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HARD FEELINGS? PREDICTING ATTITUDES TOWARD FORMER ROMANTIC PARTNERS

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ABSTRACT

Most research on relationship quality addresses ongoing involvements. Departing from this trend, Athenstaedt et al. (2020) explored attitudes toward former romantic partners in an Austrian sample of heterosexual respondents. While the authors focused on gender as a predictor of attitudes, there were two stronger predictors. In two studies conducted in Germany and the USA, we replicate the finding that perceived social support before and continued friendly relations after the breakup are associated with a positive ex-partner attitude. As a new theoretical contribution, we also find that regret over having started the relationship predicts a negative ex-partner attitude. We note implications and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Research has extensively explored the psychological factors contributing to the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships (Finkel et al., 2017; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Much less is known about post-breakup judgments. How do people feel about their former partners? This question is significant for a number of reasons. First, relationship dissolution implicates individual differences in personality. Depending on personal characteristics such as attachment style or self-esteem, individuals might cope differently with a romantic loss (McCarthy et al., 1997; Perilloux & Buss, 2008). The way people manage breakups offers insights into their coping strategies during other stressful life events, and especially events in the social domain. Second, many ex-partners still share important resources (e.g., possessions, friends, or children), thereby prolonging interdependence (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003). Attitudes toward the ex-partner may affect how resources are distributed and conflicts are managed. These attitudes thus play a critical role in ongoing self- and social regulation efforts. Lastly, the attitude toward an ex-partner may affect romantic prospects and efforts (i.e., behavior) as well as hopes and aspirations (i.e., other attitudes) in the broader domain of social connectedness (Spielmann et al., 2012). It is

therefore important to explore the psychological sources of people's attitudes toward their former partners.

PREDICTORS OF EX-PARTNER ATTITUDE

Athenstaedt et al. (2020) initiated the study of ex-partner attitudes with a sample of heterosexual adults in Austria. While the authors focused on gender as the main predictor variable of interest, several other psychological variables showed strong associations with ex-partner attitude regardless of gender. The strongest two of these predictors were the degree of social support respondents said they had received from the partner before the breakup, $\beta = .55$, and the degree of reported friendly relations after the breakup, $\beta = .46$. We may now ask whether there are other, hitherto unexplored, psychological predictors of ex-partner attitudes. We propose the concept of post-decisional regret as a candidate, a concept that has a rich history in social-cognitive psychology (Brehm, 1956) and the economics of rational choice (Loomes & Sugden, 1982). We hypothesize that the more a person regrets *having entered* the relationship in the first place, the more negative their perception of the ex-partner will be.

REGRET IN JUDGMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Regret is a post-decisional affect arising from counterfactual thinking, that is, from ideas of what could have been (Ortony et al., 1990; van Dijk et al., 1999; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). Inasmuch as any choice brings to mind unchosen alternatives, regret pervades the aftermath of choice (Kierkegaard, 1843/2004; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2007; see also Kahneman & Miller, 1986). It is difficult to make any decision (e.g., for a romantic partner) without opening the door to regret. Regret is prevalent in mental life (Shimanoff, 1984), but it is not always evaluated negatively. The utility of regret lies in its potential to guide future decisions so that mistakes are not repeated (see Krueger, 2010, for a dissenting view). A regretful ex-partner may decide to never get involved with a certain type of person again. Inasmuch as regret is seen as a useful emotion (Saffrey et al., 2008), a correlation between regret and ex-partner attitude is unlikely to reduce to a perceptual halo. Rather, it has its unique functionality, guiding social selection and, therefore, increasing future payoffs.

REGRET IN EX-PARTNER ATTITUDES

Romantic relationships meet basic human needs such as being close to others, being cared for, understood, and loved (Argyle, 1987; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Epstein, 1990; Krueger et al., 2022; Myers, 1999). A rewarding romantic relationship promotes happiness, contentment, and life satisfaction (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Kansky, 2018). Romantic relationships are thus fertile ground for counterfactual regret; they involve complex interactions requiring difficult decisions (e.g., in planning future projects or discussing present conflicts). The most radical decision one can make in a romantic relationship is to terminate it. While regret can arise from having ended a relationship, which will also have its effect on one's attitude toward the former partner, the present paper focuses on an individual's regret of having entered the relationship in the first place. It stands to reason that greater regret of having entered the relationship is associated with a less positive attitude toward the ex-partner.

The simplest causal model assumes that post-decisional regret arises when the balance of benefits and costs is reassessed and found wanting. A more negative attitude toward the object of choice is the result. Alternatively, an attitude may have soured for reasons unrelated to such calculations, and the judge retroactively generates the idea that a choice that had been made should not have been made (Festinger, 1954), resulting in a negative attitude toward the former partner as well.

A person rejecting a partner not only in the present, but also counter-factually projects this rejection into the past seems to assert a freedom of having been able to choose differently; and not having done so gives rise to the experience of regret. Such cognitions would be internally consistent. Because, however, the person did choose the now-rejected partner in the past, and presumably for good reasons at the time, the regret experienced now is likely contaminated by an outcome bias (Baron & Hershey, 1988; Krueger & Acevedo, 2007).

AIMS OF PRESENT STUDIES

We test three hypotheses. First, we expect regret about having entered the now-lost relationship to predict ex-partner attitude. Second and third, we hypothesize that social support and friendship also predict ex-partner attitude, as shown previously by Athenstaedt et al. (2020). The analytical purpose of the paper was to establish the basic relationships between these psychological states ex-partner attitudes. We tested the relationships in two countries, namely, Germany (Study 1) and the USA (Study 2).

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Five hundred fifty-five German participants were recruited via social media advertisement and a student mailing list, and the participation management platform of the University of Mannheim. We set aside participants who did not identify as male or female, who did not indicate heterosexuality, or who reported to have never been in a romantic relationship that lasted longer than three months. The final sample comprised 446 participants (76.0% female) with age ranging from 18 to 73 years ($M = 26.82$, $SD = 9.12$). A sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2007) revealed that with the standard settings of $\alpha = .05$ and $1-\beta$ of .80, an effect of $\beta \geq .11$ is reliably detected in a fixed-effects multiple regression model.

Procedure

Following consent, participants completed an online survey. After reading the general instructions, they answered questions regarding the following constructs in the given order: prerequisites (i.e., age, gender, sexuality, and past relationships), ex-partner attitude, regret, friendship, and social support. Afterward, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Measures

The prerequisites for participation – age, gender, sexual orientation, and the history of past relationships – were indicated by one item each. All measurement scales were taken from Athenstaedt et al. (2020) and a one-item scale for regret was added. The full set of measures can be viewed on OSF, Open Science Framework, repository (https://osf.io/65yw8/?view_only=541348e496cf40e4a18bfdbdaa1c30c3), including those (i.e., social support after the breakup, cause of the breakup, physical attractiveness, and attachment style) that receive no further consideration in the present paper. Before making their judgments, participants were asked to remember when they were still in the relationship with their ex-partner and answer questions regarding this past relationship.

At the beginning, we asked participants how many months had passed since the last breakup and if they were in a relationship at the time of the survey. Then, participants indicated their ex-partner attitudes with a 18-items scale (e.g., “My ex-partner has many qualities”) using a 6-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 - “Do not agree at all” to 6 - “Completely agree.” The internal consistency of the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .78$. Respondents then reported their regret measured by a single item (i.e., “How much do you regret entering the past relationship you were thinking of?”) on another 6-point scale. Afterward, they answered 14 items about their ex-partner’s social support before the breakup (e.g., “My ex-partner always took the time and listened to me carefully when I wanted to have a talk”) with a high internal consistency of $\alpha = .94$ and two items about existing friendly relations between them after the breakup (i.e., “I maintain a friendly relationship with my ex-partner” and “I have no contact with my ex-partner”), which showed a satisfactory consistency, $\alpha = .83$.

Results and Discussion

We tested the hypotheses non-parametrically when the assumptions of parametric tests were not met, and we performed additional Bayesian tests where these offered additional information. As expected, these diverse testing strategies yielded the same substantive conclusions (see Krueger & Heck, 2018, for why this is generally so).

Psychological predictors of ex-partner attitude

As predicted by hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, regret ($\beta = -.56$), social support ($\beta = .58$), and friendship ($\beta = .53$), showed the expected associations in bivariate linear ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses with ex-partner attitude as the continuous criterion. Both frequentist (all $ps < .001$) and Bayesian (all BF_{10} 's $> 1.679^{e+30}$) analyses suggest that these effects provide strong evidence for these predictors’ substantive role in predicting ex-partner attitude. Stronger regret was associated with a more negative attitude toward the ex-partner. Greater social support before the breakup and a closer friendship after the breakup, as recalled by the respondents, was associated with more positive attitudes toward their ex-partner. Relating to Athenstaedt et al.’s (2020) main findings, we tested gender’s effect on ex-partner attitudes which was small but robust, as shown in the supplementary material: <https://osf.io/65yw8/>.

Multivariate prediction

A multiple regression analysis with ex-partner attitude as the criterion and regret, social support, and friendship as the three predictors yielded $R^2 = .54$. Together these variables explained more than half of the variation in ex-partner attitude. A regression model with the standardized versions of these variables yielded the same result (i.e., only minimal differences in the hundredths). The increments to the explained variance, expressed as ΔR^2 , were .07 for regret, .07 for social support, and .10 for continued friendship. To test the robustness of regret, social support, and friendship as predictors we, as shown in Table 1, controlled for the time since the breakup (a continuous variable) and if respondents were in a current relationship (binary). All three predictors' standardized beta-weight remained unchanged.

Table 1

Multivariate regression model of the four predictors of ex-partner attitude in the German sample: regret, social support, and friendship controlling for time and current relationship

Predictors	β	t	p
Regret	-.29	-7.72	< .001
Social support	.34	9.14	< .001
Friendship	.34	9.80	< .001
Time since relationship	.08	2.33	.020
Current relationship	.08	2.23	.026

Note: For gender, 0 = woman, 1 = man. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. The two control variables showed a positive relationship with ex-partner attitude. Respondents who reported having broken up a long time ago and those who were in a current relationship showed more positive ex-partner attitudes.

As regret, friendship, and social support all remained strong predictors in a joined regression model, we conclude that all three variables uniquely explained variance in ex-partner attitude. Hence, their predictive contributions were not confounded with each other.

As the elements of romantic relationships such as passion (Gao, 2001), emotional support (Burlinson, 2003), communication (Ge et al., 2022), and approval (MacDonald et al., 2012) can vary considerably across cultures, we sought to replicate our hypothesis tests in a second cultural and linguistic context, namely the United States. We thus designed Study 2.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants

We recruited participants in courses at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and via the platform Prolific. We obtained data from 321 US-based participants, applying the same criteria as in the German sample (gender, sexual orientation, past romantic relationship). We excluded the data of participants who were neither born nor currently lived in an English-speaking country to avoid language bias. The final sample consisted of 203 participants (58.05% female), with age ranging from 18 to 77 years ($M = 31.21$, $SD = 13.67$). Assuming again (Fail et al., 2007) an α error probability = .05, a $1-\beta$ (i.e., power) of .80, a sensitivity analysis for a fixed-effects multiple regression model showed that effects of $\beta \geq .17$ could be reliably detected.

Procedure and measures

The same procedure, after approval, was followed and the same measures were completed as in the German sample. The internal consistencies of all measures were satisfactory, with all α s > .81.

Results and Discussion

Psychological predictors

As predicted by the primary hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, linear regression analyses with ex-partner attitude as the criterion showed the expected strong effects for regret ($\beta = -.56$), social support ($\beta = .56$), and friendship ($\beta = .49$). Both Frequentist (all $ps < .001$) and Bayesian (all BF_{10} 's > 1.872^{e+30}) analyses point to strong evidence for all three predictors' associations with ex-partner attitude. Stronger regret was associated with a more negative attitude toward the ex-partner. As before, greater social support before the breakup and a closer friendship after the breakup, as recalled by the respondents, was associated with more positive attitudes toward their ex-partner. Again, the effect of gender on ex-partner attitudes was small but robust, as shown in the supplementary materials: <https://osf.io/65yw8/>.

Multivariate prediction

A model comprising all three predictors yielded $R^2 = .54$. Table 2 shows the individual contributions of all three predictors. A regression model with the standardized versions of these variables yielded the same result (i.e., only minimal differences in the hundredths). In contrast, regret yielded a unique increment of $\Delta R^2 = .12$, and social support and friendship added considerable amount with $\Delta R^2 = .09$ and $\Delta R^2 = .07$, respectively. To again test the robustness of regret, social support, and friendship as predictors we controlled for the time since participants had broken up the past relationship (continuous variable) and if respondents were in a current relationship (binary). As shown in Table 2, all three predictors remained significant.

Table 2

Multivariate regression model of the four predictors of ex-partner attitude in the U.S. sample: regret, social support, friendship, and gender controlling for time and current relationship

Predictors	β	t	p
Regret	-.36	-7.04	< .001
Social support	.33	6.25	< .001
Friendship	.29	5.46	< .001
Time since relationship	.12	2.35	.020
Current relationship	.12	2.51	.013

Note: For gender, 0 = woman, 1 = man. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. The two control variables showed a positive relationship with ex-partner attitude. Respondents who reported to have broken up a long time ago and those who were in a current relationship showed more positive ex-partner attitudes.

As regret, friendship, and social support all remained strong predictors in a joined regression model, we conclude that all three variables uniquely explained variance in ex-partner attitudes.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Supporting the Austrian-sample findings reported by Athenstaedt et al. (2020), our German- and US-sample results show that the degree of social support provided by an ex-partner before the breakup, and the friendly relations with this person after the breakup substantially predict respondents' attitudes toward this former partner. Going beyond the cultural replication of earlier research, we find that regret is also a strong predictor of ex-partner attitude. The more that people regret having entered the now terminated relationship, the more negatively they view their former partner. These three psychological predictors explain more than half (i.e., 54%) of the variation in people's ex-partner attitude in both the German and the U.S. sample.

Critical considerations

There is a possibility that the correlation between ex-partner attitudes and regret signals inferential constraints of endogeneity. Reported regret may be associated with ex-partner attitudes simply because of shared desirability, and not because one variable predicts the other in a causal sense. On this view, both the forward causal chain linking greater regret to a more negative attitude and the backward causal chain linking attitude to regret are false. However, we note that the attitude measure pointedly refers to the person with whom the respondent had been involved, whereas the regret measure affords a broader construal of the past romantic relationship. Regretting a past relationship leaves open the possibility that participants regret

mistakes they themselves had made independent of how the ex-partner had behaved. This difference in object reference makes regret, as measured in the present research, conceptually distinct from ex-partner attitude.

We anticipate the argument that assessing ex-partner attitude retrospectively raises concerns about reconstructed memories. While it is true that an ex-partner attitude may change over time and, due to the instability of memory, reflect the actual relationship less, its experience and consequences for other psychological variables remain real and impactful. Otherwise, an abundance of research on emotions could be disregarded. However, emotional states, be they influenced by memory flaws or not, are a concept of interest at the moment of experience with real consequences for well-being and behavior. The same is true for people's attitudes toward people and events of the past. This said, the present paper does not focus on the diagnosticity of ex-partner attitudes in regards to the past relationship's real condition but rather on the actual attitude participants have toward a former partner.

Limitations and future directions

The measurement instrument of ex-partner attitude (Imhoff & Banse, 2011) warrants further examination. In both samples, the instrument's internal consistency was satisfactory. There may, however, be latent dimensions to this attitude with differing connections to the tested predictors. Further research on the scale's psychometric properties should enhance measurement resolution and efficiency, and potentially reveal hitherto unseen causal paths linking predictors and ex-partner attitudes in more detail. Lastly, the present results, like the findings reported by Athenstaedt et al. (2020), remain limited to their broader cultural context and the context of heterosexual relationships. We encourage future research to attempt replications of the present findings in other cultures and for different types of romantic involvements. In the same vein, different types of regret regarding a romantic breakup and their effects on ex-partner attitudes should be inspected- For instance, while regretting the initiation of the relationship, as researched in the present studies, should reduce one's ex-partner attitude, regretting the dissolution of it might mean the opposite.

CONCLUSION

The breakup of a romantic relationship is a significant and generally stressful life event. It is an experience of loss. Among its psychological outcomes is the evaluation of the now-former partner. We show that ex-partner attitudes are highly predictable from three psychological judgments: the social support received in the former relationship, the degree of friendly relations after the breakup, and the experienced regret about having entered the former relationship. We demonstrate their predictive power across cultures in Germany and the USA.

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