Rules of disengagement: ‘Feeling rules’ in sexual minority and heterosexual youth breakup cultures

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Introduction

Young people often have little knowledge or experience with which to navigate the complex processes of breaking up. The challenge is acutely felt by sexual minority youth, who have less access to prescribed relationship norms. We explored how peer-held cultural norms shaped young people’s understandings and experiences of breaking up.

Methods

We undertook thematic analysis of data from five focus groups with 28 young people, aged 15-24, recruited via youth groups in Scotland. The sample comprised 15 sexual minority youth, 12 heterosexual people and one person who did not disclose his sexual orientation. Our analysis drew on Hochschild’s work on feeling rules and emotion work.

Results

Emotions characteristic of breakups, such as heartbeat, anger or relief, are often experienced as private and individual; yet these feelings are also socially patterned. We identified three feeling rules governing interactions between people breaking up:

One should be appropriately distressed

Young people voiced a widespread understanding of breakups as difficult and emotionally distressing.

“There’s such a thing as an easy breakup” (Oak, asexual panromantic non-binary person)

They also acknowledged that during a breakup there was a social pressure to be sad. The intensity of this socially expected distress was dependent on whether one had initiated the breakup, the nature of the relationship, and the time since the breakup happened. For example, mutual breakups were expected to be less distressing than one-sided breakups. Young people often disregarded the emotions of those experiencing stronger than expected distress during a breakup.

One should not cause unnecessary hurt

According to this rule, one should attempt to manage their and/or their partner’s emotions to avoid unnecessary pain. People’s emotional needs often clashed during a breakup forcing young people to decide whether they should prioritise themselves over their partner. Break uppers were expected to prioritise the break uppee above themselves. Trying to avoid unnecessary hurt was perceived as a near impossible task by young people. Irrespective of the degree of care and consideration a break upper put into communicating an ending, one could argue they could have done more to minimise distress. Young people often said they felt like there was no good way to breakup.

One should no longer be in love with their ex

Love was understood as an emotion reserved for those in a relationship. Once a breakup was communicated young people emphasised the importance of “getting over” or “moving on” from one’s ex. They spoke about the multiple ways they worked on their emotions after a breakup. Young people grappled with whether to continue engaging in behaviours characteristic of the relationship, such as sex or emotional intimacy. Young people diverged their actions, however their justification for their behaviours was underpinned by idea that one shouldn’t be in love with their ex.

Exceptions to the rules

1. ‘Cheating’: ‘Cheaters’ feelings could be disregarded as they were seen to be responsible for and ‘at fault’ for a breakup.

2. Violence: if one was afraid for their safety, they did not need to account for the break uppee’s feelings.

Conclusion

Sexual orientation shaped youth breakup cultures. Commonalities included shared understanding around the phases and stages of breaking up, of appropriate communication methods, and of exceptions to the ‘feeling rules’. Differences emerged in young people’s definition of a breakup, in their likelihood of desiring friendship with their ex-partner, and in their concerns or normalisation of violence during breakups. Given the importance of adolescence and young adulthood to the formation of one’s values, behaviours and skills in later life, it is imperative that young people (irrespective of their sexual orientation) have access to guidance, education and support grounded in understandings of their breakup cultures.