

# Relationship Dissolution and Romance and Mate Selection Myths

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**ABSTRACT.** This research examines the impact that of relationship dissolutions on romance and mate selection beliefs. A questionnaire was randomly distributed to 261 young adults regarding past breakup history and attitudes toward unrealistic beliefs of romance and mate selection. Age, gender, relationship status, the number of breakups and recentness of a breakup were all shown to affect one or more of these unrealistic beliefs. The study suggests that the more relationship experience an individual has, the less likely one is to hold unrealistic beliefs when choosing a mate.

Studies that examined dating relationships, attitudes toward mate selection and marriage, and the dynamics of ending close relationships (Grover, Russell, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985; Sorenson, Russell, Harkness, & Harvey 1993; Zusman & Knox, 1998) offer insight as to why the process of choosing a future partner can be both intriguing and difficult for young adults and how breakups can shape attitudes and expectations toward intimate relationships. Individuals with unrealistic expectations about mate selection are more likely to experience indecision, frustration and disappointment while choosing a mate (Larson, 1992).

Cobb, Larson, and Watson (2003) suggested that few other experiences have such a rippling effect on the lifespan of the individual than that of choosing a future partner. Tashiro and Frazier (2003) noted that the ending of a close relationship can be one of life's most difficult events. Difficult life events can often alter the belief and value systems of individuals. Since breakups have been identified as an event that can be difficult and life changing, examining how a relationship dissolution impacts mate selection beliefs can yield valuable insights into young adult development of values and attitudes related to mate selection. The purpose of this research is to explore how relationship dissolutions actually impact ideals or beliefs regarding mate selection. If patterns are identified between breakups and mate selection, it is important to understand how such breakups impact these beliefs.

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## Review of Literature

*Social Exchange Theory*

The process of successful mate selection can be explained in a number of ways. Social exchange theory posits that individuals evaluate the success of a relationship based on a number of comparisons made both within his or her past experience, as well as comparisons made against his or her peers (White & Klein, 2002). Surra, Gray, Cottle, Boettcher (2004) hypothesized that there are a number of observable predictors that will indicate both the success of a relationship, as well as the commitment the couple has to the relationship. Relationship success may also be influenced by the beliefs an individual has about relationships. Larson (1992) observed nine unrealistic beliefs about romance that one may hold during the mate selection process that can be detrimental to any relationship.

*Mate Selection Beliefs*

A meta-analysis of mate selection and premarital counseling literature, performed by Larson (1992) identified nine unrealistic beliefs of mate selection. Unrealistic beliefs are related to satisfaction in a relationship, as well as the success of the relationship. The first unrealistic belief is “The One and Only,” which suggests that there is only one right person for an individual to marry. Individuals with this belief may let viable marriage prospects pass them by. He or she may expect to feel some specific feeling when the right person comes along, and that they may not feel a desire to actively date or get to know others on a higher level of intimacy. Second is the “Perfect Partner” belief, which claims that the perfect partner must be found before a person chooses to marry. People that hold this belief often engage in short term relationships aimed at evaluating their partner, and do not take the time to build relationships with their dates. These relationships may lead to disappointment for both the evaluator and the person being evaluated. The myth of the “Perfect Self” belief or “Perfect Relationship beliefs suggest that an individual must be perfect before choosing to marry, or a relationship must be proven perfect before a couple will enter into marriage. Those who hold this belief may have dating relationships that last much longer than needed. They may arrange test situations designed to prove the strength of the relationship. Many times the partner grows tired of these situations and may terminate the relationship (Larson, 1992).

Individuals who hold the “Try Harder” belief may feel that they can be happy in any relationship if they work hard enough at it. These individuals may be too casual about mate selection and may not take time for adequate thought or preparation before committing to marriage. After marriage, the individual may think that he or she alone can fix the marriage. The “Love is Enough” belief implies that being in love with someone is a sufficient reason to marry that person, and individuals who hold this belief may not realize that many other factors contribute to a healthy marriage relationship (Larson, 1992).

The “Cohabitation” belief suggests cohabitation will help prove a couple’s relationship before they commit to marriage. However, studies found that marriage quality is lower in those who cohabit before marriage than those who do not (Horowitz & White, 1998; & Treas & Giesen,

2000). “Opposites Compliment” suggests that only people with opposing characteristics are suited to marry each other. People may believe that they need to find someone whose different characteristics make up for their shortcomings, and personal change may be discouraged. Finally, the idea that “Choosing Should be Easy” suggests that choosing a mate is a matter of chance. This belief takes away the responsibility for the events of the relationship (Larson, 1992).

### *Breaking Up*

Young adults agreeing with these unrealistic beliefs they hold in regard to mate selection, may culminate in the ending of a close relationship. Sorenson, Russell, Harkness and Harvey (1993) surveyed forty college students, twenty-five female and fifteen male about causes of relationship dissolution. They found that relationships end frequently because of different emotional investments. For example, one partner feels he or she is in love while the other does not feel the same. Another major reason of relationship dissolution was a desire to date other people. Fifty-percent of both male and female respondents mentioned a growing dissimilarity in interests and attitudes as a factor in the decision to end a relationship. The researchers also found distinct gender differences in the desired amounts of relationship talk and sexual relationships. Forty-percent of females were disappointed that their partner was not more willing to be emotionally expressive and talk about the relationship, and mentioned this as factor of the breakup. Forty-percent of men named the unwillingness of their partners to engage in sexual activity as a factor in their reasoning for ending the relationship.

Men and women also use different coping skills after relationship dissolution (Sorenson et al., 1993). These authors found that females were more likely to use confiding in good friends as a form of coping with a breakup than males, and that the people they chose as confidants were most frequently female. Males were more likely than females to begin dating soon after the breakup. The researchers also found similarities in coping strategies between genders. Those who felt that the relationship was over experienced higher levels of closure. Those who felt that they had a significant amount of control over their own recovery were more likely to cope well with the fact that the relationship had ended. The less the participants perceived that the relationship was over, the more likely they were to have thoughts and feelings about their ex-partner.

Individuals who experience significant breakups also experienced personal growth. The most common ways in which people experience psychological growth after traumatic life events are positive changes in personal identity and the development of relationships with others, philosophies of life, and empathy. The amount of stress experienced after a breakup differs from person to person based on the relationship background of the individual (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Furthermore, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) identified four factors that may be related to personal growth following a breakup. These factors are: attributions regarding the cause of the breakup, personality, gender, and initiator status.

The factor that was most influential in the individual’s response to the relationship breakup was attributions regarding the cause of the breakup, including: personal characteristics, partner’s characteristics, problems with the relationship in general, and attributions to the environment. Personality was another factor in predicting the amount of personal growth following a breakup.

The researchers used the Big Five Personality Factors developed by Watson and Hubbard (1996). These factors are: extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and neuroticism. The next factor explored by Tashiro and Frazier (2003) was gender. The last factor was initiator status, which refers to the individual who was responsible for the breakup.

The results of the study were as follows: in regards to attributions, individuals who attributed the cause of the breakup to partner characteristics or environmental characteristics were more likely to experience distress than those individuals who attributed the cause of the breakup to personal characteristics or general problems with the relationship. Personality only accounted for a small amount of personal growth following a breakup. Neuroticism was the only personality characteristic that was significantly related to the experience of distress following the relationship dissolution. Agreeableness was the only characteristic related to personal growth. Through their research, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) concluded that the possibility of personal growth following a breakup may lead to future relationships that can be more fulfilling.

Dating, breakups and beliefs of mate selection are all factors contributing to the selection of a future partner. Couple formation may have more effect on other life choices than any other choice made throughout the life span (Cobb, et al., 2003). What individuals believe about mate selection influences the way they feel and guides their responses to dating and breakup situations, which, in turn, influences the degree of satisfaction they feel with their lives and relationships (Cobb, et al., 2003).

### Hypotheses

The current study hypothesized that breakups affect each of Larson's (1992) Nine Unrealistic Beliefs in different ways.

Hypothesis 1: Those who have had multiple breakups would be more likely to hold the belief that they should wait to be married until they have found the "Perfect Partner."

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who have experienced multiple breakups would be more likely to believe that *Cohabitation* would help them improve their chances of being happily married.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals who have experienced multiple breakups would be more likely to believe that they should be the "Perfect Self" before they get married.

Hypothesis 4: Individuals who have had fewer breakups would be more likely to believe that there is a "One and Only" right person for them to marry and that "Opposites Compliment."

Hypothesis 5: Individuals who have had fewer breakups would be more likely to believe that if they "Try Harder" they could be happy with any person they choose to marry, that "Love is Enough" and that "Choosing Should Be Easy."

### Methods

To test the hypotheses, the authors used the measure of mate selection myths developed by Cobb, Larson and Watson (2003). This thirty-two-item questionnaire examined Larson's (1992) nine unrealistic beliefs of mate selection. Cobb, et al. found that three beliefs regarding perfection (the perfect partner, the perfect self and the perfect relationship) loaded into a single factor, leaving a total of seven unrealistic beliefs. Factor analyses performed with the current project also identified an identical factor matrix as reported by Cobb et al. This instrument

consisted of twenty-eight other questions to measure the aforementioned beliefs and four distracter items that helped disguise the true nature of the questionnaire. Five of the twenty-eight questions that measured unrealistic beliefs were reverse coded. The questionnaire also included items that examined relationship history, including the number of breakups, who initiated the breakup, how difficult the breakup was, how recently the couple broke-up and how long the couple had been together before the breakup.

The responses to the Nine Unrealistic Beliefs questionnaire section were measured on a five point Likert scale that measured the degree of agreement, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The breakup section was measured differently for each question. The questions dealing with relationship history included *How recent was your last break?* *How long had you been together before that relationship ended?* Response scales to these items are as follows: 0-3 months, 4-6 months, 7-11 months, 1-2 years, 3-4 years, and 5 or more years. When asking about who initiated the breakup, the respondents were given the choice of: yourself, your partner, both or another person. A five point Likert scale was also used to measure the difficulty of the breakup, ranging from very difficult to very easy.

## Results

First, the perception of the seven unrealistic beliefs was compared between those who had experienced a breakup compared to those who had not. Next, comparisons were made for those who had experienced multiple breakups, the length of time passed since the last breakup, the amount of time spent in the relationship, who initiated the breakup, and the difficulty of the breakup. Also, gender and age were examined.

The sample consisted of 261 randomly selected undergraduate students (mean age 22.3) at a university in the Northwestern United States. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and ethical protocols were followed. Males accounted for 46.4% of the participants and females accounted for 53.6% of the participants. The majority were single participants (64.4%), followed by married (21.8%), engaged to be married (5.4%), and divorced (2.3%). Six-percent selected 'other' as their relationship status.

Seventy-percent of the participants had experienced at least one serious relationship dissolution, and 30% had not. Forty-one percent had experienced 5 or more. The majority of those experiencing a breakup (68.3 %), reported their most recent breakup within the past two years. In their most recent relationship, 91.8% had been together less than two years. Initiation of the break up varied in that 45.9 % had initiated the breakup, 19.1 % reported that their partner initiated the breakup, 31.7 % of breakups were consensual, and 3.4 % were attributed to another person. When asked about difficulty of the breakup, 4.7 % responded that it was very easy, 11.5 % responded that it was easy, 30.1 % moderately difficult, 31.2 % responded that it was difficult, and 23.0 % responded that it was very difficult.

Independent sample t-tests were performed to examine the difference in perception of the unrealistic beliefs between those who have experienced a relationship dissolution compared to those who have not. Subsequent comparisons include how the beliefs vary for those who have experienced multiple breakups, the recentness of the last breakup, the length of time in the relationship, and who initiated the breakup. Gender and age differences were also identified.

Comparison by age (21 and older versus 20 and younger) identified significant differences in the myth of believing in “The One and Only,” “Try Harder,” “Perfection,” and “Love is Enough,” with younger persons reporting a greater likelihood of agreeing with these marital myths (see Table 1). The only gender difference identified found that females were more likely to agree with the myth of *Try Harder* than males (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean comparison of marital myths by age, gender and relationship status

Mate Selection Myth	Age	Mean	sd	t	Gender	Mean	sd	t	Relationship Status	Mean	sd	t
The One	>= 21	15.16	3.77	3.85**	Male	14.7	4	1.344	Single	14.57	4.2	0.646
	< 21	13.29	3.9		Female	14.04	3.8		All others	14.23	3.8	
Try Harder	>= 21	10.16	3.16	3.44**	Male	10.08	3.4	2.26*	Single	10.13	3.4	2.01*
	< 21	8.79	3.12		Female	9.17	3		All others	9.29	3.1	
Perfection	>= 21	11.76	2.89	2.97**	Male	11.62	2.8	1.72	Single	11.21	3	-0.41
	< 21	10.72	2.55		Female	11.02	2.8		All others	11.36	2.7	
Choose	>= 21	14.86	2.98	1.58	Male	14.6	2.9	-0.20	Single	15.13	2.9	2.11*
	< 21	14.3	2.57		Female	14.67	2.8		All others	14.96	2.8	
Opposites	>= 21	14.62	2.5	0.26	Male	14.63	2.4	0.23	Single	14.49	2.7	-0.52
	< 21	14.54	2.33		Female	14.56	2.5		All others	14.65	2.3	
Cohabitation	>= 21	16.77	4.42	0.05	Male	16.22	4.9	-1.81	Single	16.23	4.9	-1.39
	< 21	16.74	4.79		Female	17.25	4.3		All others	17.06	4.4	
Love is Enough	>= 21	12.40	3.4	3.51**	Male	11.49	3.5	-1.81	Single	12.43	3.5	2.38*
	< 21	10.93	3.2		Female	11.99	3.3		All others	11.39	3.3	

\* p &lt; .05 \*\* p &lt; .01

Comparisons of agreement on the marital myths by relationship status (single versus engaged or married) showed significant differences in the beliefs of *Try Harder*, *Choosing Should Be Easy*, and the belief that *Love is Enough*, indicating that single respondents were more likely to agree with these unrealistic beliefs (see Table 1).

Comparisons of those experiencing a relationship dissolution to those who had not experienced a dissolution found significant differences in the myths of *The One and Only*, *Perfection*, and *Love is Enough* (see Table 1). Those who had not experienced a breakup of a romantic relationship tended to report a stronger belief in these myths than persons who have experienced a breakup. Similarly, a comparison of those who reported only one breakup to those who have experienced two or more breakups identified significant differences in the beliefs of *Opposites Compliment* and *Love is Enough*. Persons with more relationship dissolutions reported less of a tendency to agree with these relationship myths (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mean comparison of marital myths by number of breakups, recency of breakup, and length of time in relationship.

Mate Selection Myth	<i>Experienced Breakup</i>	Mean	sd	<i>t</i>	<i>Recency of Breakup</i>	Mean	sd	<i>t</i>	<i># of Breakups</i>	Mean	sd	<i>t</i>
The One	Yes	14.81	3.79	2.91**	>= 7 months	14.78	3.86	-0.147	More than One	14.85	3.81	0.28
	No	13.27	4.04		<= 6 months	14.87	3.64		One only	14.66	3.81	
Try Harder	Yes	9.76	3.3	1.26	>= 7 months	10.24	3.32	3.03**	More than One	9.75	3.27	-0.09
	No	9.21	3.01		<= 6 months	8.65**	3		One only	9.8	3.44	
Perfection	Yes	11.56	2.8	2.267	>= 7 months	11.7	2.61	1.053	More than One	11.57	2.74	0.09
	No	10.7	2.72		<= 6 months	11.22	3.21		One only	11.52	3.01	
Choose	Yes	14.78	2.72	1.253	>= 7 months	15.09	2.7	2.43*	More than One	14.81	2.7	0.31
	No	14.29	3.06		<= 6 months	14.04	2.65		One only	14.67	2.82	
Opposites	Yes	14.71	2.45	1.139	>= 7 months	14.69	2.49	-0.138	More than One	14.44	2.53	-2.67**
	No	14.33	2.36		<= 6 months	14.75	2.38		One only	15.59	1.99	
Cohabitation	Yes	16.58	4.77	-1.012	>= 7 months	16.67	4.67	0.398	More than One	16.45	4.86	-0.35
	No	17.21	4.05		<= 6 months	16.36	5.03		One only	16.79	4.56	
Love Is Enough	Yes	12.14	3.41	2.77**	>= 7 months	12.4	3.51	1.514	More than One	12.52	3.33	2.81**
	No	10.88	3.19		<= 6 months	11.56	3.14		One only	10.83	3.43	

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

Those who had experienced a breakup within the last six months were compared to those who experienced a breakup at a previous point in time. The beliefs of *Try Harder* and *Choosing Should Be Easy* significantly differed in that those who had experienced a more recent breakup reported higher levels of agreement to these myths (see Table 2). Finally, a comparison was made on the length of the relationship (less than one year versus one year or longer). Interestingly, the belief in *Cohabitation* significantly differed in that those with a longer length of relationship were more likely to agree that cohabitation would lead to successful relationships (see Table 2).



## Discussion

This study identified significant differences between those who had experienced relationship breakups with those who had not. In general, it was found that those who had experienced more relationship breakups were less likely to agree with commonly held myths about romance and mate selection. Specifically, they were less inclined to believe that there is only one person for them, that they should strive for perfection in themselves and their partner, and that love is enough to make a relationship succeed. Those who had experienced multiple breakups were also less likely to believe that opposites compliment each other and that love is enough to make a relationship succeed. It appears that those who have had more relationship experience learn from such events and may be less inclined to believe in relationship myths.

The recentness of a breakup was also found to impact beliefs in romance and mate selection myths. Those who had experienced a breakup within the last six months were more likely to believe that trying harder can make a relationship work, perhaps reflecting remorse and second-guessing over the recent breakup. Female participants were more likely than males to believe that trying harder is all that is needed to make a relationship succeed. Agreement with the “Try Harder” myth may be a reflection of the cultural norm that women are expected to maintain relationships. Those individuals who were married or engaged were less likely to agree with the myths that choosing a partner should be easy and that love is enough for a relationship to succeed when compared to single individuals. This would suggest that those who have more relationship experience have learned that successful relationships are not easy to establish and that love is a necessary but not a sufficient component for relationship success.

This study failed to support the hypothesis that individuals who had experienced more than one breakup would be more likely to hold a stronger belief in “Perfection.” In contrast, the study suggested that those who had not experienced a breakup held a stronger belief in “Perfection,” and were more likely to believe that there is only one right person for them. They were also more likely to believe that “Love is Enough.”

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the more relationship experience an individual has, the less likely he or she will be to hold unrealistic beliefs regarding mate selection. The study found that most unrealistic beliefs were disagreed with; however, those with less relationship experience were generally more prone to accept unrealistic beliefs. Current relationships can be training grounds for individual attitudes, interactions and skills that may help relationships with future partners (Ruvolo, Fabian & Ruvolo, 2001). Therefore, it is possible that relationship dissolutions play an important role in the mate selection process and preparing individuals for success in future relationships.

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