

## **Applying the Communication Theory of Resilience to Understanding Friendship**

### **Dissolution**

Friends make up a significant part of a person's social network and are often primary providers of supportive communication over the life course (Sias & Bartoo, 2007). This is important considering people supported by their friends live longer (Perissinotto, et al., 2012), stay healthier both physically and mentally (Cable et al., 2013), and are more optimistic when faced with obstacles (Taylor et al., 2000). Thus, it might be unsurprising that friendship satisfaction significantly predicts overall life satisfaction, even when controlling for number of friends, demographic differences, and satisfaction with other aspects of life (Gillespie et al., 2015). Despite the importance of friendship research, friendships are one of the most ignored relationships (Gillespie et al., 2015; Muraco, 2012), and much of the scholarship about friendships is decades old (e.g., Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Shapiro, 1977; Wiseman, 1986).

A notable exception, and a germane to this study, pertains to research illuminating the turning points in female friendships (Doherty, 2021). In this study, Doherty found that an important turning point was friendship conflict, presenting evidence that conflict can result in friendship termination. She even opted to title her article, "It's just like a break-up" (p. 43). Although she noted that some friends were able to repair their relationships or simply grew apart, this study attends to reality that friendship breakups are common and can contribute to ambivalent emotions and depression (Flannery and Smith, 2021). Given that friendships contribute to so many positive outcomes, it stands to reason that the loss of friendship could be difficult. As such, research on relational dissolution more broadly suggests that breaking-up is stressful experience that has negative physical, psychological and behavioral ramifications (Hasselmo et al., 2020). This might be because during the process of dissolution, people must

navigate the reason for the break-up, the doing of the break-up, and the aftermath of the break-up. Yet, despite how traumatic this experience could be, scholars rarely attend what it is like for people experiencing a friend break-up (Rose, 1984). Thus, the first goal of this study is to illuminate the triggers that people identify as being most salient after a friend break-up that prompt them to try to regain a sense of normalcy (i.e., resilience; Buzzanell, 2010; 2018).

The second goal of our study to explore how people enact resilience, where resilience is process that facilitates the reintegration from life's difficulties (Scharp et al., 2022). The process of resilience is "constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people's abilities to create new normalcies" (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 9). This conceptualization of resilience corresponds to Buzzanell's (2018) communication theory of resilience (CTR), which moves away from trait-based definitions of resilience to focus on how people communicate and interact to productively respond to triggering events. Understanding communicative resilience (CR) is important because it emphasizes the ways people can help themselves after major disruptions. Furthermore, identifying resilience enactments can be practically useful for counselors, family, and friends who want to support, in this case, people who have suffered a friend break-up.

Finally, our last goal is to explore, how, if at all, CR triggers and processes co-occur. As Scharp and colleagues (2022) argue, "identifying triggers and processes as if they were unrelated fails to account for the ways certain processes might be well-suited to address particular triggers" (p. 23). Recent studies suggest that CR triggers and processes often overlap suggesting relationships that could inform both theory and practice (e.g., Scharp et al., 2021, 2022; Tian & Bush, 2020). For example, a recent study suggests that although some CR processes helped migrants respond to their triggers, others were less helpful in addressing bureaucratic obstacles (Scharp, 2021). Based on a thematic co-occurrence analysis, the authors advanced the CTR by

calling attention to structural power inequities and provided recommendations for the U.S. government to better support migrants. Given the importance of identifying CR triggers, CR process, and their overlap, I begin by contextualizing our study in the friendship dissolution literature before turning my attention to explicating the communication theory of resilience and a complementary method, thematic co-occurrence analysis.

### **Friendship Dissolution**

Any relationship dissolution might be disruptive and present an opportunity for people to renegotiate their lives (i.e., create a new normal; Baxter, 1984; Noller & Galois, 1988). The reasons for dissolution, the process of dissolution, and the outcomes of dissolution could all serve as triggers that prompt people to respond to regain a sense of normalcy (i.e., resilience).

#### **Reasons for Dissolution**

Despite the scholarship outlining friendship rules (Argyle & Henderson, 1984), benefits (Shapiro, 1977), and its nonvoluntary nature (Wiseman, 1986), hardly any pertains to friendship dissolution (Rose, 1984). For example, in 2021, Flannery and Smith argued that their study was the first to elucidate the reasons for adolescent friendship dissolution, suggesting that the research that does exist on friendship and friendship break-ups has ignored this important process. Specifically, their study revealed seven reasons for dissolution: (a) conflict/betrayal, (b) lack of social support, (c) lack of companionship, (d) lack of reciprocity, (e) dissimilarity, (f) interference from others, and (g) the situation. These findings deviate slightly from a study by Johnson and colleagues (2004) that found that in adult friendship terminations, (a) less affection, (b) a change in the friend or self, (c) a decrease in participation of activities or time spent together and/or (d) an increase in physical distance were the root causes for termination. Taken

together, however, these reasons suggest that in addition to losing a friend, people also have to cope with contextualizing factors that contribute to the overall stress of the break-up.

### **The Process of Dissolution**

In addition to reasons for the break-up, people must also cope with the labor and stress of enacting the break-up. In a comprehensive study that attended to the strategies people initiated to dissolve a friendship, Baxter and Philpott (1982) surveyed a sample of fifth graders, high school students, college students, and post-college graduates. They examined six dissolution tactics across the participants including: (a) other negation, difference, self-presentation (i.e., of negative attributes), cost-rendering (i.e., increase costs of being in the relationship and decrease of benefits), disinterest, and exclusion. Flannery and Smith (2021) recently confirmed these results although collated them into the following five categories: (a) avoidance, (b) conflict, (c) passive-aggression, (d) third-party strategies, and (e) direct strategies. Overall, these findings suggest that the initiating and accomplishing the friendship break-up is likely effortful and rife with potential difficulty, especially if the other person does not want the relationship to end.

### **Dissolution Aftermath**

Finally, people also must navigate the negative consequences of the break-up in addition to the reasons for it and the potentially difficult process of dissolution (Flannery and Smith, 2021). Research suggests that after a friendship dissolution, people experience depression (Chan & Poulin, 2009), rumination, and/or ambivalent emotions that can ultimately create confusion (Flannery and Smith, 2021). As such, relationship dissolution can contribute to negative physiological, psychological, and behavioral outcomes, some of which are so stressful it can increase the risk for early death (Hasselmo et al., 2020). Furthermore, Koenig Kellas (2008) argues that scholars often ignore the fact that dissolved relational parties communicate

post-dissolution and how that can create a whole different set of complications. Rollie and Duck (2006) explain, “Not only is communication during the process significant, but it also has important roles afterward as people adjust themselves and their embedding social expectations and ease into the future form of their relational life” (p. 237). Because of the potential for numerous disruptions associated with friendship dissolution, we seek to illuminate those that prompt a resilient response. In other words, people might experience a multitude of obstacles, but some might be more salient than others. Understanding what triggers resilience could be useful to counselors, academic affairs professional, family, and friends who want to support someone going through a different friend break-up. Thus, the first research question reads: **RQ<sub>1</sub>**: What obstacles (i.e., resilience triggers) do individuals experience after a friendship dissolution?

### **Communication Theory of Resilience**

After people experience triggering events, they can enact resilience processes to help them (re)create a sense of normalcy (Buzzanell, 2010). These CR processes include: “(a) crafting normalcy, (b) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings, (c) affirming identity anchors, (d) maintaining and using communication networks, and (e) putting alternative logics to work” (p. 100). Crafting normalcy involves establishing new rituals and routines which they might accomplish by telling stories or through interacting. Despite having to acknowledge and accept negative emotions, people who foreground productive action focus on what they can do instead of lingering on how they feel. Next, people might interact with others in ways that help them remember and embrace essential aspects of their identity (i.e., affirming identity anchors). Essential to CR is maintaining, and using the network of family, friends, co-workers, and important others to help cope with the CR triggers. Finally, people might engage

in discussion or come across new information that helps them see their situation in a new way (i.e., putting alternative logics to work). Given the triggers they face and the potential for CR triggers to help people regain a sense of normalcy after the break-up, the next research question reads:

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** What, if any, communicative resilience processes do people enact after a friendship dissolution?

Lastly, our third research question pertains to the ways that CR triggers and processes can overlap in patterned ways. As Buzzanell (2018) acknowledges, triggers and processes are intertwined systems. Scharp et al. (2021) explain that this means, “processes and triggers might be interdependent and integrated such that, certain triggers are particularly related to specific resilience processes and that people’s behaviors more generally can speak to multiple processes at once” (p. 5). Indeed, existing research illustrates that CR triggers and processes often overlap. For example, a study by Scharp and colleagues (2021) revealed that in context of first-generation students’ (FGS) transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, three relationships emerged across CR triggers and process. Specifically, (a) maintaining and using networks co-occurred with reduced classroom interaction, (b) crafting normalcy co-occurred with struggling to find motivation, and (c) crafting normalcy overlapped with collision of school and home life. This finding suggested that crafting normalcy and maintaining/using networks did much of the heavy lifting for FGS. Understanding the importance of these two processes in particular helped guide practical applications across multiple potential support provides. Given the usefulness of co-occurrence analysis to provide practical insights, the third research question reads:

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** What, if any, relationships exist across the communicative resilience triggers and processes?

## **Method**

### **Data Collection and Participants**

After attaining Institutional Review Board approval, I began recruitment. The participants needed to meet the following criteria (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) be comfortable reading and speaking in English, and (c) have experienced a friendship breakup where at least one person decided to end the friendship, as opposed to just growing apart. To recruit participants, I shared the study announcement on social media and to a Communication department at a large university in the Northwest. After a potential participant emailed about their interest in participating in the study, they were sent a demographic questionnaire. Ten ( $n=10$ ) participants engaged in narrative and semi-structured interviews for an average of 33 minutes and yielded 84 pages of single-spaced transcribed text.

Participants ranged from ages 19-61 ( $M = 29$ ,  $SD = 12.24$ ), the majority whom were women ( $n=8$ ). Participants identified as White ( $n = 6$ ), multiracial ( $n = 2$ ), and Asian ( $n = 1$ ). Half of the participants reported initiating the dissolution, four cited a mutual break-up, and the last reported that someone had broken-up with them. Months since participants experienced their friendship break-ups ranged from 1-132 ( $M = 52.2$ ,  $SD = 45.39$ ). Of the ten participants, six said they had no contact, two reported some contact, one reported hardly any contact, and one reported regular contact.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I engaged in a thematic co-occurrence analysis (TCA, Scharp, 2021), which is an analytic tool that helps researchers identify relationships between and across themes.

According to Scharp, TCA requires researchers to take three steps: (a) conduct a thematic analysis, (b) create a co-occurrence matrix, and (c) examine the matrix for qualitative relationships between and across the themes depending on the research questions.

To apply this method, I began by conducting a thematic analysis which required that I: (a) familiarize myself with the data by reading and re-reading the data corpus, (b) identify codes within the data germane to the research questions, (c) combine the codes into initial themes, (d) refining the themes so that they are responsive to the research questions, (e) label the themes, and (f) identify and select evocative exemplars (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the themes emerged, I held them to standards of (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness (Owen, 1984) (Scharp, 2021). Recurrence pertains to how often a theme emerged within the data. Repetition accounts for the ways similar words and phrases reappear throughout a corpus. Finally, forcefulness characterizes accounts that are particularly illustrative as well as those emphasized by distinctive punctuation such as all capital letters and exclamation marks.

To complete the second step, I created a co-occurrence matrix which consisted of themes across each column and a participant account across each row. I then marked an “X” in each box when a participant uttered a particular theme. For forceful accounts, those Xs also earned an + (see Table 1; Scharp, 2021).

The most important part of a TCA analysis requires researchers to explore the relationships between and across the themes. Scharp (2021) originally identified three qualitative relationships (a) pervasive/sporadic, (b) unilateral/bilateral, and (c) balanced/unbalanced. The pervasive/sporadic relationship is when the presence of a theme pervades the data. Unilateral is when one theme is consistent with another (If A1 then A2). Bilateral is when one theme is consistent with another and vice versa (If A1 then A2 and if A2 then A1). Lastly,

unbalanced/balanced is if “the relationship among themes is (un)balanced with regard to recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness” (Scharp, 2021). Subsequent studies, additional potential relationships emerged including (a) ubiquitous/independent (Scharp et al, 2022) and (b) presence/absence (in press). Independence suggests that a theme does not co-occur with another other theme. Ubiquity exists when all participants give voice to the theme, making the theme a ubiquitous experience that co-occurs with all of the themes. Instances of independence get marked with an I whereas instance of ubiquity get marked with a U. Lastly, presence and absence depicts a relationship suggesting that every time Theme A appears, Theme B does not. This is difficult to ascertain in the matrix but should be interpreted nevertheless.

To verify our analysis, I engaged in the following procedures: (a) peer-debriefing, (b) the audit trail, and (c) exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, I met with a trained qualitative researcher to discuss my findings, argue through differences, and come to a consensus. I kept detailed notes of my decisions in an audit trail, which eventually helped me select detailed exemplars. After this round of analysis, I plan to collect more data, which I will compare to my original findings. This will be my final verification procedure (i.e., referential adequacy; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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