

Every Time We Type Goodbye: Heartbreak American-style

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In the fall of 2008, Lynn sat in my office at Indiana University and told me a story about how a long term relationship of hers began to unravel. I had been searching for volunteers for a study on how people were using new media to end romantic relationships. Lynn was one of 66 undergraduates, and 72 people total, who were generous and agreed to be interviewed in a face-to-face conversation. She told me about the consequences of sharing passwords. “I was abroad last semester, and he snooped onto my e-mail account and claimed that he was deleting an e-mail that he had sent me, but he had seen an e-mail that I had received from another mutual friend of ours, and he decided to take it upon himself to read it and, um, then he told my two best friends here at school that he had read this e-mail and they of course came and told me. And then I confronted him on it. And then he said “Yeah, I did look at it.” And I was like, okay, you shouldn’t have. It is one thing to know my password, but it is another thing to be looking through my e-mail. . . .”

There are parts of Lynn’s story that I have grown to think of as part of how American undergraduates tell breakup stories. The story was a string of conversations, in which each medium that people used to communicate was marked. Lynn, the wronged party, has to decide to transform the boyfriend’s actions into a conflict, she decides to confront him. And, when she ascribes motivation to him, as she does in the following

quote, she is attributing a level of innocence to his practice. He violates her expectations that her communication will be private, but does so by accident:

Ilana: How did he get to see this e-mail?

Lynn: Right, well she wrote back to me and wrote a response to this e-mail. This is when he logged on to my e-mail account, claimed he was deleting an e-mail he sent me, saw that my best friend, who is also a good friend of his, but through me, saw that my best friend had written me an e-mail, assumed it was about Little 500 activities [Note: an annual bicycle race at Indiana University], because it was during when Little 500 was going on here, so he decided to read this e-mail . . .”

There is quite a bit to analyze in this story, including Lynn’s belief that sharing passwords is not granting her boyfriend unconditional access to all her conversations with others through Facebook and e-mail (at different points in their relationship, they shared with each other their passwords to both accounts). In my book, *The Breakup 2.0*, I discuss how sharing passwords can be a marker of intimacy as people respond to the ways communicative technologies are shifting what counts as a public or private conversation. Here I’m interested in how this story is similar to the other breakup stories that U.S. undergraduates told me, and in particular, why I have begun thinking of the elements I mentioned as culturally specific ways that people are using and thinking about new media when they break up.

Media, both old and new, is part and parcel of how the people I interviewed are performing the complicated daily tasks of living among other people. They are, as Mark

Deuze (2012) puts it, living in media, not with media. These breakup narratives become glimpses into the culturally specific ways that people understand their own and others' uses of media

The "How" of a Breakup

I was inspired to interview people about their mediated breakups because of an improvised class exercise I regularly use to reveal common cultural assumptions. I teach an introductory course to linguistic anthropology every year. On the second day of class, I ask students to write down individually all the rules for a first date. The students don't know each other that well, and yet the U.S. undergraduates invariably come up with remarkably similar answers. This allows me to point out that the American students in the class, so far always the vast majority, have shared tacit expectations about this ritual. The fifth or sixth year that I was teaching this course, I looked down at my notes, and couldn't bring myself to ask the question yet again. I had heard the answer "the guy pays" one too many times. On the spot, I decided to ask them to write down, on their own and without talking to anyone else, what they thought constituted a bad breakup. I was expecting stories about infidelity, about DVDs that were never returned, or loud, dramatic arguments. I did not expect what actually happened – everyone answered "breaking up by e-mail" or "breaking up by text." The unanimous consensus was a bad breakup was a mediated breakup. I became curious why the medium used was so important, but it wasn't until after I had collected many breakup stories that I realized my students had told me something quite revealing that would come up time and time again when I interviewed their peers – American undergraduates focus on the "how" of a breakup when describing their breakups, not the "why" or the "who".

After this classroom moment, I decided to research mediated breakups further, and I conducted 72 interviews at Indiana University during 2007 and 2008 with anyone who would volunteer to be interviewed. I primarily interviewed undergraduates, although six people I interviewed had advanced degrees and were over 25 years old. I spoke to 54 women and 18 men about how they used new media when dissolving romantic relationships and friendships. These people were self-selected. They volunteered to be interviewed in response to requests I made by word of mouth and in large lecture classes. I also found people to interview by sending e-mail to large majors and to campus-based student organizations. The people I interviewed were raised in the United States, with the exception of two interviewees. The majority of students I interviewed were upper working class to middle class and white. I interviewed six Asian American students, seven African American students and one Latino student. Indiana University is a sizable midwestern state university with about 30,000 students enrolled on the Bloomington campus during 2007-2009. In 2008-2009, of these 30,000 students, 1,749 of these students were minorities (7.2 percent). As a state university, there is a difference in tuition (and thus potentially class background) between in-state students and out of state students. This was reflected in my interview sample, the out-of-state students were from more middle-class backgrounds than some of my in-state interviewees. At Indiana University, 56 percent of the total number of students have in-state residency. (IU Factbook 2007-2008, 2008-2009)

When U.S. undergraduates told me their breakup stories, these were well-rehearsed stories about all the different media they were using to disentangle a relationship, not only stories about one conversation that they might label The Breakup

Conversation. They had told the tales to friends and family, and had gotten feedback that might be interwoven into the story as well. For example, Halle explained to me what her mother thought in the middle of a story about an ex-boyfriend who ended the relationship in a series of text messages:

I called my mom, and told her about it.

She said, “This is all a big joke, this isn’t serious.”

I told her “No, this really happened.”

She goes “What a schmuck!”

I want to point out two aspects of this snippet of a breakup story. First, Halle, like the others I interviewed, mentions the medium used for every conversation (she calls her mother on the phone). Secondly, her narrative chronicles the array of conversations she had with her lover/ex-lover and with others in the course of the relationship’s dissolution. In short, these stories were primarily collections of conversations in which the medium used for the conversation mattered enough to be almost always mentioned.

People would invariably mark when a different medium was used, explaining when communication shifted from voicemail to texting to Facebook and then to phone. At first, when I noticed that people were doing this, I thought that they were simply being generous interviewees. After all, we were conducting an interview because I had asked people to tell me about how they were using new media in their breakups. As I looked at more and more examples of widely circulated breakup accounts on websites as well as in books, television shows, and movies, I realized that marking the medium was a standard element of how many other Americans tell breakup stories. This was but one of the ways

that people in the United States call attention to the “how” of a breakup when they tell their stories about the disintegration of a romantic relationship.

A story about a breakup does not have to be a story about how the breakup happened. This is a cultural choice. One of the reasons I think one can analyze this as a narrative pattern that American undergraduates use is because I have read other ethnographers’ research on divorce in Britain and Japan, where the divorce narratives had a substantively different focus. Below I discuss briefly Bob Simpson and Allison Alexy’s work on British and Japanese divorces as concrete examples of other cultural ways of discussing separating.

When Bob Simpson did his anthropological research in England in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the people he interviewed did not tend to talk about the ways the relationship ended. Instead, their stories tended to be justifications, why might the person still be a good person despite being willing to end a relationship. Character was the focus, not method. He writes about how often the people he interviewed were concerned with justifying their decisions, with continuing to be seen as a good person in the eyes of their family and community and in their own self-assessment. Admittedly he was interviewing people at a different stage of life than I have been – these were people who had children and entangled families they were re-arranging. But I believe that there is still something culturally specific about his interviewees’ focus on personal character. Even accounts of U.S. divorce practices from research done only a few years earlier than Simpson’s interviews, such as Diane Vaughan’s *Uncoupling* (1986), will often stress the “how” instead of the “who.” This seems to indicate there might be different narrative structures people use to explain the same phenomena in Britain and the United States.

Japanese couples, by contrast, will often discuss their efforts to figure out the right mix of dependence and independence when going through breakups or divorce, as Allison Alexy found in her anthropological research. Until relatively recently, a good marriage in Japan was characterized, as Alexy puts it, as “un- or under-stated affection, highly gendered familial roles, separate hobbies and social spheres, and a relationship as partners rather than friends.” (Alexy, 2011, p. 900) While this kind of marriage is increasingly becoming less appealing to Japanese couples – not all that surprisingly, many people in Japan do not want their parents’ marriage – they still highly value relationships which privilege intertwined dependence. They want some independence, but not too much. Japanese stories about breakups and divorce thus often revolve around people’s struggle to find the right kind of dependence, the one which is most comfortable and emotionally satisfying for them. Women would explain to Alexy that the man had grown too dependent and kept demanding service and care from her instead of working toward a companionate relationship. But too much independence in the relationship was also a problem. She describes how one Japanese interviewee, after describing her divorce and relating that she chose to find her true self and to be more independent, then asked Alexy if Alexy knew any available men. The woman had divorced her abusive husband a decade before. This request surprised Alexy. “She [the interviewee] had been alone for long enough, [now she] was looking for someone with whom to share a partnership. Using a metaphor of a bicycle built for two riders, and invoking classic images from ideals of companionate love, she described wanting a man with whom she could share daily struggles and “peddle together.” She didn’t mind if this hypothetical man leaned on her because she planned to lean on him, and that is what love is about. For these women,

dependence is a key ingredient of romantic love . . .” (Alexy, 2011, p. 913) Japanese divorce narratives were often all about finding a middle ground between acceptable and unacceptable dependence.

The American undergraduates I interviewed were not discussing their breakups in terms of the right balance of dependence, or even the kind of people who might break-up. The closest an interviewee came to describing herself as a particular type of person was a woman who decided not to show anyone else the text message breakup message her ex had sent her. She explained she didn’t want to be known as “the girl who was dumped by text message.” Even this example shows that U.S. undergraduates were using the “how” of the breakup as the narrative frame to explore what an end of the relationship might mean for them.

They are also focusing on the “how” in the context of other cultural assumptions about the ways conflict begins and then unfolds. Jane Collier outlined some of these cultural assumptions in her 1989 article “Whodunits and Whydunits”, in which she compared Zinacanteco (indigenous Mexican) narratives of conflict with U.S. undergraduates’ narratives. Collier collected conflict narratives from her undergraduates at Stanford who were asked to write conflict journals for a term. Collier found that most narratives revolved around the perceived victim, their emotions and their interpretations, not the perceived wrongdoer and their motivations. That is to say, the information about the wrongdoer tended to be relatively brief, and their reasons given for this misbehavior tended to focus on two kinds of explanations – either the person acted out of ignorance or acted out of selfishness. She writes: “Because the American students equated selfishness with thoughtlessness, they did not posit deliberate malice on the part of those who

harmed them. Wrongdoers were merely thoughtless. They had not put themselves in others' shoes to think about how they would feel if they were the recipients of their own acts." (Collier, 1989, p. 140). It is easy to imagine a cultural context where people told long complicated stories about conflict created by longstanding familial antagonisms in which someone spends years planning revenge – television shows like *Dallas* or *The Sopranos* are filled with such plotlines. But not in U.S. undergraduate conflict stories.

In these undergraduate narratives, because the offenders are being selfish or don't know better, they are not seen as the ones provoking open attempts to address the conflict. The victim is the one who instigates the conflict in a sense by revealing that what the person did affected them. Collier found that most of the conflict narratives were devoted to explaining the victim's carefully reasoned decisions to either make it clear that wrongdoing had happened, or, perhaps more frequently, carefully reasoned decisions to avoid conflict entirely. They tended to avoid conflict to protect a valued relationship, or because they decided they cared too little about the relationship to go through the trouble of making visible the conflict.

When a confrontation happened, it tended to be the victim informing the offender indirectly or directly that the offenders' actions had inspired negative feelings within them. No third parties were asked to mediate the conflict or help the two reach a resolution. If the injured party did decide to confront the offender, they might do it indirectly – announcing at a house meeting that "Some people are leaving dirty dishes in the sink." Or they would have direct confrontations where they explained why what the wrongdoer had done had hurt them, how the wrongdoer had made them feel. The confrontations rarely involved trying to establish the facts of what had happened or

allocating blame. Instead the confrontations quickly became about creating “shared understandings about goals for the future.” (Collier, 1989, pp. 152-153).

The events in the breakups that I heard didn't always fit all that neatly into the types of conflict that Jane Collier was describing. In her article, Jane Collier didn't mention romantic breakups. Instead she talked about a mother who asks her son in front of his roommates if he remembers to change his underwear, or a male professor who makes sexist jokes all the time. In both instances, the narrators thought the authority figures were being thoughtless, they would not have done so if they had realized the impact on their audience. And the wrongdoers, in their thoughtlessness, are often unaware that they have created conflict. When you are breaking up with someone, you tend to suspect that this is a moment of conflict. Who exactly is the aggrieved one can be up for grabs, and in some sense, this is precisely what focusing on the “how” of the breakup can draw attention to. So I am suggesting that when breakup stories are focusing on the “how” of the breakup, this narrative structure brings the dilemmas that a breakup might raise more closely in line with this other cultural script for addressing conflict that Collier outlines.

The American undergraduate conflict narratives Collier describes and the breakup narratives I collected have in common a shared technique for addressing the audience. In both sets of stories, the story-teller is expecting the listener to validate the storyteller's tacit understanding of how responsibility should be allocated, and how to define what took place (see also O'Barr and Conley, 1997). As Collier explains: “Student narrators assumed the role of detective. They gave careful accounts of the clues they uncovered, providing a reader/listener with the evidence he/she would need to assess responsibility

and allocate blame.” (Collier, 1989, p. 154) When undergraduates told their breakup stories, the medium was crucial evidence that I as audience was expected to interpret as a sign that it was indeed a bad breakup. However, in the stories that I collected, assessing blame was part, but only part of the point of the narrative. Breakup conversations turned out to be quite confusing in practice – people might think that they have had a breakup conversation, but still find themselves in the same relationship the next week or the next month. Framing the breakup as a detective story allowed the story-teller and listener(s) to agree together that it was a breakup in the first place, not only that it was a *bad* breakup.

Calling attention to the ways that the breakup took place allows people to talk about the other familiar motivations that U.S. undergraduates seem to like to attribute to others in moments of conflict. One of the most common adjectives I have heard applied to breaking up using a medium, any medium, is how cowardly it is. And in this instance, cowardice is a form of selfishness – taking one’s comfort and emotional security to be more important than anyone else’s. When a story focuses on how someone used texting or Skype to end a relationship, the storyteller is often re-framing the ending of a relationship into a conflict with a clearer victim. The fact that someone wants to end a relationship does not make the dumped the victim. It is the way the breakup is done that makes someone into the aggrieved party. And people often spend a considerable amount of time talking about their rationales, how they understood what was happening, why they responded in the ways that they did, just like Collier’s American students did as well.

Conclusion

One day I was showing a short clip in an undergraduate class when I noticed Rebecca starting to get teary-eyed. Dave Chappelle can inspire some strong reactions, but he never seems to drive people to tears, so I asked her discretely what was going on. Rebecca told me that her boyfriend had just broken up with her by text. I advised her to go home, and recover, which she did. A year or two later, when I started doing this research, I contacted her to find out what had actually happened that day. She explained that they had been dating for four and a half years, but it had become a rocky relationship. They would break up, and then get back together, and then break up again. It had become a cycle, until he texted her while she was walking to my class that it was no longer working out, and then refused to talk to her through any other medium. He would only interact with her by text. As she told me the story, she kept stressing that she had wanted to talk to him by phone about what was happening. He refused, claiming she wouldn't be able to change his mind. This too offended her greatly. As she pointed, she simply wanted to talk on the phone in order to have what she considered a proper ending to the relationship. She did not want to change his mind. She said that whenever she told the story to her friends, she focused on how her ex-boyfriend had ended the relationship – by texting her, and refusing to speak to her using any other medium *but* text for months afterward.

As in most of the narratives I collected, the “how” of the breakup was the central focus of Rebecca’s story. And this “how” stood in for other questions that haunted Rebecca as well – namely, why her ex-boyfriend decided to break off the relationship. Rebecca and others did not focus on the “why” of the breakup or the “who” of the breakup, although this of course would come up in the narratives as secondary themes.

By focusing on the “how”, she was able to avoid these often unanswerable questions. She was also able to structure the story of the breakup in a way that resembled some other familiarly American moves when discussing conflict. She, like others, was able to present herself as aggrieved because of someone else’s selfishness, cowardice or thoughtlessness. Focusing on the messy “why” of a breakup might not lead to such a clearcut division between victim and aggressor and risks raising the distressing possibility that the person breaking off the relationship had decided that he or she had a very good reason to do so. It might spark a different set of judgments about the persons involved in the relationship, an anxiety that the clichéd American breakup saying “its not you, its me” is a lie after all. Rebecca managed to deflect those questions by emphasizing how poorly her ex-boyfriend behaved by the manner he chose to disentangle. She could also recruit the support of her friends and family in presenting herself as aggrieved in the process of the breakup because the method was so inappropriate.

What I also often find striking about Rebecca’s account and other similar stories was the ways in which the medium helped clarify that a breakup had in fact happened. Both undergraduates and older adults would tell me about relationships that included breakups that didn’t take, relationships filled with cycles of fighting, ending a relationship and then getting back together over and over again. This would turn the end of a relationship into somewhat of a mystery, and the stories told became detective stories of a sort. In telling their breakup stories, people were piecing together a series of ambiguous and unclear conversations into an overarching narrative that revealed that a breakup had happened. And for Americans, often the medium becomes an essential clue in this unraveling.

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