loss, as well as the realization and recognition of the resulting implications. For tabular representation of Phase One, please refer to Table 4 on the following page.

Table 4

Phase 1: Experiencing a Loss

Paradigm model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Romantic relationship dissolution	Multiple losses
Conditions	Initiator status	
Strategies/Actions	Surveying the damage	
Consequences	Discerning finality	

Context

Romantic Relationship Dissolution

The context of experiencing a loss is *romantic relationship dissolution*. Within the

past year, the participants had experienced a non-marital breakup that led to the loss of a

romantic partner. All participants described having been "in love" or still in love with

their partner, and viewed their breakup as a major loss. Anna found that the word

"breakup" could not effectively capture the magnitude of her experience. In response, she

created a new term to convey the impact of her separation:

> I've experienced breakups before but not like this. This was a real breakup, like a
> smash up. I don't have any experiences to compare this to except for the ones
> that I have already and that were not quite like this.

As exemplified in this account, the dissolution of a non-marital union may clearly

entail a significant loss. At this point, it is also important to acknowledge that the

category, *romantic relationship dissolution* rarely involved a single loss but, rather, a

number of different types of losses. This idea is reflected in the subcategory, *multiple losses.*

Multiple Losses

In addition to the loss of their relationship and romantic partner, most participants described having sustained *multiple losses* as a result of their breakup. This included the loss of social networks connected to the ex-partner, as well as the loss of parts of themselves (e.g., part of identity related to past relationship, loss of hopes and expectations connected to the relationship, loss of lifestyle). For Lillian, this experience entailed a loss of social connection:

> You lose sort of a form of emotional support and, as well for me, I also lost an entire social network because I had a huge social network with him and his friends and all of a sudden, that was gone as well.

The multiple losses that Beth described, on the other hand, involved more the loss of hopes and expectations that were connected to her romantic relationship:

> Sometimes, I'm disappointed because I feel like I really liked him and just being around his family and, I know I'm only 21 but I think girls tend to just think about marriage and just fantasize and I was just thinking about how perfect it would be to be together with his family because I really loved him and liked his family too.

Both the loss of a romantic partner and the additional losses that are conveyed in these participant comments are important because they form the overarching context of Phase One. This context comprises the framework within which the rest of this phase is situated, as outlined in the following sections.

Intervening Conditions

Initiator Status

In the context of relationship dissolution, *initiator status* affected an individual's initial reactions to the loss of their relationship. Many participants whose partner had

ended the relationship or who had ended the relationship themselves after learning of their partner's infidelity described an initial period of feeling surprised or shocked by the loss. As Hannah noted:

> I was just blown out of the water, blown away. I thought we were going to get married and I definitely didn't see this coming.

Will used similar terms and the metaphor of an explosion to convey the shock and surprise that he experienced as a result of his breakup:

> It was during the Christmas break. I had finished exams and was doing all these things with her and my friends, just chilling out after it all, and then, boom! She just came and broke up with me out of nowhere. Well, I guess there were some signs, just thinking about it now. But back then, it just felt like a bomb.

Since participants who initiated the breakup made the decision to end their relationship, they did not report feelings of surprise. Instead, initiators described a short period of self doubt that they experienced after they had ended their relationship. This sentiment is articulated in the following comment from James:

> Breaking up with [ex] was, saying the words out loud was one of the hardest things that I've ever done. I remember afterwards saying, you know, I think that this is right but why do I feel so bad now? ... I might have spent a while second-guessing and doubting myself but I ultimately knew that it was the right thing.

Similarly, Sofia said that she experienced some initial regret surrounding her breakup:

> There were a couple of days where I was regretting breaking up with him but I was like, I can't dwell on this. It's going to ruin everything so I'd just go out and keep myself occupied.

As reflected in these accounts, taking action to leave a non-marital relationship is rarely a seamless process, and often involves its own set of difficulties in the form of doubting one's own decision.

Strategies/Actions

Surveying the Damage

Following their loss, participants engaged in the strategy of *surveying the*

damage. All of the interviewees described requiring a period ranging from a few hours to

a few days to be immersed in the process of recognizing and assessing the immediate

implications of their loss. For Warren, this included the recognition of his post-breakup

self as single:

> ... I spent the first little while just sitting there, thinking about her. Her being
> gone, me losing her. Thinking about being single too. It just seemed so weird
> having her, having sex together a few days ago then being like, acquaintances
> overnight.

The action of *surveying the damage* did not appear to vary with initiator status, as

initiators shared that, although they had made the decision to end the relationship, it was

only after the breakup when they began to address the range and intensity of resulting

implications. With respect to the nature of this strategy, I conceptualized *surveying the*

damage as a cognitive process that involved addressing the "what" of the breakup.

Consideration of the "why" and the "how" of the experience seemed to occur later,

predominantly during Phase Two. This distinction is articulated in a comment that Anna

made while trying to explain some of the experiences that she went through in the

aftermath of her breakup:

> I think there are different stages that you go through. There's what's going on?
> This is just bizarre. Then there's why did I even do this? And then there's OK,
> now I'm ready to get over this.

The process of *surveying the damage* that Anna refers to and that Warren describes

helped to lead to the consequence that is discussed in the following section.

Consequences

Discerning Finality

As they continued to recognize and to assess the immediate implications of their loss, participants identified a point when they realized, in a more concrete way, the finality of their breakup. At this moment, they fully grasped their newly single status, and either recognized (non-initiator) or decided (initiator) that they would not be reconciling with their ex-partner in the near future. As Ben described:

> Well, it took me a couple of days to realize, OK, you know what, it's over for good this time and you are not going to be with this person again. That was hard to think about in the, at first. Just that, yeah, I ended it but I didn't think about the whole thing of going from being best friends to nothing in no time. Even though I wanted it, it still really sucked.

For Lillian, in addition to the characteristics discussed above, *discerning finality* involved a reduction in the shock that she felt as a result of her breakup:

> You go from having, sort of like a constant companion and then all of a sudden, being single is quite a different change right? You don't realize how different it is until you get there ... It's a huge adjustment, especially for me because mine was so unexpected and sudden, I was a bit in shock, I would say, when I first found out, and then you sort of have to come to a realization and then the shock wears off.

In realizing the finality of their loss, the participants were able to begin their movement towards Phase Two.

Phase 2: Pulling Apart

Pulling apart involved the process of separating from one's ex-partner physically, emotionally, and symbolically. During this phase, participants were grieving for their loss and, through the separation process, beginning to recover from their breakup. By recover, I do not imply that they were able to fully resolve the emotional consequences of their

loss. Rather, I refer to the manner in which participants were able to shift in this direction as they moved within Phase Two.

In the process of *pulling apart*, the participants employed a variety of tasks and strategies that helped them to manage the pain of their separation and to make sense of their loss while they slowly began to pull away from their past relationship. Movement through Phase Two also resulted in positive consequences for the participants. Please see Table 5 for a presentation of Phase Two in tabular format.

Table 5

Phase 2: Pulling Apart

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Grieving	Distress Anger
Conditions	Prior breakup experience Level of contact Perceived rules Time	
Strategies/Actions	Managing emotions	Cognitive strategies Behavioural strategies
	Making sense	Asking questions Forming attribution(s)
	Connecting socially	Presence of others Eliciting emotional support
Consequences	Initial changes	Learning Lifestyle Finding freedom

Context

Grieving

In Phase Two, all participants reported some form of *grieving* for the loss of their relationship. No systematic differences were detected between the initiators and non-initiators, with the exception of the timeline. Initiators described beginning the process of *grieving* before they had ended their relationship, whereas non-initiators were rarely aware of their impending breakup and could therefore only begin to grieve after sustaining the loss. *Grieving* assumed a variety of forms for the participants, with reports of anger, hate, sadness, disappointment, distress, trauma, anxiety, fear, and loneliness. For Beth, this experience involved sadness that was frequently triggered by reminders of her ex-partner:

> It was really sad for maybe three or four months. I would think about him every day. Every little thing that I did or saw. Just something really small reminded me about maybe a situation that we had together that was a good memory. So every little thing had a meaning and that made me feel that I missed him. … It [first few months after the breakup] was traumatic, really. I never want to put myself in that kind of situation again. Never again.

Ben, focusing more on the loneliness that he felt after his breakup, also expressed a sense of sadness and, also, of anger:

> You get really attached, dependent and then we broke up and it's like you have no one … Alone. I don't know how to describe it but it's a really bad feeling. Just so sad and so lonely. … At the beginning, I really hated her. It was easier to hate her some of the time then just to always be sad and moping around.

This account highlights the idea that *grieving* can extend beyond sadness and loneliness to include feelings of anger and hate. This extension is addressed through the two subcategories of *grieving: Distress* and *anger*.

Distress

All participants reported elevated levels of distress, beginning either in the weeks

prior to (initiators) or following (non-initiators) the breakup. This included a substantial

amount of sadness and, often, a feeling of loneliness. For Anna, both of these feelings

were prominent in her account:

> There is sadness, I would say. Hurt, definitely and loneliness as well. Loneliness
> more for, it's weird, not for him per se but for a partner... I'd say the first couple
> of weeks were probably hardest for me. I sort of emotionally broke down and
> was crying more.

James did not describe feeling lonely but, rather, a deep sense of hurt:

> I was more hurt by this relationship, I believe, than she was. I was pretty hurt
> because I loved her very, very much and it was hard for somebody that loves this
> much to initiate the breakup so I was very, very, very hurt.

For both of these participants, their non-marital breakups were clearly a very difficult and

distress-provoking experience.

Anger

In addition to distress, many participants described feeling very angry towards

their ex-partner and, in some cases, hate or hateful. For non-initiators, this anger was

often directed towards the manner in which the ex-partner had ended the relationship:

> I'm not angry because he broke up with me. I'm angry with the way he handled
> the breakup because I've broken up with individuals before and I have gone out of
> my way to sort of be as caring and sensitive towards the individual I'm breaking
> up with as possible and I don't really feel like when he broke up with me, he
> really took those extra steps ... I'm more angry at the way he handled the breakup
> definitely. That's what the source of my anger is.

Conversely, for initiators of the breakup, their anger related to actions or

behaviours that an ex-partner had engaged in during the relationship. As Sofia noted:

> I definitely don't want it to sound like I broke up with him because I was mad at
> him but the anger was definitely something that pushed me towards my decision

... Yeah, anger was definitely around for a good couple of months after, until I moved on a bit.

As exemplified in her comment, the experience of anger can be a prominent component of *grieving,* and was not confined to people who had been left by their partner.

Intervening Conditions

Prior Breakup Experience

Prior experience with non-marital relationship breakups helped participants as they grieved for their loss and began to pull away from their ex-partner. This condition offered two interrelated benefits for participants. In terms of coping, participants who had undergone past breakups had been able to gain experience in managing their loss and had a clearer idea of what was helpful or unhelpful for them in coping with their current breakup. For many, knowing that they had been able to overcome past relationship dissolutions provided an enhanced perspective, allowing them to view their current challenges as temporary. As Lillian explained:

> I think for me, personally, experience with previous breakups definitely helps. If it had been, I think, maybe, my very first breakup, I probably would have coped with it worse ... Given the fact that I've been through breakups before, I have experience of it so I know that it does get better with time. I was more familiar with coping strategies. I can sort of see the light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak.

In her comment, she has clearly expressed the idea that past breakups were a factor in helping her both to cope with and to better understand her current separation.

Level of Contact

The amount of contact that participants had with their ex-partner in the aftermath of their breakup affected their ability to pull away from them. Some found that extremely limited interaction soon after the breakup was helpful in providing symbolic separation

and closure. The following is Hannah's account of the only contact that she had with her ex-partner after her breakup:

> A week after we broke up, we did the whole possession exchange and I'm glad that I did it. I don't regret it and, so, that was a bit of almost premature, perhaps, closure for me so that was also, I think, part of the reason why I wanted to get everything over and done with because I didn't want any loose ends definitely.

Beyond early and limited interaction, participants reported that more regular and lengthy contact with their ex-partner led to renewed pain and sometimes, anger. It seemed that, at this point, any benefits that might arise from contact were outweighed by the negative impact that it appeared to have. As Ron described:

> I still had some contact with my ex. Every time I would see her, I would get really emotional. I would, maybe because of something she said or what she did, I would just freak out and then, for a while, I would be like bouncing around. It was just very like, am I really ready to move on and make some changes or am I still stuck thinking about my ex? Or still not being able to let go. For a while, I was still bouncing around, hurting ... The thing is, I think, she didn't really say anything that ticked me off but it just did, you know, ticked me off. Not as angry but took over thoughts that I had.

It appears as though the intensity of some of the feelings and thoughts that Ron experienced in this situation were unexpected and confusing for him. Also inherent in his account seems to be the notion that habitual and frequent contact with an ex-partner can hinder recovery from a breakup by temporarily limiting one's ability to cope with their loss. For Warren, this process involved the re-emergence of feelings of love:

> I slept with her last week. She came over to see me and one thing led to another. So, that's difficult. It's hard not to attach feelings to that because that's the kind of thing that used to mean something. It made me think that I'll never get over her. I love her to death.

Through his words, Warren seemed to express the conceptualization of renewed contact with an ex-partner as a potential obstacle to recovery from a breakup. Like Ron, he also experienced confusion, in this case, as a result of some of the conflicting feelings that he

held. Warren's account suggests that, as he had renewed contact with his ex-partner, he felt strong feelings of love for her, as well as heightened feelings of pain. This could seem conflicting and confusing. Perhaps it is these feelings of love that maintain the cycle of contact and make it more difficult to pull apart from an ex-partner.

Perceived Rules

The second intervening condition of Phase Two was centred on the fact that many participants referred to guidelines that seemed to influence their way of behaving and thinking in the aftermath of their breakup. These *perceived rules* originated from a variety of sources and influenced participant's beliefs about the breakup recovery process, as well as some of the behaviours that they engaged in while *pulling apart.*

Several participants described material from movies, television, or radio shows that was meaningful to them. These media sources seemed to exert an influence on their beliefs about breakup recovery. For Hannah, a popular television show removed some of the uncertainty regarding the length of time that might be required to move through her breakup:

> This is such a dumb analogy, but on *Sex and the City*, they talked about how every year you're with a person, it takes six months to get over them or something like that and they have a mathematical formula and I'm all like, yes, we were together for three years, so a year and a half and I'm still, you know, trying to deal with my own issues … I think it will take about a good year and a half just to get everything cleared up.

Similarly, Ben referred to a current movie when he discussed his beliefs about contact with an ex-partner. The central theme of this film concerns the fantasy of being able to use futuristic technology to "erase" the memory of a painful breakup and ex-partner from one's mind:

I guess that I have in my mind that I can get on with my life faster if I just completely, cut her off completely, kind of like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* sort of thing.

For some participants, *perceived rules* were conveyed through cultural or social norms, or through personal mandates regarding post-breakup behaviour. In the following account, Will discusses his perception of and experience with a rule that relates to traditional gender roles:

I kind of think about it like, as a man, I'm not allowed to just sit back and wait. I have to always be pursuing, even if I'm not looking that hard. I wouldn't be satisfying my social rule if I was to just give up and say, I don't want to meet someone else ... I have to be kind of the hunter. I have to make the first move most of the time. They're never going to make the first move, the women, and so, I just looked at it like, I can't not try. I mean, sure, I can fail but I can't not try.

Lillian, on the other hand, did not reference a cultural or social norm but, rather, outlined a personal mandate that guided her post-breakup behaviour:

My previous policy with other breakups has always been a period of no contact after the breakup because I find it simply too hard for myself and usually for the other individual when you're trying to move on with your life to have constant reminders of the previous breakup.

Considered together, the perceived rules described within this section highlight the notion that many students arrive at a breakup situation with a variety of preconceived notions that help to guide their beliefs and behaviours.

Time

Most of the participants spoke about the importance of *time* as they grieved for the loss of their relationship and began to pull away from their ex-partner. While *time* alone was rarely seen as sufficient for recovery from the breakup, it provided participants with physical distance from their ex-partner. As such, *time* operated as a catalyst in the process of *pulling apart*. In the following comment, Arleen shares her perspective

regarding *time* in the context of relationship recovery. In her account, she first asserted

the idea that time is able to provide healing from the breakup. As she expanded on this

statement, however, Arleen also introduced the notion that, in addition to time, there is a

process of forgetting aspects of the breakup that is important:

> I think that time does heal all. ... It's time but it's also forgetting. It's not
> forgetting so much that you forget what you went through and you're not foolish
> enough to do it again. It's just forgetting enough so that you can move on with
> life but remembering enough so that you don't do the same thing again.

While Sofia did not agree with the idea that *time* can heal everything, she nevertheless

expressed a belief in the importance of this factor in recovery from a breakup:

> You definitely need distractors in your life because you can't really will the pain
> to go away. I mean, some people say time heals all wounds. I wouldn't agree
> with that but I think time does definitely mitigate the sort of, sharpness of the
> pain. So you definitely need distractors, like I said, to distract you while time
> mitigates that sharpness. You never want to be alone in your room, listening to
> sad music, dwelling on it for excessive periods of time.

Regardless of the manner in which participants conceptualized the importance of

time in the processes of pulling apart and breakup recovery, their references to and

descriptions of this factor highlight its role as an intervening condition within Phase Two.

Strategies/Actions

Managing Emotions

In response to the pain of their breakup, participants reported thinking and

behaving in ways that facilitated the management of their unpleasant emotions. For most,

the experience of pain generated a proclivity towards isolation from others and dwelling

on their loss, pain, distress, and/or anger. All participants who reflected this sentiment

reported avoiding these actions and instead, engaging in active processes which helped

them to decrease the amount of pain that they felt. In many cases, the actions that were taken were described as intentional and purposeful. As Will commented:

> I don't like letting stuff get to me, letting stuff ruin me. I mean, I know I'm sad. I can't help it but I don't like letting people see I'm sad and I don't like staying sad. I try to use it in the most constructive way possible. That's what I'm trying to do when I, whether it's going out more, whether it's focusing or whether it's going to the gym. It's all based on trying to use this as the ultimate motivating tool.

With respect to anger, very few participants reacted to the presence of this emotion by directly confronting their ex-partner. Also, as the following comment from Anna exemplifies, most felt that prolonged levels of anger did not aid in their recovery from the breakup:

> So then, how you deal with the anger and then acceptance because there's no way to heal with just anger. I am ready to move past it and in the process now of chilling out and stuff so ... I think it's almost self-indulgent to keep going through the anger. It doesn't hurt anyone but myself. He's not in my life anymore so why act like he is?

The participants' anger instead motivated them to take cognitive and behavioural actions that ultimately helped them to pull apart from their ex-partner and, as a by-product of this process, reduced the amount of anger that they felt. These actions are addressed within the two subcategories of *managing emotions*: *Cognitive strategies* and *behavioural strategies*.

Cognitive Strategies

In attempting to manage their emotions, participants engaged in a variety of cognitive actions. These involved assuming a greater degree of control over their thoughts, either by pushing pain-causing thoughts away, or by incorporating more distress-reducing cognitions. For the former strategy, participants reported interrupting painful thoughts, memories, or both as they arose. As James described:

I try not to think about the breakup or the past. I don't want to think about the past that much. When these thoughts come up, I just try to stop them. ... I tend not to think about the breakup and what could have happened, what did happen. I just didn't try to think about this as much.

With respect to the incorporation of distress-reducing cognitions, some participants found themselves thinking about negative aspects of their ex-partner or past relationship more often (either intentionally or non-intentionally). Although potentially painful and anger provoking, this action seemed to help to bolster a sense of separation from one's ex-partner, ultimately having a distress-reducing effect. Ben reflected this sentiment in the following account of his post-breakup coping actions:

...sometimes, you just think of all the bad things they do. Usually, that's what happens when you break up. ... Yeah, I never thought about the good things. It was a lot easier for me just to think about all the things that I didn't like about her and the way she was at the end. Like, oh shit, she did this to me and that makes me kind of hate her.

Although Ben's strategy may differ from others because it involved an active process of maintaining anger towards his ex-partner, I viewed this as being temporarily helpful during the process of *pulling apart.*

Another manner in which participants incorporated distress-reducing cognitions was through the action of comparing themselves and their current situation to others, noting that regardless of their struggles, there are always people who face more difficult problems. This strategy is exemplified in a comment from Anna:

You know, people who are married and then all the financial things and stuff like that and then, if you have kids, I know that it's so much more difficult. I know that would be so much worse than what I went through so it's not like it's the worst for me.

I conceptualized the type of cognition found in this account as a strategy because of the way in which it unconsciously (or perhaps, consciously) may have helped to reduce a person's distress surrounding their breakup.

Behavioural Strategies

Also used in the management of their painful emotions, participants described employing a wide array of behavioural strategies in the aftermath of their breakup. At points when they found themselves engaging in what many described as "excessive dwelling," moment-to-moment actions were taken. Arlene offered the following account on this topic:

> Whenever I thought about it [breakup/feeling pain], I think, actually, I always took naps, just to try to forget about it or to try to go on the computer and just do something else for a little bit, or, just try to keep on reading or something. ... I would still think about it but these were ways to just avoid thinking about it for a while.

As exemplified in her comment, these strategies included activities that were designed to provide an immediate but temporary distraction from pain.

On a broader level, all participants described feeling a need to keep busy. A few used the term "distractors" when referring to regular activities that they incorporated into their lifestyle in order to remain occupied. This usually encompassed greater involvement in work, school, and/or time with friends and family. In the following passage, Sofia comments on her involvement in school following her loss:

> School kind of helped because at school, I don't really think about, well, I didn't think about him. I just focused on school really, so, it was definitely a distractor. Just going to class and doing all of my assignments. It sort of kept me occupied.

Also of noteworthy status is the fact that all participants spoke of an overwhelming need to "get out of the house" in the aftermath of their breakup. As Warren offered:

> You can't sit around all day and do nothing. That could drive you insane. You have to get out of there [house] because the more you think about it, the more it drives you crazy because you'll never figure it out. You can't figure out how to make someone love you who doesn't so you have to move on. You've got to take action. The best thing is just to move on. Try something else. Meet new people. Just do anything.

For this participant, spending a great deal of time at home was not only undesirable, but also appeared to be somewhat distressing.

At this point, it is also important to note that, as seen in the above passage, many of the participants used the word "you" when speaking about their own experiences. By externalizing or disowning their words, perhaps this was another way that some of the students were able to manage and gain distance from their painful feelings. Alternate interpretations of this language usage, however, could also include social convention, advice-giving (directed at the interviewer), or both.

Also of relevance is the observation that many of the behavioural strategies mentioned during the interviews were clearly aimed at managing painful memories of the relationship. This included all of the actions described above, in addition to more specific strategies. A number of participants, for example, said that they felt a need to eliminate physical reminders of their past relationship, disposing of mementos such as gifts, pictures, or shared possessions. For Anna, this included not gifts, but electronic traces of her ex-partner, as well as songs that served as reminders of him:

> I finally got rid of the things that he had given, the letters, the songs, all the e-mails. ...When I thought of what the memories brought back, I didn't want any physical reminders anymore. Like, it's OK, there's nothing really you can do if they want to live in your mind ... You don't really have the means to destroy those memories so they live in your mind but for me, it was being ready to not want any more physical reminders.

For many participants, acts like those mentioned in the above passage were able to

provide a greater sense of symbolic and emotional separation from their ex-partner.

Making Sense

Concurrent to the strategies aimed at managing emotions, participants described

engaging in an active process of trying to make sense of their breakup. This was

cognitive in nature and involved trying to gain a better understanding of the "why" and

the "how" of the separation. The strategy of *making sense* is distinguished from dwelling

in that it was not described as painful, and involves forward movement through, in the

words of a few participants, "sorting stuff out." The category, *making sense* is

exemplified in the following comment from Will:

> It kind of seems like women go through, like this phase, when they're young and
> they want, they don't really care about, I guess, a husband like qualities and then
> they switch and they go into and then they are interested in guys who are
> successful and maybe have money. I don't know if that's true or not but then they
> start to look to settle down. They have their fun first and then they go after the
> pointdexters and settle down with them. I, mainly from a radio show that I used
> to listen to that I have these notions. I suspect that's what's going on with her
> [ex].

Whereas Will worked towards *making sense* of his ex-partner's reasons for leaving him,

Hannah struggled to make sense of her partner's infidelity:

> Personally, I like to think in my mind that it [infidelity] was a lack of judgment.
> He was feeling lonely in a sexual sense and it was a lack of judgment on his part.
> I would love to think that. That's what I want. It may be a sanitized version but I
> would like to think that that's the reason why he did that.

As evidenced in both of these accounts, there is a clear effort made towards trying to

better understand the why and how of the breakup and the events surrounding this

occurrence. I develop this phenomenon in more detail within the two subcategories of the

category, *making sense: Asking questions* and *forming attributions*. These are described in the next two sections.

Asking Questions

Within Phase Two, participants were engaged in the process of asking themselves questions about why their relationship had ended. They wondered how their union had arrived at the point of dissolving, and questioned each member's role in the breakup. This is articulated in the following two comments, the former, from Ron, and the latter, from Hannah:

> You always try to get yourself to be like, OK, why didn't this relationship work? Why did we break up? I was just trying really, trying to figure out why it didn't work ... ... all this reflection and analyzing and asking myself who was to blame for this. I felt like I needed to figure it all out ...

> I asked myself why [did he cheat]. I spent three years of my life devoted to him emotionally and physically, kind of thing. And I mean, it was just fine, like we were together so much, so I guess it's [infidelity] a big deal, right, I guess ... There was a lot of trust.

As participants engaged in this sort of inner inquiry, they were again able to begin answering some of the why and how questions relating to their loss, helping them to gain a better understanding and, ultimately, aiding in the recovery process. It is important to note that the action of asking questions did not vary with initiator status, apart from the fact that initiators began to ask some questions before their breakup.

Forming Attributions

As they tried to make sense of their loss, participants formed attributions and generated reasons to explain why their relationship had ended. Among possible accounts, they blamed themselves, their partner, both members (the relationship), or circumstances external to both people. Warren, while evaluating his relationship in retrospect, felt that some of his behaviours were the cause of his breakup:

> Ya, I think now that I was just a dick. That's why our relationship got ruined. I was just being mean. What she saw as me being a dick, I saw as getting respect or something. I am to blame for what went on because she asked me to change and I didn't.

Will, on the other hand, attributed his breakup to both his ex-partner and to the nature of his past relationship. In his words, it appeared that he was dismissing the value of his ex-partner:

> We probably should have broken up a long time ago but we didn't and we probably weren't a good match for each other. I was always the one coming up with the ideas. I was just the motivator in the relationship and she was just kind of always there and so, if she's not going to be my girlfriend, then she really serves no purpose.

I conceptualized the above passages as efforts towards the formation of a breakup attribution. These seemed to comprise an important means of both *making sense* and of coping with the loss of relationship.

Connecting Socially

Participants also coped with their breakup by maintaining social connections with friends, family, or both. Most of the students reported that this strategy or action was crucial during the aftermath of their separation. As such, it seemed integral to both their *pulling apart* and forward movement processes. The category, *connecting socially* is exemplified in the following comment from Beth:

> I take my friends as really important. They may not notice that but I think they're really important. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have gotten through this like I did if they hadn't been around.

Despite the near unanimous endorsement of the helpfulness of others, the appearance of this contact varied a great deal from person to person. This is captured in the subcategories of the category, *connecting socially*: *Presence of others* and *eliciting emotional support.*

Presence of Others

After their separation, some participants found that the presence of others in their lives was important, but did not find it necessary to talk a great deal about their breakup or to obtain emotional support or advice. For them, this manner of social sharing was not helpful. Instead, their stories converged around the theme of having friends, family, or both who were able to spend time with them and, in many cases, offer diversion. This sentiment is reflected in the following comment from Warren, as he spoke about the role of his friends during the aftermath of his breakup:

> I don't look for support. I tell people what's going on. They give me advice but it doesn't help because I make my own choices. So, advice isn't helpful at all. My friends just have a good time. That's what's helpful. We just have a good time.

Ron also spoke about the importance of his friend's presence during his post-breakup period:

> I wouldn't really say supporting, more just being there because I didn't really talk about what happened to most of my friends, even friends that I knew for a long time. Only those, there were only 1 or 2 people that I talked to about the situation, so most of them, it was just being there and that was the time, I think, that was the time that I was getting over the breakup so it was just nice to have them around.

Beth offered a similar account, and also reported limiting her talk about the impact of her breakup to the research interview context:

> he [friend] was one of the people who made a big difference and it wasn't by actively talking about what I had been through because that's just sucky. I only do that here ... it's not about consciously voicing problems, or how I felt after I broke up with him.

Considered together, these three accounts suggest that talking about a breakup with close others is not always necessary for or helpful in recovery from relationship dissolution.

Eliciting Emotional Support

Despite the idea presented above, several participants did speak not only of engaging with others, but also of seeking interaction that would provide them with the opportunity to talk about their breakup and the impact that it had on them. As Sofia commented:

> I definitely sought advice from my mom and from [friend]. Yeah, support is a big thing for me ... I can make my own choices and I can be very self assured but I like to bounce ideas off other people.

Hannah shared a similar preference:

> I have confidantes who I can talk to like my sister, who, and like my father, who are really, really close and so, I talk to them. So, my female is my sister and my male is my dad so I'm really lucky to have those two people to talk about everything.

For these participants, having people to listen, empathize, and to provide advice was clearly seen as important.

<div align="center">

Consequences

</div>

Initial Changes

As participants moved through Phase Two, many experienced initial positive outcomes. These were often the first that they identified as having ensued as a result of their breakup. This category is exemplified in the following comment, from a participant who had engaged in school activities to a greater degree as a means of keeping busy in the months following her breakup. In her account, Beth outlined some of the positive changes that arose as a result of this behavioural strategy:

> I'm more focused on school now and doing so much better. I had never got an A before and I was so happy. I was showing my dad and everything and it made me feel so, just so good ... ... Just the fact that I was feeling so crappy and just being emotionally, I mean, sad all the time. It's a really horrible feeling. I was really so sad about it. And the fact of being upset, just wanting to be more cheerful and happy and do something that's good for me and do something that my parents and

my family expect me to do. Just doing well makes me feel happy. I did
something, I succeeded in something. I feel so good about myself right now.

Combining Beth's words with the stories of other participants, I conceptualized the

category, *initial changes* as comprising three subcategories: *Learning, lifestyle*, and

finding freedom. These are outlined within the following three sections.

Learning

All of the participants reported *learning* something from their breakup that would

help them in future romantic relationships. Their *learning* was relatively specific in

nature, relating either to future mate choices or to their own behaviour and investment in

subsequent relationships. James' learning involved a change in the kinds of qualities that

he desired in a romantic partner:

> I know more what I want in the future now. I mean, I know what to look for in a
> girl ... I would want a girl now to be more independent. More independent and
> know more what she wants and be more understanding and compassionate.

Conversely, Arleen's account of her learning centred more around her behaviour and

emotional investment in future relationships:

> It's [outlook] more realistic because I think I tend to go into something and just
> think it through so much that it's, I can't think of the word but it's just unrealistic.
> I just realized, don't take things too seriously with future boyfriends because that
> was just me being too serious. I don't think it should have been that serious, just
> looking back at it. I should have been more chillaxed about that stuff and not, I
> don't know, worried. Just not give it my all, in a sense. Emotionally, just not
> give it my everything emotionally.

In this passage, Arleen implied that it may be more helpful for her to invest less

emotionally, and to view her future non-marital relationships as less enduring and more

transitory. Though both Arleen's and James' accounts comprise different learning topics,

both denote changes in thinking and behaviour that may lead to more personally fulfilling

future romantic relationships.

Lifestyle

Through the behaviours that participants engaged in while trying to stay busy and engaged with the world, many reported having made change(s) to their *lifestyle*. Most perceived some positive changes in their social network, as exemplified through a comment from Hannah:

> I really reached out to my support system during the breakup so I would say, I actually forged stronger bonds with my previous boyfriend that I mentioned and also with my close-knit group of girlfriends, and also, with my family.

Other commonly reported lifestyle-related changes included improving grades at school and becoming more physically fit. For Will, these changes entailed making more progress towards post-graduate goals, as well as intentionally losing unwanted weight:

> Well, I've always wanted to go to law school and so, even when I was with her, I wanted to go to law school and after the breakup, I just kind of really focused more on concentrating a bit more on school. I actually booked the test and stuff like that, so I'm actually writing a test now and I've actually done research into the schools and stuff like that. And, before I met her, I was planning on going to Europe. This was way back when I was in high school. So I booked that now. And just, I feel like I'm more directed in my goals. I went, I started working out like pretty much right after the breakup and said, you have to lose 20 pounds and so I lost 25. So, that's a pretty big change in my life. I go to the gym quite regularly now.

As emphasized in Will's account, I conceptualized these lifestyle changes within the category, *initial changes*, but the term "initial" certainly does not imply that these were insignificant or unimportant changes in the participants' lives.

Finding Freedom

Within Phase Two, participants also recognized that they had gained freedom that was not available to them during their relationship. Some mentioned freedom explicitly, in the form of feeling free from obligations that they had during their relationship. As Warren described:

> It's nice to have some free time to yourself. Freedom to hook up, freedom not to have to spend the half an hour on the phone every day. Don't have to do obligatory dinners on Friday night or whatever. Feels good ... with my free time, I've started to take up sports or chase other girls.

Others did not use the term freedom but described feelings of relief and an ability to branch out that I conceptualized as comprising newfound freedom. This is illustrated in the following account from Hannah:

> I always wanted to take up swing dancing but [ex] hates dancing and I always hated that because he would never go dancing with me so I'm like sweet, I can join a swing dancing class ... it was really fun, doing these things that I was never able to do before but now I have all this time to do them.

Given the fact that she reported being able to pursue an activity that she did not feel able to pursue before the breakup, it seems appropriate to view this shift as falling within the scope of newfound freedom, or feeling able to free oneself from limitations that were imposed by the relationship.

As the participants began to experience *initial changes* as a result of their breakup, some started to transition from Phase Two towards Phase Three. As discussed in the following section, Phase Three entailed a greater connection to self, as well as additional changes and personal growth.

Phase 3: Moving Beyond

Within this phase, the participants reported reduced distress and were able to move beyond their breakup and grow from it. In the context of connecting to themselves, participants built on their initial changes by shifting their focus more towards themselves. Their development was bolstered through self-reflection, by recognizing the changes that they had made in the aftermath of their breakup, and by seeking new experiences that

would contribute to their forward movement. Please see Table 6 for tabular representation of this phase.

Table 6

Phase 3: Moving Beyond

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Connecting to self	
Conditions	Initial changes Distress reduction	
Strategies/Actions	Focusing on self	Self-reflection
	Seeking novelty	
Consequences	Changing sense of self	Self-confidence Awareness

Context

Connecting to Self

Within this phase, the intervening conditions, strategies, and actions that were taken were embedded in the context of participants' greater connection to themselves. This overall climate of self-connection must be considered in order to understand the self-oriented nature of Phase Three. As emphasized in the following comment from Ben, *connecting to self* seemed to entail a shift towards self-discovery:

> I've really found that a lot of it has to do with me just getting a better sense of who I am, what matters to me. I feel like I took so much shit in that relationship. Not like, her being mean or anything like that but just always thinking, planning my schedule around her and stuff ... So now I feel like I've been able to ask myself what do I want to do with my time? Who do I want to be in my life? It's

like my life is more "me" now. I don't know if that makes sense but it's really just about self discovery, I guess.

Connecting to self was also conceptualized as providing the context within which participants were able to focus more on themselves. This is exemplified in the following passage from Arleen:

> Before, I was just, I don't know what I'm doing and now, I have an idea. I can actually think about what my life's going to be like. I know what I want to do while before, I was just not thinking about it really because it was always about both of us.

For Arleen, it was not until after the breakup that she began to consider what direction her life might take with respect to school and career.

<div align="center">Intervening Conditions</div>

Initial Changes

Please refer back to Phase Two for a description of participant comments pertaining to the consequence, *initial changes*. Within Phase Three, *initial changes* acted as an intervening condition rather than as a consequence of actions taken. Here, participants spoke of continuing with and reflecting upon the changes that had initially arisen in Phase Two. A comment from Sofia highlights this idea:

> We're young. I might as well experience different things, not just do the same thing over and over. Like, I feel like after I started doing different things, I, that's when I changed and I'm figuring out who I am, my personality and stuff ... I think you need to experience things, different things, to figure out who you are, really, so, not just focusing on one thing.

In addition, many participants considered what the initial changes meant for them, with respect to their recovery from the breakup and forward movement. As Ron described:

> It's hard to regret any of it [past relationship and breakup] when I think about everything I've learned. Just, thinking about all the learning, I know so much more about myself and what I want in a future girlfriend too.

The accounts in this section illustrate the idea that the participants often valued the *initial changes* that they had made and found them to be a source of meaning. The students seemed to carry these changes with them as they continued to move forward from their breakup.

Distress Reduction

By Phase Three, participants had moved through some of their grief and were experiencing lower overall levels of sadness, anger, or both. As Lillian described:

> I can definitely say two months later that my moods have changed now than they were two weeks ago. Like two weeks after the breakup, I mean. I think the sadness has definitely dissipated. I haven't emotionally cried or broken down about it in a very long time.

It is important to note that very few students found themselves moving completely beyond their grief, but some reduction seemed to be necessary in order to allow participants to focus more on themselves (please refer to the following section for a discussion of the strategy, *focusing on the self*). This change in focus can be seen in the following comment from Ron:

> ... after I got over all the anger and hate because she dumped me, I was able to start looking at things more positively and seeing the breakup as an opportunity. Psychologically, it was so hard but after a lot of time and after I was able to think about it a lot. I got over it and was able to think about what I wanted and do my own thing.

As demonstrated through his words, I envisioned the reduction in anger (or, for certain others, sadness) as "clearing the space" that was needed in order to allow a participant to focus more on themselves. The strategy, *focusing on the self*, is outlined in the following section.

Strategies/Actions

Focusing on the Self

The strategies and actions employed in this phase were less about self protection,
management, and account making than they were about *focusing on the self*. As the
participants were recovering from their breakup and had experienced some initial
changes, they began to focus on themselves to a greater degree. They invested more time
and energy in understanding and honouring their own desires, feelings, and needs. As
Arleen outlined:

> I've started thinking about what I want to do ... in our relationship, it was always
> just thinking about two people but now, I can concentrate on myself. I figured out
> what I want to major in and stuff and what I want to do with my life, while before,
> it was just thinking about him and me. I never really got to concentrate on what I
> wanted.

Ben also found that, after his breakup, he began to shift his focus more from his ex-
partner to his own desires:

> You know, I really know what I want now. It's not clouded by her [ex-partner]. I
> mean, clouded is a weird word maybe but that's what it felt like when I was trying
> to get over her ... now, it's easier for me to be like, what do I want? Do I really
> want to spend 2 hours on the phone every night? No, but before, it's like I didn't
> even think about me, what I wanted. It was always her, her, her.

Both of these participants' accounts illustrate a movement from focusing on other or the
relationship to *focusing on the self*. This category is expanded in the following section,
where I outline the subcategory, *self-reflection*.

Self-Reflection

Within Phase Three, participants began to recognize the pain that they had
partially overcome and persevered through. They also began to acknowledge the way(s)
in which they had moved forward since their breakup and to reflect upon the strength that
they demonstrated by continuing to engage in their life and academic, career, or both

activities throughout the grieving process. Through this *self-reflection*, the participants

were able to learn more about themselves and their needs. As Lillian noted, "I think that I

learned more about myself from the actual breakup than the entire relationship." She

illustrates the subcategory, *self-reflection*, in the following comment:

> I thought, you know, you handled this really hard breakup. You got through that
> and you're doing well and that's really, the presentation in front of the class is
> really nothing compared to the breakup you just went through so if you could
> handle that then you can definitely handle this and so, it's carried over into other
> areas of my life as well and sort of lends ... ... You know that if something is
> thrown your way unexpectedly, then you're not going to crumble or be destroyed.
> You can handle it although it might be hard. Like I said, you can sort of see the
> light at the end of the tunnel.

Beth also engaged in *self-reflection* during the aftermath of her breakup, learning more

about herself in a purposeful, intentional manner:

> It's mostly about learning who I am and self-discovery. I mean, I think that you
> can go your entire life trying to know yourself and never knowing yourself as
> much as you want to or you think that you should but I certainly think that I've
> learned more about myself in the last three months than I've learned in the last
> three years ... That's a choice that I've made because I didn't have to do all this
> self-discovery stuff. I could have just carried on as usual but I chose to use this
> stressful time to be more with myself. Like, discover myself.

Whether intentional or unintentional, both of these accounts illustrate the reflective and

cognitive nature of the subcategory, *self-reflection*. In the following section, I outline a

strategy that seemed to be more behaviourally-oriented.

Seeking Novelty

As participants began to focus more on themselves, they started to pursue a

greater level of novelty in their lives. This assumed the form of new social interactions,

experiences, and ways of being that were consistent with their evolving sense of self.

Many participants reported engaging in activities that they would not have done when

they were with their ex-partner. The comments below, the first, from Hannah, and the second, from Sofia, exemplify this strategy:

> I'm able to be most free and most flexible and move out more. Move out in the sense, like, go out more. I'm putting myself out there, you know, going out to do stuff that I wouldn't have otherwise.

> I remember sitting there going: This is something that I would not have done a year ago. This is something that I wouldn't have done six months ago. This is something that I'm doing now because I am finally at the point where I'm confident enough with myself to do it ... Without going through that experience [breakup], there's no way that I would have been craving all this newness and no way that I would have been able to act on it anyways...

As illustrated in these accounts, the experiences involved in seeking novelty may involve some level of risk-taking, and, in the words of Will, "putting myself out there." These actions, occurring concurrently with the strategy of *focusing on the self*, helped to bring about the consequences that are discussed in the following section.

Consequences

Changing Sense of Self

As they moved through Phase Three, participants experienced changes and growth that involved new ways of viewing themselves. Many, through honouring the journey that they had embarked upon in the aftermath of their breakup, came to view themselves and their abilities in new ways. As Anna shared:

> I'm so grateful. I mean, you can moan and groan about breakups all you want and how much of a drag they are but when all is said and done, I think, you're faced, you come face to face with who you are especially and if not that then different people. It forced me to question that and to look at things in a different way ... the breakup was so hard but it's also invaluable, completely priceless. I value it because without it, it would still be bouncing along for me. So, it's definitely, it's like diamonds in my pocket. It's very valuable to me.

As students experienced a *changing sense of self*, this usually involved gaining a greater recognition of their strengths. Participants described feeling more positive about

themselves, and conveyed an optimistic outlook towards their future. This sentiment was

reflected in the following comment from Ron:

> I think that going through tough breakups ultimately makes you a stronger
> individual ... I've felt that I've become a stronger individual in terms of, besides,
> handling breakups in the future, perhaps, but also sort of tackling other things in
> my life ... I wouldn't describe it as an epiphany so much but sort of as gradual
> realization that I actually am stronger than I thought.

In addition to the strength that Ron referred to, I conceptualized *changing sense of self* to

involve shifts in both confidence and understanding. This is reflected in the

subcategories, *self-confidence* and *awareness*, both elaborated in the following sections.

Self-confidence

The majority of the participants emerged from the aftermath of their breakup with

an increased level of *self-confidence*. Among the possible areas of heightened confidence,

participants reported being more assured in their beliefs, personal strengths,

independence, and in their ability to handle future stressful events. James, for example,

reported that, through his breakup, he became more confident in his capacity to feel

worthwhile despite being single:

> I think I'm more confident as a person. I mean, I think I can live on my own as
> well as in a relationship. I don't need to have a girlfriend or something to prove
> my self-worth or something like that. I mean, I'm more confident as a person.
> I'm not as desperate as before to want a girlfriend ... I mean, I could keep a
> relationship as it has been proven for 3 or 4 years and I can end a relationship as
> well. I mean, I don't need to keep this relationship just because it's been going on
> for 3 or 4 years. I initiated the breakup and this is completely new for me.

This account seems to suggest that an increased level of self-confidence emerges mostly

as a result of the challenges that are associated with the loss of a romantic relationship,

regardless of whether a person chose to initiate the separation or not.

Awareness

In addition to greater *self-confidence*, participants experienced an increase in *awareness*. Here, awareness refers to an augmentation in self-awareness, as well as an expanded life perspective. By self-awareness, I mean an increase in knowledge that a person gains about their own characteristics and qualities, the way in which they operate in the world, as well as their own needs, desires, and beliefs. By life perspective, I mean learning that is less context-specific and results, in the words of some participants, in the development of a more "realistic" view of the world. Both of these types of augmented awareness also seemed to involve participants' motivations towards changing what they found was detrimental to them in their past relationship. This idea was reflected in the words of Anna, as she spoke about the increase in self-awareness that she experienced after her breakup:

> It [past relationship and breakup] taught me to be very weary of my own gut feelings. I think from each relationship, you learn something positive and something negative about yourself and for me, it was that naivety or innocence, you know, isn't really a virtue. It's more of a hindrance ... Now, I can tell, it's like a gut feeling, when I'm being naïve. I can stop it in myself and just start to be more realistic. ... I feel that I have a bigger picture now. A greater awareness of different people, different styles, different ways of handling things. Just seeing how he handled it [breakup] and accepting that what he did is wrong but it doesn't necessarily mean that he's a horrible person. I've realized that different people have different capabilities ...

Ron conveyed a similar motivation to change what he found to be detrimental in his past relationship. This is apparent in the following account, as he reports having developed an expanded perspective as a result of his breakup:

> I think I'm more understanding. In the second relationship, everything that I thought was bad with my first girlfriend, I realized that I think she was just more mature than me at the time. Now, I feel like I have the same point of view as her and I feel like, as if me and my first girlfriend were dating now, it would work out in a way because I often disagreed with her before but now that I'm more mature, just my perspective of things has changed.

The development of an expanded perspective is also apparent in the words of Beth:

> Now when I look back, I think that experience taught me so much and especially to be grateful of what I do have. It's like you go through a relationship and you have this time but now I know that inevitably, all things end and the best you can do is just enjoy.

It seems that a part of Beth's increase in awareness reflects a shifting view of relationships as relatively permanent to more transitory in nature.

Also fitting within the scope of the subcategory, *awareness*, many participants felt as though they had matured a great deal and "grown up" since they had experienced their breakup. Participants attributed this maturation largely to their relationship dissolution, and noted that the change(s) was more rapid and punctuated than the maturation that occurs over the lifespan. This distinction is exemplified in the following passage from Sofia:

> I think it [personal growth] would have come eventually. I don't think it would have come nearly as hard or fast that it did because of the breakup. I mean, it was bound to happen eventually but I think if I was sitting here now and I was still with him, I would be a bit more confident but not as confident as I am now.

Thus, it appears that the changes that were conceptualized within Phase Three can be attributed, at least in part, to the unique experience of going through a non-marital breakup.

The Core Category

The core category for this study was *moving-self-forward*. As outlined in chapter three, in grounded theory research, a core category is chosen according to the criteria that it appears a great deal in the data and has ample explanatory power within the theory.

Moving-self-forward is the process that participants engaged in as they recognized the loss incurred by their breakup, coped with the grief that ensued, learned from this

stressful experience, and, ultimately, connected to themselves and moved beyond the breakup. It was manifested through all of the phases and wove in and out of each phase, providing continuity and connection between them. Thus, movement from one phase to the next depended on the presence of *moving-self-forward*. Sometimes, as participants cycled through phases, they moved backwards or came to a temporary standstill. The overall process, however, involved some degree of forward movement.

The term, *moving-self-forward* refers to movement that is oriented both towards recovery from a breakup, and towards personal growth and change. Although the definition of "forward" was not identical from participant to participant, it usually involved three characteristics: (a) Movement from pain, distress, and preoccupation with the breakup towards reduced pain and a subjective sense of closure, (b) a continuation with goals and activities that an individual was pursuing before the breakup, and (c) movement from focusing on the relationship to focusing on the self and behaving in a manner more consistent with one's own needs and desires. This is articulated in the following comment from Beth, a participant who did not initiate nor expect her breakup:

> Even when it was right at the beginning and I couldn't get through the day without crying, I felt like, yeah, that's OK but you still need to keep on trucking. Get out of the house. Keep studying and moving forward with your life. I know I would have regretted it if I had just stayed home and moped around. And I think that now, because I kept that thought in my head the whole time, that's how I got over him and that's how I was able to become stronger and more confident from it … I just felt so proud of myself that I just kept going and got through it all [semester workload] and even got mostly As. I mean, I thought to myself, [participant's name], you are so strong. You just went through this horrible time but you kept going and even used it as an opportunity to learn something about yourself. It felt really good, so good. And now I'm even more on track towards my ultimate goal... [further schooling].

James, a participant who had chosen to end his relationship, outlined a similar process:

Whatever I do, I have to try to get something positive out of it. I have to take something out of what happened and that's what I did. I mean, I've had to extract the positive stuff out of the relationship and move on and carry forward. I mean, I can't dwell on the negative stuff too much. Everything you do, there's a positive side to it. So, I've just had to get hold of that and move on forward ... with every relationship, I gain experience. I know more about myself. I know more about the other person. So these are all positive steps ... I'm a stronger person now because of what the breakup has taught me.

Although Beth and James differed with respect to whether they wanted the breakup to happen, both described having similar outlooks and taking actions that seemed to involve a great deal of self-initiated forward movement.

To expand further on the meaning of *moving-self-forward*, the use of the word self was included in order to represent the sense of being actively engaged in the process conveyed within the participants' accounts. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they were actively engaged and invested in moving themselves forward. By engaged and invested, I mean that the participants remained continuously involved with the external world and, often, with their internal processes (e.g., self-reflection) during the aftermath of their breakup. Participants described actively coping with their loss and, as outlined in Phase Two, avoided isolating themselves and dwelling on their pain for long periods of time. A sense of being actively engaged, central to *moving-self-forward*, is exemplified in an account from Lillian that is found below:

No one ever said to me, you need a distractor. It was an initiative of my own because I didn't want to sit at home crying. I mean, life goes on and I want to move on. Just because [ex] is no longer a part of my life anymore doesn't mean that my life has to be miserable ... I think it's really important to be future-oriented throughout a breakup. I have definitely needed to have little goals for myself. You can't just say, you know, I'm just going to be miserable. You have to sort of take small steps ... Sometimes, I even consciously think to myself, stop dwelling on this person so much and try to focus your energy and attention elsewhere.

This passage referenced many examples of being actively engaged, including setting

personal goals, striving towards small steps, and intentionally shifting the focus of attention.

Although the term *self* may be construed as implying an individual process, it is important to acknowledge the socially embedded nature of the core category. The idea of being actively engaged with the world assumes that no participant got over their breakup alone, moved forward alone, or grew alone. Regardless of whether they chose to confide to close others throughout the aftermath, it was evident that both recovery from the breakup and personal growth occurred within a social context that cannot be separated from the participants. This idea manifested itself pervasively throughout the data, from the perceived rules that influenced post-breakup beliefs and behaviours, to the university context within which participants experienced their romantic relationship dissolution. As such, the core category of the study, *moving-self-forward*, derives much of its meaning from participants' embedded social context.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter examines the theory of change and personal growth in the aftermath of non-marital relationship dissolution, as articulated in chapter four. The discussion begins with an outline of new insights and ideas that arise from this theoretical framework. Next, the model is compared to existing literature in the areas of both stress-related growth and non-marital relationship disunion outcomes. The core category, *moving-self-forward*, is also situated within an alternate field of research, that of psychiatric rehabilitation, in order to provide additional support for its use in this study. This chapter ends with implications for practice in counselling, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

New insights: Non-marital Romantic Relationship Outcomes

The examination of any positive outcomes that may arise as a result of non-marital breakups has, to date, been an extremely rare venture within the relationship dissolution literature, and has rarely been studied within a qualitative framework. The few studies that have considered this topic have reported and described substantial levels of stress-related growth among university students who have suffered the loss of a romantic relationship (Park et al., 1996; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). The results of this investigation are consistent with these studies in their assertion that students can and do experience personal growth as the result of a breakup. This study makes a unique contribution, however, as it extends beyond description and categorization. The theoretical model that I developed is able to explain how, in the aftermath of a breakup, personal growth may arise. This explanation comprises three interrelated phases that people cycle through as they move towards recovery and, ultimately, personal growth.

These include *experiencing a loss, pulling apart*, and *moving beyond.* Weaving through

each of these three phases is the core category that is central to the theory, *moving-self-*

forward.

Comparing the Findings with Existing Literature

Although the grounded theory of change and growth in the aftermath of non-

marital relationship dissolution is unique in its distinct scope and focus, it can

nevertheless be compared to current, more generalized models of stress-related growth.

By generalized, I refer to the fact that these theories involve a wider variety of stressors

and do not focus on one specific demographic. In the following section, two models that

are commonly cited in the literature and that have amassed some empirical support are

compared and contrasted with the current framework. These include Schaefer and Moos'

(1992) model of life crises and personal growth, and Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995)

theory of transition from trauma to triumph and posttraumatic growth. After the current

theory has been examined in relation to these two models, each phase of the framework is

considered, comparing the major findings with existing literature in the field of both

stress-related growth and non-marital relationship dissolution.

Schaefer & Moos' Model

Schaefer and Moos' (1992) model of life crises and personal growth emphasizes

the importance of personal and environmental systems in determining the amount of

subsequent growth that is experienced, rather than the nature of a stressful event. These

authors focus more on accounting for individual variation in outcomes rather than in

providing an explanation of the overall process through which participants are able to

experience growth. Among the factors implicated in this process, they include cognitive

ability, health status, motivation, self-efficacy, prior experience with similar crises, social

support, community resources, and finances.

Since my study involved semi-structured interviews that did not incorporate

questions about factors such as health status, temperament, finances, and community

assets, this limited the number of systems that could be investigated. Nevertheless, some

of the categories and subcategories that were generated in this study appear to be

consistent with the work of Schaefer and Moos (1992). These include prior experience

with similar crises, coping responses, and social support. Before commenting on this

overlap, it is important to mention that, in their model, Schaefer and Moos used the term

social support to refer to a wide variety of social contact, including social connection and

integration. Consistent with my study, this did not necessarily entail emotional social

support and therefore seems compatible with my framework.

Shifting now to consider the overlap between Schaefer and Moos' (1992) model

and the categories and subcategories that I generated in this study, these similarities

cannot be used to assert for a high degree of likeness between these two models. They

can, however, be used to illustrate that both my framework and Schaefer and Moos'

pathway are influenced and shaped by several common factors. These are explained

further after the next section, at the point where I situate each part of my model within the

extant literature.

Tedeschi and Calhoun's Model

After 15 years of research in the area of stress-related growth, Tedeschi and

Calhoun constructed a model of coping with and growing through trauma (1995). The

authors use the term trauma to refer to experiences such as military combat and

victimization, as well as life crises such as bereavement and serious illness (Linley &

Joseph, 2004). As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) note:

We use the terms *trauma, crisis, highly stressful events*, and other similar terms interchangeably, as roughly synonymous expressions. Our usage of these terms is a bit broader and less restrictive than their use in some literatures (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2000). (p. 1).

Before discussing Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) model further, it is important to note

that the experience of a non-marital breakup cannot be compared to many of the traumas

and highly stressful events that Tedeschi and Calhoun study. For this reason, a direct

comparison cannot be made between this model and Tedeschi and Calhoun's framework.

Their theory is included in the discussion, however, because many parts of it have an

appearance of similarity with my model.

Consistent with the constructivist perspective that I assumed in this study,

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) emphasize the active, creative nature of the individual in

appraising the environment, his or her behaviour, and its consequences. Their model

consists of a series of "self-regulatory feedback loops" (p. 88), occurring within four

distinct stages. In the first stage of their model, the authors characterize an individual's

initial response to a trauma in terms of affect, cognitions, and behaviour. This reaction is

marked by surprise, difficulty managing affect, and having both a limited understanding

and level of behavioural control over the situation. This beginning stage has the

appearance of similarity with the first phase of my framework, *experiencing a loss*.

Within this phase, students expressed surprise and, consistent with the idea of limited

understanding, did not yet realize the multiple implications of their loss.

The second stage of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) model involves what they

refer to as the "secondary response" (p. 89) to the trauma. Here, the lack of understanding

of the event and the distress surrounding it leads to rumination and primarily emotion-focused coping. During the second phase of my model, *pulling apart*, students were engaged in coping strategies primarily as a means of managing their distress and, therefore, it was emotion-focused in nature. Participants were also involved in the active process of *making sense* of their loss. It is unclear, however, whether this can be likened to the rumination described in Stage two, as Tedeschi and Calhoun do not expand on the intended meaning of this term. These authors also do not include any process that resembles the *grieving* found within my model.

The third stage of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) model is called "Coping success" (p. 89). This includes what the authors view as comprising initial growth. They conceptualize this change as successful coping, where a stressful situation is perceived to be more manageable and comprehensible, and, therefore, emotional distress is reduced. Behaviourally, initial growth is characterized by individuals beginning to act in a manner that helps them to move more towards their goals. This third stage has the appearance of similarity to the consequences that I conceptualized within Phase Two of my model. Here, participants experienced *initial changes* that were positive in nature, and emerged as a result of their coping efforts. Many of these changes also involved increased behavioural investment towards personal goals.

The final stage of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) framework is entitled "Further growth: Wisdom" (p. 89). According to these authors, this growth occurs when the positive effects of the initial growth are stabilized and internalized. Thus, further growth is not sharply distinguished from the initial growth but, rather, is built upon it. It involves a more profound understanding, changing the way in which an individual regards the self,

the world, or both. Behaviourally, individuals move towards actions that allow them to attain rewards and goals that were previously not possible, avoid future sources of distress, become involved in new activities, or a combination of the three.

The conceptualization provided in Stage four of Tedeschi and Calhoun's model (1995) shares the appearance of similarity to the third phase of the present framework, *moving beyond*. In Phase Three, as participants grew through their breakup, the earlier *initial changes* that they had made intervened in helping to bring about further changes and personal growth. Students began the process of *seeking novelty*, and gained *awareness* that was marked by a shift in their understanding of themselves, the world, or both. This wisdom and increased perspective helped the students to avoid future sources of distress, and was often accompanied with a greater level of *self-confidence*. As a whole, I framed the growth that occurred in Phase Three within the category, *changing sense of self*.

Shifting now to consider the appearance of similarity between this framework and Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) model, it appears that the personal growth that participants experienced following their breakup is consistent with the idea of stress-related growth. Again, this does not suggest that non-marital dissolution fits within the scope of some of the traumas, such as natural disaster or serious personal injury, that Tedeschi and Calhoun study. Nevertheless, it adds some support to the idea that breakups generate enough stress in order to act as impetuses for personal growth. As mentioned earlier, the past decade has seen other researchers make similar assertions regarding the ability of stressful life events to promote personal growth (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Park et al., 1996; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Thus, it appears that a person does not

necessarily have to experience something that falls within the scope of a trauma for positive personal change to occur.

<div align="center">Examining Each Phase in Relation to Existing Literature</div>

In this section, I consider each interrelated phase of the grounded theory of change and growth in the aftermath of a non-marital breakup. Where prior research is available, I compare it with the major ideas found within the three phases of my study, *experiencing a loss, pulling apart*, and *moving beyond*. Towards the end of this section, the core category, *moving-self-forward*, is also situated within existing literature. Additional support for its use in this study is drawn from research in psychiatric rehabilitation.

Phase 1: Experiencing a Loss

Within this phase, participants were engaged in the initial processing of their loss. For non-initiators of the breakup, this usually began with a feeling of shock or surprise, a reaction that is commonly reported within the extant literature. Sbarra (2006) and Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, and Vanni (1998), for example, both found that, among university students, surprise comprises a typical initial response to a non-marital breakup. Another reaction thought to occur during the first phase was the strategy of *surveying the damage*. Here, the students assessed and realized the immediate implications of their loss. This concept has been described in a comparable manner within the work of Watrous and Honeychurch (1999). These researchers asserted that, after sustaining a non-marital separation, individuals are faced with tasks that involve sorting through debris that was left behind by the loss. Thus, it seems necessary for people to engage in this type of

activity before they are able to move forward from their breakup and, in the case of my study, engage in tasks associated with Phase Two.

Phase 2: Pulling Apart

The second phase, *pulling apart*, refers to the physical, emotional, and symbolic separation from one's ex-partner that occurs in the aftermath of a breakup. Related to this concept, Sbarra (2006) asserted that continued "longing" (p. 301) for an ex-partner was related to slower rates of decline in distress. Similarly, Watrous and Honeychurch (1999) have argued that, after a non-marital disunion, an individual must strive towards the achievement of emotional separation from their ex-partner. They refer to this process as "putting your ex in storage" (p. 137). This is rarely a simple and straightforward process and, as seen in my study, seems to involve a particular context, and a number of embedded strategies. These are discussed within the following five sections.

Grieving, Distress, and Anger

The context of the phase, *pulling apart* was *grieving*, with subcategories *distress* and *anger*. The experience of grieving, distress, and anger among those sustaining a non-marital breakup has been documented a great deal within the non-marital relationship termination literature (Davis et al., 2003; Frazier & Schauben, 1994; Kaczmarek et al., 1990; Mearns, 1991; Sbarra, 2006). With respect to initiator status, both initiators and non-initiators reported experiencing similar levels of distress and anger in this study. This differed only, in some instances, with regards to timing (before vs. after the breakup).

The notion that initiators and non-initiators experience similar levels of distress surrounding a breakup has been subject to mixed findings within the literature. Many researchers (Sbarro, 2006; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Vaughan, 1990) have found no significant differences in the distress found between groups. Sbarra (2006), for example,

noted that anger is a commonly reported emotion in the aftermath of a breakup, and that its occurrence does not depend on initiator status. Similarly, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) reported that, within their sample of 92 North American undergraduate university students, initiators and non-initiators of a non-marital breakup did not differ in the amount of distress that they reported. These results suggest that, even though a person may know that they want to leave their partner, they are still likely to experience a substantial amount of distress throughout this process.

In apparent contradiction with these findings, other researchers have found that non-initiators of a breakup tend to report more distress than initiators (Fine & Sacher, 1997; Sprecher, 1994). These results may be due more to the methodology that these studies employed, as they measured current distress levels at a single point in time, occurring after the breakup, at the time of the study. In doing so, these researchers may have collected data from initiators who had already moved beyond some of their distress. In contrast, Sbarra (2006) measured student distress on a daily basis for a period of one month. Tashiro and Frazier (2003) gauged participant distress at a single point only, but these researchers used a measure that asked participants to consider the amount of distress that they had experienced over the past month rather than their current levels. Thus, these two studies may have been more likely to capture initiator distress because they measured this construct over a greater temporal range.

In accordance with this view, Vaughan (1990) also addressed the importance of the elapsed time period when considering initiator status and distress levels. She argued that initiators of breakups may complete a large portion of their grieving and emotional detachment before the relationship ends. As a result, this discrepancy often creates the

fallacious illusion that those who orchestrate a separation have a faster recovery time than non-initiators.

Past Experience, Perceived Rules, and Level of Contact

Among the intervening conditions found within Phase Two of my model, *prior breakup experience* influenced the way in which participants managed and coped with their breakup. No prior research has examined experience specifically in relation to non-marital breakups, but this topic has been studied in the context of stress-related growth for other types of stressors. Several researchers have found that, when facing a highly stressful event, experience in dealing with the same or similar stressors plays a crucial role in the determination of growth outcomes (Aldwin, 1994; O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998; Schaefer & Moos, 1992). Horowitz's (1986) model of responses to stressors or trauma also emphasizes prior experience as a crucial factor, implicated in both coping with and growing through a stressful life event. As discussed in chapter two, this theory posits that, as one gains experience with a difficult situation, this will culminate in new approaches to similar occurrences, thus increasing the possibility that an individual will experience a growth outcome after subsequent hardships.

Among the other intervening conditions that I conceptualized within Phase Two was *contact* with an ex-partner. This phenomenon was found to be helpful if it followed shortly after a breakup and occurred only a few times or less. Contact became detrimental, however, when it persisted and happened at more frequent and enduring levels. Within the existing literature, this topic has also received very little attention. Among some of the only available studies, one set of researchers had a sample of university students carry a daily diary where they recorded their emotions for a period of one month, after they had recently sustained the loss of a romantic relationship (Sbarra,

2006; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). The results indicated that those students who reported

having contact with an ex-partner after their breakup exhibited a slower decline of both

feelings of love for that person, as well as sadness towards the loss. Unfortunately, the

researchers did not distinguish between various levels or amounts of contact. Students

who had little versus a great deal of association with their ex-partner are, therefore,

lumped together within the same group. Despite this issue, these findings do lend support

to my assertion that regular contact slows recovery and movement forward in the wake of

a non-marital breakup.

The final intervening condition that I included within Phase Two referred to the

notion that the way in which participants managed and coped with their loss was

influenced by *perceived rules* that they held. The source of these guidelines included the

media, cultural norms, and social norms. Although there does not appear to be any

literature relating to this specific topic, there exists a great deal of evidence which

documents the ability of these three sources to influence the beliefs and behaviours of

North American college students, some examples being body image (e.g., Bessenoff,

2006), sexual beliefs (e.g., Chia & Gunther, 2006), sexual relations within non-romantic

opposite sex friendships (e.g., Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005), and career decision

making (e.g., Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005).

Also of relevance is a symbolic interactionist study conducted by Orbuch (1992).

Through her research, Orbuch asserted that, unlike divorce, there are few culturally and

socially derived expectations and norms for how to behave in the event of a non-marital

breakup. She believes that this lack of guidelines may result in difficulties in assigning

meaning to a breakup. Extending to this investigation, this argument may explain, in part,

why so many participants relied on media material as a source for post-breakup rules and guidelines. If students were unable to discern norms and expectations from within their social and cultural groups, they may have felt a greater need to rely on the media for these guidelines. Perhaps this medium provides a reflection of social and cultural norms that do not tend to be discussed during everyday discourse.

Managing Emotions

In addition to intervening conditions, my framework also included strategies and actions that participants employed during Phase Two. One set of such strategies was termed *managing emotions*, because it referred to the students' management of the pain associated with the loss of their romantic relationship. The notion of controlling or regulating emotions in response to distress is well documented within the stress-related growth literature. Horowitz (1986) asserted that any stressful event that causes a strong, negative emotional reaction will spur an attempt (consciously or unconsciously) to control the painful affect and to soothe oneself. Similarly, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) theorized that, after the initial response to a trauma, early coping is focused primarily on the reduction of distress-related emotions.

In my framework, *managing emotions* involved cognitive actions, such as limiting the amount of time that one thinks about their ex-partner, as well as behavioural strategies that were designed to provide distraction from the loss. Considered together, these approaches were thought to comprise an essential part of the recovery process. Within the existing literature, there is some support for this conceptualization. A number of researchers who study within the field of stress-related growth have recently argued that, despite the commonly held belief that one must face and work through their difficult feelings, many who strive to avoid the unpleasant emotions associated with a loss are

able to recover from and to grow through this experience (Bonnano, 2004; Bonnano, Keltner, Holen, & Horowitz, 1995; Wortman & Silver, 2001). In addition, behaviours designed to provide distraction from a stressful life event have been demonstrated as providing an effective means of coping with the situation (Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996; Broderick, 2005; Park & Fenster, 2004). It is important to note that by distraction, I refer to thoughts or activities that allow a person to focus away from their pain and distress, but that do not involve potentially self-harming behaviours such as substance abuse. Specific to non-marital breakups, researchers have shown that when people focus a great deal on their loss and on the negative aspects associated with it, their recovery may be slowed considerably (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Mearns, 1991).

Taken together, these findings do lend support to the effectiveness of the cognitive and behavioural strategies that were employed in an effort to manage pain and distress. At this point, it is important to note that I did not conceptualize participants as engaging in complete avoidance of their breakup. Rather, they seemed to process some parts of their loss, but avoided spending significant amounts of time and effort focusing on the pain and negative aspects of their breakup. This active and selective avoidance appeared to help them to divert more of their energy into other Phase Two strategies, including *making sense* and *connecting socially*.

Making Sense

Within Phase Two, participants were actively attempting to make sense of their loss, a category that included the subcategories, *forming attributions* and *asking questions*. The cognitive action involved in this process was conscious and instrumental in nature, distinguished from the kind of dwelling or excessive rumination that participants sought to avoid through the use of cognitive and behavioural strategies.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, this distinction is explained and further elaborated in the work of Martin and Tesser (1996). In their article, these authors outline various forms of rumination, and distinguish between those that involve intrusive, unwanted thinking and those that are more useful and helpful in nature.

Shifting now towards the non-marital breakup literature, several researchers have argued that, after sustaining this type of separation, people have a strong desire and need to make sense of their loss (Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990; Sorenson et al., 1993; Weber, 1998). This often involves working towards the formation of a story that can adequately explain why and how the breakup occurred. With respect to *forming attributions*, a number of researchers in the field of stress-related growth have highlighted the importance of this process among people who have endured a stressful life event or trauma (Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Taylor, 1995; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). According to these studies, people have a need to work towards forming attributions about what happened, and are able to cope more efficiently when they are engaged in this process.

Connecting Socially

The final strategy/action found within Phase Two was *connecting socially*. Underlying this category is the assumption that the presence of people in the life of someone who has experienced a non-marital breakup influences both their recovery and subsequent growth. As illustrated through the two subcategories, *presence of others* and *eliciting social support*, however, the nature of this social influence appeared to differ among individuals. The former refers to the subjective perception of having a network of people whom one is able to spend time with and share activities that do not necessarily involve disclosure about the breakup. In contrast, I conceptualized the latter subcategory

as the presence of close others whom with a person could discuss the impact of their breakup and obtain emotional support, advice, or both.

When comparing these constructs to the existing literature, it is important to keep this distinction in mind. Many past studies have lacked precision and clarity, using the term social support as an umbrella term which may encompass emotional support, social integration, and social connection (Thoits, 1982, 1992). For this reason, I only included studies that provided a precise meaning of the social domain(s) that they examined in the discussion that follows.

With respect to the subcategory, *eliciting social support*, a number of studies have documented a positive relationship between the amount of emotional support that a person has available to them following a non-marital breakup and their post-breakup adjustment (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Valentiner et al., 1994). My model is only partially consistent with this research, as I have asserted that emotional social support may be helpful for some, but it is not a universal need for young adults experiencing the loss of a relationship. In support of this contention, Orbuch (1992) found that, within a sample of 180 students who had recently experienced the loss of a romantic relationship, many did not confide or seek advice from close others, and only sought support from an average of 1.17 people out of a possible four sources. These students remained consistent in the amount of time that they spent with friends and family, but simply reported not requiring or seeking a great deal of emotional support. Also worthy of mention is a study within the domain of stress-related growth, conducted by Sheikh (2003). This researcher examined the role of social support in posttraumatic growth, using a measure of emotional support to represent social support. When she was

unable to find an association between growth and support, Sheikh concluded that alternate conceptualizations of social support should be used in future investigations.

Within the literature that has examined alternate conceptualizations of social support, many of the findings are compatible with the following categories and subcategories of my model: *connecting socially* and *presence of others*. Moller et al. (2003), for example, found no association between perceived social support and indices of adjustment following a non-marital relationship breakup. They did, however, document an association for perceived connection to the social environment, defined as the "non-relationship specific perception of support from the social environment" (p. 355). Similarly, Park et al. (1996) suggested that people's satisfaction with their social network is positively related to the amount of stress-related growth that they experience in the wake of a serious stressor. Finally, many have asserted that the maintenance of social networks increases the probability that a person will thrive through adversity (see O'Leary et al., 1998 for a review; Schaefer and Moos, 1992). Considered together, all of the studies cited in this paragraph support the notion that, although the social domain is an important factor in a person's adjustment to a stressor, this relationship cannot be captured through conceptualizations that are limited to emotional social support.

Initial Changes

In addition to the strategies discussed above, Phase Two also involved the consequence, *initial changes*. These changes often comprised the first positive outcome(s) that a participant experienced as a result of their breakup, and included the subcategories, *learning, lifestyle,* and *freedom*. Comparing *initial growth* to the extant literature, this notion is also a part of Tedeschi and Calhoun's model of growth through trauma (1995). As mentioned earlier, these authors view initial growth as successful

coping with a trauma or loss, a conceptualization that has the appearance of similarity to my model. When participants began to invest more effort into their academic endeavours, for example, this occurred as a result of coping behaviours that were employed in the management of their loss. Similarly, *learning* arose through participants' successful use of the cognitive coping strategy, *making sense.*

When situating the category, *initial changes* in the context of the non-marital relationship dissolution literature, the only relevant studies are limited to descriptive accounts of breakup outcomes. In one examination of relationship dissolution, a group of researchers found that students commonly reported finding a greater sense of freedom as a result of their breakup (Banks, Altendorf, Greene, & Cody, 1987). Tashiro and Frazier (2003) noted that students habitually report both learning and lifestyle-related shifts when they are asked about any positive changes that they went through as a result of their breakup. Examples that also occurred frequently in my study included learning more about what one desires in a future mate, as well as investing a greater amount of effort into school-related responsibilities. Given the propensity of these reports, non-marital breakups seem to offer at least some opportunities for learning, for gaining a greater level of freedom, as well as for making lifestyle-related changes.

Phase 3: Moving Beyond

Within my model, Phase Three represented the point when participants, in the context of *connecting to self,* began to focus more on themselves and, as a result, experienced a *changing sense of self.* Since none of the studies that have examined personal growth in the wake of non-marital dissolution have extended beyond description of these changes, it is difficult to situate Phase Three within this area of literature.

Instead, support for this part of the framework comes from research in the field of stress-related growth, as well as from anecdotal evidence. In the following section, each of these sources is outlined, as they pertain to the third phase.

The two intervening conditions that I constructed within Phase Three were *distress reduction* and *initial changes*. The former referred to the idea that a student could experience personal growth in the midst of some distress, as only a partial reduction from original levels was necessary in order to allow growth to occur. Although relatively little is known about the relationship between distress and growth, many researchers argue that these constructs do not fall along the same continuum (see review in Linley & Joseph, 2004). In other words, growth and distress do not appear to be inversely related. Similar to my conceptualization of *distress reduction*, the majority of studies have found that the occurrence of stress-related growth does not depend on the complete alleviation of distress (again see Linley & Joseph, 2004 for review).

With respect to the category, *initial changes*, this was included both as a consequence of Phase Two and as an intervening condition within Phase Three. It intervened in the third phase because, in continuing with and reflecting upon their *initial changes*, participants were more easily able to experience a *changing sense of self*. Congruent with this description, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) also distinguished between initial growth through successful coping and later growth that builds from this beginning by stating, "development that initially took place can be a springboard to the [later] growth" (p. 91). This portion of their theory provides support for the idea that initial changes are both an outcome in their own right, as well as an integral part of the process which leads to further growth.

Also garnishing support from existing literature is the strategy, *seeking novelty*. I framed this category as students' increased pursuit of activities that were new for them, and often involved some level of personal risk taking. The work of Aldwin (1994) endorses the importance of this strategy, as he found that the willingness to take personal risks increases the likelihood that one will experience positive benefits in the wake of a highly stressful experience.

Finally, the consequences that I situated within Phase Three can also be compared with the existing stress-related growth literature. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), for example, asserted that some of the potential for the personal growth seen in their model relates to changes in one's self-schema. This shift in self-schema appears to be similar to the *changing sense of self* that I viewed as occurring among participants in my study.

The subcategory, *awareness* can also be compared with prior research. This consequence comprised changes that appeared to be similar to the maturational shifts that occur over the lifespan. Since students are expected to mature a great deal during their college or university years (Luyckx, Goosens, & Soenens, 2006), this has raised some questions about the extent to which any maturational changes could be attributed to the breakup, in contrast with the process of emerging adulthood that these authors describe. The changes documented within my framework, however, seemed to be distinguished from the process of growing older because they happened more rapidly and appeared to be more pronounced. In support of this distinction, a number of authors have argued that growth following the experience of trauma or loss is akin to the process of emotional and cognitive maturation, but occurs at a faster and more sporadic rate (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

In addition to the stress-related growth literature, the anecdotal evidence provided by Weber (1998) comprises a second source of support for the third phase of my model. This researcher is also a clinician in the area of non-marital breakups, and has argued that these events act as impetuses for personal growth because they are able to spur self-discovery. According to Weber, through the experience of a breakup, many students are able to attain greater levels of self-knowledge. This theme of self-discovery is central to Phase Three and is also a part of the core category of my study, as discussed in the following section.

Support for the Core Category

Weaving within each of the three phases of the grounded theory of change and personal growth in the aftermath of romantic relationship dissolution was the core category, *moving-self-forward.* This category was central to the theory and referred to the process through which participants were actively engaged in recognizing their loss, coping with the grief that ensued, and, ultimately, moving beyond the breakup to experience personal change and growth. Once again, within the non-marital breakup literature, the lack of theoretical development limits the number of studies that can be related to the core category. Consequently, *moving-self-forward* was also compared to an alternate area of study, research in psychiatric rehabilitation, in order to provide further support for its use in my model. In the following section, I outline the only relevant study that I could locate within the field of non-marital breakups. This is followed by a discussion of an alternate area of research.

As discussed in chapter four, I conceptualized the core category, *moving-self-forward,* in a manner that assumed participants' active agency in both their recovery and

movement beyond the breakup. Although only relevant for one gender, Marcoux (2004) studied women's experiences following non-marital relationship dissolution. As a central part of this research, he highlighted the active role that women assumed as they coped with their loss and moved forward through the aftermath of their separation. Similar to the students that I interviewed for this study, these women demonstrated a notable sense of active agency in the wake of this experience.

Shifting now to compare the core category with a study in the field of psychiatric rehabilitation, Ochocka, Nelson, and Janzen (2005) explored the phenomenon of people who were able to overcome aspects of their struggle with a serious mental illness. Through grounded theory analysis, the authors studied the experience of these individuals, and were able to construct a framework that explained the process of recovery and personal growth that occurred. Their model was conceptualized as a journey and given the title "Drive to move forward" (p. 315). Central to this journey is an underlying intrinsic motivation that helps a person to engage in forward movement. The authors argue that it is through this drive that strength is mobilized and individuals are able to recover from their mental illness and experience positive personal change.

Though separate fields of investigation, the core category, *moving-self-forward* demonstrates a great deal of consistency with the Ochocka et al. (2005) concept of the drive to move forward. In both instances, a motivation towards forward movement is seen as central to the processes of both recovery and personal growth. Like individuals struggling with a mental illness, the students experiencing a breakup also demonstrated a mobilization of strength. Through their sense of being actively engaged and driven to move forward, the students marshalled strength that was necessary for persevering

throughout their grief, and for using their breakup as an opportunity to experience positive personal growth. This seemed to be able to occur either intentionally or unintentionally, but without this drive to move forward, very little movement between phases would have been possible.

Implications for University Counselling Centres

Since this study contributes new insights to the area of change and personal growth following non-marital disunions, the results have implications for professional helpers who come into contact with people experiencing this type of transition. These recommendations are especially meaningful given the propensity of romantic relationship concerns among the issues presented at university and college counselling centres (McCarthy et al., 1997). In the following section, implications for counsellors are discussed in the context of each of the three phases: *experiencing a loss, pulling apart, and moving beyond.*

Phase 1: Experiencing a Loss

Within the first phase, participants experienced a *romantic relationship dissolution* and often expressed either shock or surprise (non-initiators), or self doubt (initiators). At this point, the students were engaged in the major task of *surveying the damage* of their loss. This involved an assessment of the breakup's immediate implications, as well as realizing the multiple losses that may have been sustained. These tasks were vital during the immediate aftermath of the breakup because they helped an individual to reach a final realization and resolution regarding the finality of their separation. Extending to the counselling context, students who have recently separated from their ex-partner may experience a variety of initial reactions to their loss (i.e., shock,

surprise, self doubt). As such, a counsellor needs to refrain from making assumptions about how a student might present after their breakup. Early in the process, an individual will likely require time and space for processing and assessing the significance of their loss. They should not be protected or shielded from obtaining a complete assessment and realization of their loss, as this important activity needs to be valued and honoured. The sense of finality that they are likely to gain through this process will help them as they confront some of the tasks inherent in Phase Two.

Phase 2: Pulling Apart

As students began to pull apart from their ex-partner and past relationship, a fresh set of tasks emerged. Among these strategies was the management of painful emotions through avoiding excessive rumination about the loss, as well as through distraction and keeping busy. Given the variety of existing models of counselling, many helpers might construe these actions as unhelpful avoidance responses. The present framework, however, assumes that distraction and other ways of keeping busy are not detrimental but, rather, an essential part of the recovery and moving forward process. Within Phase Two, these distractors seemed to help students to recover more quickly and to move towards personal growth. Thus, while it is important that a helper frame a breakup as a loss that will likely involve grieving, it is also advisable that they encourage students to stay engaged in their day-to-day lives and to continue with their academic activities.

This approach is congruent with prior research by Kelly (1981). This author argued that, when working with a student who has recently experienced a breakup, a university counsellor should provide behavioural interventions that help the student to remain functional in meeting their daily responsibilities. According to Kelly, this is

helpful for students because, when they remain engaged in their school or work responsibilities, their self-efficacy is bolstered and they are better able to manage the overwhelming affect that may result from the breakup. At this point, it is important to note that some strategies that serve to provide distraction from a loss may not be helpful and may even be harmful for a student (e.g., substance abuse, unsafe sex, excessive gambling). Thus, it is important to preface the clinical implications discussed above with the recommendation that a counsellor assess the kinds of strategies (if any) that a student is using to cope with their breakup and use this as a basis for helping them to determine which are helping and which are hindering them.

Another Phase Two strategy which offers implications for counsellors concerns the social needs that students may have in the wake of their separation. Within this model, I ascribed social connection a crucial role in recovery and forward movement. Thus, an effective helping approach would involve encouraging students not to isolate themselves, but to remain socially engaged at a level comparable to that maintained during the relationship. Given the variability in the perceived helpfulness of emotional support, however, it is important to be aware that not all students may require this kind of support. According to the current theory, those who do not pursue emotional support would not be expected to fare any worse than those who do. This suggests that helpers could be most effective by trying to understand and honour each student's individual needs, while avoiding the approach of encouraging everyone to pursue a globally defined and excessively rigid concept of social support. Thus, before a counsellor initiates discussion about how a student might access more or different kinds of support, it is important that they first ensure that the student would like to access these sources.

Phase 3: Moving Beyond

Within the third phase, participants experienced a *changing sense of self* as they began to focus on themselves to a greater degree. More specifically, students were engaged in strategies such as *self-reflection* and *seeking novel experiences*. With the knowledge that a non-marital breakup appears to catalyze this kind of personal processing, helpers can be sensitized to this and prepared to provide a student with adequate space and structure for engaging in these important activities. An understanding of Phase Three outcomes may also help counsellors in their work with students who are passing through earlier phases of the cycle. If a helper can appreciate the potential for positive change and personal growth that a breakup affords, they may be better able to bolster a student's sense of hope. Of course, as mentioned in chapter one, no student should be expected to experience personal growth as a result of their breakup or be criticized for not doing so. Instead, the responsibility lies with the helper in determining when an intervention of this sort is likely to be helpful and how it could best be implemented.

Limitations of the Study

As outlined earlier, this study offers valuable insights in the area of change and personal growth following non-marital relationship dissolution. There are, nevertheless, potential limitations of this research that require consideration. Since I chose to examine an area that is largely absent from the existing literature, it is important to recognize that the proposed model is tentative and exploratory in nature. Although not necessarily a limitation, it is likely to be revised and changed substantially as the field grows and new findings emerge.

Most of the limitations relevant to the present investigation arise as a result of the chosen design and methodology. Since data collection was limited to participant interviews, for example, there was only one source of data that was included in this study. Charmaz (2005) asserts that when researchers limit data acquisition to interviews, it places constraints on the kind of theory that can be developed: "Like snapshots, interviews provide a picture taken during a moment in time. Interviewers gain a view of research participants' concerns as they present them, rather than as events unfold" (p. 529). As illustrated in this statement, the sole use of interview data in a study poses difficulties in discerning the temporal dimensions of a given process.

Interview data may also introduce challenges in addressing macro-processes relevant to an investigation, such as the broader structural, institutional, and global context of the inquiry (Charmaz, 2005). If one does not include questions that directly address these issues, it becomes difficult to discern, through interview data alone, the role of any status variables that might be significant (e.g., cultural factors, gender, age). Since I did not conduct this study through a feminist or critical theory lens and did not include direct questions of this sort, this may explain why these types of variables were confined to only one part of the theoretical framework (the intervening condition, *perceived rules*). As Charmaz notes, any attribute that is conceptualized as a status variable must not be assumed beforehand, and, instead, earn its way into the analysis. Consistent with this suggestion, caution was taken in avoiding the presupposition of the significance of any of these factors and, by the end of the research process, none of these had entered into the analysis. Given the limitations imposed by my interview questions, however, their

absence may be better explained by the restricted interview schedule than by any effort that was taken to avoid assuming their inclusion.

Another limitation of this study arises from the relatively narrow and homogenous sample of participants. Although the students who were interviewed represented a rather wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, there was limited variation in socioeconomic level, as theoretical sampling was confined to full-time undergraduate university students. In addition, all participants reported experiencing a heterosexual disunion, eliminating the possibility of including the experiences of any gay or lesbian participants. Finally, all of the students who were interviewed for this study volunteered their time, without receiving any incentive beyond a minimum stipend for participation. This group may therefore differ systematically from those students who did not volunteer to be part of the research.

Considered together, these sampling limitations highlight the importance of recognizing that the present theoretical model is specific to the particular context, participants, and researcher within which it was created. In this instance, the goal of constructing a substantial theory took precedence over any intention of generalizing beyond the immediate research situation.

<div align="center">Considerations for Future Research</div>

Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this investigation, it constitutes a rich and fertile source of ideas for future research. The articulated framework suggests that some university students can and do experience personal growth in the wake of non-marital disunion, and that these changes resemble stress-related growth in both their nature and the pathway through which they occur. If non-marital breakups can, in fact,

spur stress-related growth, this poses implications for those people who study this process. The university student population is highly accessible to researchers, and non-marital dissolution is a relatively common occurrence within this demographic. Further investigation into the process sustained in the aftermath of a breakup could, therefore, help to illuminate and clarify many aspects of stress-related growth. This may assist in the expansion of this field and contribute towards the ultimate goal: A theoretical framework of stress-related growth that clearly connects all of the constructs and variables that are currently involved in its study.

Within the present model, there were many factors that appeared to influence the processes of recovery, change, and personal growth. Since many of these are largely absent from the existing literature, they require much more detailed examination. Within the social domain, for example, I asserted that social connection is vital to the recovery process and does not necessarily constitute emotional support. Future studies could clarify this finding by determining, in more detail, the aspects of social connection that make it an integral part of the framework and an important intervening factor. Another example is the *perceived rules* that were positioned as factors that influence post-breakup thinking and behaviour. Extending from the framework, it would be immensely helpful to understand more about how these rules are formed and how institutionalized practices and processes contribute to this phenomenon.

In addition to the factors found within the model, the potential limitations of this study also offer directions for further investigation. Given the temporal issues introduced by the one-time interview design, future research could incorporate multiple visits with participants, allowing for greater illumination of the process that young adults go through

after a breakup and the myriad factors that influence this. In order to better address the broad structural, institutional, and cultural factors that surround non-marital breakups, subsequent studies could also incorporate additional data sources. These might include historical documents, observations from popular culture, and/or the consideration of relevant agencies and institutions. Finally, further research could also operate within a feminist or critical theory framework, elucidating a better understanding of how privilege, power, and oppression operate and interact within the context of non-marital breakups.

With respect to sampling, my framework could gain density and complexity through wider sampling procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach allows for a greater degree of variation to be built into a theory. For the present model, sampling could be extended to examine non-marital breakups among groups such as young adults who are not attending university or college, older adults, and gay and lesbian participants.

Conclusion

The current investigation utilized a grounded theory approach, as articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Data consisted of transcripts and field notes from 11 semi-structured interviews with university students who reported experiencing the loss of a non-marital romantic relationship within the past year. The research questions that guided this inquiry were as follows: (1) What kinds of changes, if any, do students report experiencing as the result of their non-marital romantic relationship dissolution, and, (2) Based on students' subjective explanations of change, what is the process through which this occurred?

Through grounded theory analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes, I developed a theoretical model of change and growth following the dissolution of a non-marital romantic relationship. I conceptualized this theory as comprising three interrelated phases: *Experiencing a loss, pulling apart*, and *moving beyond*. The core category that I constructed from the analysis was *moving-self-forward*. After this model was elaborated and developed, its unique contributions to the field were highlighted. Next, the framework was situated within the existing psychological literature, where support was gathered for the major findings. Finally, implications for counselling, limitations of the study, and directions for future research were outlined.

On a personal level, the knowledge that I have gained about the experience of change and personal growth in the aftermath of non-marital breakups has helped me not only as a researcher, but also as a counsellor working within the university student population. Through this research, I have gained a greater appreciation of both the struggles and pain that breakups can create, as well as the triumphs and growth that may arise. Considering the significant benefits that I have experienced in doing this work, I find it unfortunate that this area of inquiry remains largely underrepresented within the literature. It is my hope that this study will generate further interest and research within this important area, serving as a bridge over which new understandings and further practical implications can arise.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. **Can you start by telling what led up to your breakup. What was this experience like for you?**

2. **What were you aware of after you broke up?**

   Prompts:
   * What was it like for you in the days and weeks (if applicable) following your separation?
   * Can you tell me about the relationship that you currently have with your ex-partner?

3. **Do you think that you have experienced any changes as a result of the breakup?**

   Prompts:
   * How do you see yourself now vs. then
   * What, if anything, is different?
   * What would you say is the most significant outcome of your breakup?

4. **Out of all the changes that you mentioned, which has had the most significant impact on your life? Because...**

5. Question posed only if changes are reported (positive or negative)
   For the change that you identified as having the most significant impact on your life, how do you think that this change happened?

   Prompts:
   * What aspect of the breakup do you think caused this change?
   * What role might you have played in this process?
   * What do you think your ex-partner's role was in this process?
   * What other factors influenced this process?

Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Form 2- Informed Consent By Participants In a Research Study

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at hweinber@sfu.ca or phone at 604-268-6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by professional ethics. Materials will be maintained in a secure location. The only exception is if you tell me that you are going to harm yourself or someone else, I am ethically bound to do anything that I reasonably can to prevent this from happening.

Title: An exploration of young adult's experiences of non-marital romantic relationship dissolution.
Investigator Name: Sarah Hebert
Investigator Department: Education

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the Study Information Document describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

Risks to the participant, third parties or society:

During the research interview, you will be asked questions about your break-up. For some people, this may be painful and/or bring up painful memories. For this reason, you may choose to skip particular questions at any point in the study and you may also terminate your involvement at any point.

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:
Counsellors in university and college counselling centers often work with students following break-up. Thus, this study may yield results relevant to both counsellors and to those who have experienced a break-up.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of Research Ethics or the researcher named above or with the Chair, Director or Dean of the Department, School or Faculty as shown below.

Department, School or Faculty: Chair, Director or Dean:
Education   **Dr. Tom O'Shea**
8888 University Way
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia
V5A 1S6, Canada

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting:
Sarah Hebert at shebert@sfu.ca

I have been informed that the research will be confidential. I understand that my supervisor or employer may require me to obtain his or her permission prior to my participation in a study of this kind. I understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study and agree to participate:

The participant and witness shall fill in this area. Please print legibly	
Participant Last Name:	Participant First Name:
Participant Contact Information:	
Participant Signature:	Witness (if required by the Office of Research Ethics):
Date (use format MM/DD/YYYY)	