Can We Be (and Stay) Friends? Remaining Friends After Dissolution of a Romantic Relationship

MELINDA BULLOCK
Saint Louis University

JANA HACKATHORN
Murray State University

EDDIE M. CLARK
Saint Louis University

BRENT A. MATTINGLY
Ashland University

ABSTRACT. Although many individuals report being friends with their ex-romantic partners (Wilmot, Carbaugh, & Baxter, 1985), the literature regarding post-romantic friendships is very limited. We investigated whether satisfaction in the dissolved romantic relationship could predict post-romantic friendships and friendship maintenance. We found that the more satisfied individuals were during the dissolved romance, the more likely they were to remain friends and the more likely they were to engage in friendship maintenance behaviors. We also found that friendship maintenance fully mediated the association between past romantic satisfaction and current friendship satisfaction.

Keywords: friendship, relationship maintenance, relationship quality

INDIVIDUALS ARE GETTING MARRIED later in life (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004), and opportunities for non-marital romantic relationships are increasing (Hebert & Popadiuk, 2008). However, the extant non-marital dissolution literature is limited. Research shows that ex-partners are more likely to be friends if they were friends before the romance (Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989), if the breakup was mutual (Hackathorn, Clark, Mattingly, Bullock, & Weaver, 2008),
or if the friendship is socially supported (Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2002).

Like any relationship, ex-partners must maintain their friendship if they want it to last. The Friendship Maintenance Scale (FMS; Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004) assesses maintenance by measuring a variety of behaviors (e.g., “How often do you and your friend compliment each other?”) using four subscales: positivity (makes the friendship more rewarding), supportiveness (friend/friendship support), openness (self-disclosure), and interaction (joint activities).

While a clear reciprocal association exists between maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 2001), the association between satisfaction from the dissolved romance and the post-romantic friendship has not been examined. We expected past romantic satisfaction to be positively associated with current friendship status and friendship maintenance behaviors with an ex-partner. Because relationally satisfied individuals engage in maintenance behaviors (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 2001) and satisfaction is a relational outcome of maintenance (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991), we expected that friendship maintenance would mediate the association between past romantic satisfaction and current friendship satisfaction.

Methods

Participants were 131 undergraduates who were relatively young (M = 19.11 years, SD = 1.36), predominantly female (81%) and Caucasian (75%), who dated their most recent ex-romantic partner for an average of 13.60 months (Mdn = 8 months), and were broken-up for an average of 12.30 months (Mdn = 7 months).

Participants indicated on an 8-point scale (0 = not friends, 7 = best friends) their current friendship status with their most recent ex-romantic partner (M = 3.49, SD = 1.96). A continuous scale was used because it allowed participants to indicate: 1) if a friendship existed at all (i.e., with a response of “0”) and 2) the relative closeness of the friendship. Only 11.5% of participants answered “0” to this question; 7.6% answered “1”; 13.0% answered “2”; 10.0% answered “3”; 22.1% answered “4”; 21.4% answered “5”; 11.5% answered “6”; and 3.1% answered “7”.

Participants also completed the satisfaction subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) regarding their current friendship (M = 3.28, SD = 1.97) and a modified version of the satisfaction subscale regarding their dissolved romance (M = 4.50, SD = 2.14) with their ex-partner. Satisfaction responses were averaged for the dissolved romance (α = .90) and for the current friendship (α = .96). Finally, participants completed the 37-item FMS (M = 5.01, SD = 2.10). Each subscale demonstrated adequate reliability among the current sample: positivity, α = .73; supportiveness, α = .90; openness, α = .82; and interaction, α = .92.
Results

As hypothesized, past romantic satisfaction and friendship status were significantly correlated, $r = .48$, $p < .001$, indicating that those who were more satisfied during the romantic relationship were more likely to remain friends. Dichotomizing friendship status (participants who answered “0” to the 8-point item were classified as not friends, whereas everyone else was classified as friends), and conducting a logistic regression yielded similar results, $OR = 1.64$, $p < .001$. Additionally, among participants who reported a friendship with their ex-partner, satisfaction during the dissolved relationship was significantly correlated with each subscale of the FMS ($r$ ranging from .33 to .46, $p$s $< .001$).

Because the FMS subscales were highly intercorrelated ($r$s ranging from .60 to .89), and there was evidence of multicollinearity when predicting current friendship satisfaction (tolerance ranged from .18 to .54; Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007), we created a composite FMS score ($\alpha = .94$), which was significantly correlated with past romantic satisfaction ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). Also as hypothesized, friendship maintenance fully mediated the association between past romantic satisfaction and current friendship satisfaction (Baron & Kenny, 1986): Past romantic satisfaction significantly predicted satisfaction with the friendship ($\beta = .17$, $p = .05$) and friendship maintenance ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$), friendship maintenance significantly predicted satisfaction with the friendship after controlling for past romantic satisfaction ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), and the association between past romantic satisfaction and current friendship satisfaction was significantly reduced when friendship maintenance was included in the model, suggesting full mediation ($\beta = -.13$, $p > .05$), $Z = 4.91$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, this pattern remained when controlling for time since breakup.

Discussion

The current study indicates that individuals who were satisfied during the dissolved romantic relationship are more likely to be friends with their ex-romantic partner and are more likely to use friendship maintenance behaviors. Importantly, friendship maintenance fully mediated the association between past romantic satisfaction and current friendship satisfaction, suggesting that if a romantic relationship was satisfying, it is more likely that a friendship will emerge and be maintained, which in turn makes the friendship more satisfying.

Many of the current participants reported being friends with their ex-romantic partner. However, this could be because they are likely to live in close physical proximity (i.e., campus housing) and are more likely to share friends with an ex-romantic partner than with other individuals, thus limiting generalizability. Additionally, our mostly Caucasian and female sample limits generalizability. Finally, current friendship satisfaction could inhibit accurate recall of the past
romantic satisfaction. Research indicates negative affect fades faster than positive affect (Ritchie & Skowronski, 2008), and within the context of marriages, past relationship quality resembles current relationship quality (Karney & Coombs, 2000). Therefore, the relationship between current friendship and past romantic satisfaction could be biased.

The current study adds to the post-romance friendship literature by demonstrating that past romantic satisfaction influences whether a friendship will emerge and be maintained. Although the romantic relationship may not have worked, individuals can turn a satisfying, albeit dissolved, romance into a meaningful and rewarding friendship.

AUTHOR NOTES

Melinda Bullock is a Doctoral Candidate in social psychology at Saint Louis University. Her research interests include close relationships and health persuasion. Jana Hackathorn is an Assistant Professor of psychology at Murray State University. Her research interests lie in romantic relationships, attraction, and infidelity. Eddie M. Clark is a Professor of psychology at Saint Louis University. He is a Social Psychologist with interests in close relationships and health attitudes/persuasion. Brent A. Mattingly is an Assistant Professor of psychology at Ashland University, and his research primarily focuses on relationships, motivation, and the self.

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