

# 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 heartbreak, 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 distressed 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.

Matt: It [a mutual breakup] would make things better because you can’t moan.  
Declan: Oh no, they can.  
Matt: They can but they *have no right to*. (General Group 1)

### 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.

“An ex is, well somebody must have loved that person, so [...] if they keep on speaking to them, their feelings could come back.” (Patrick, straight man)

### 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.

	LGBT groups	General groups
Definition of a breakup	Tended to have a broader definition for breakups that included the ending of friendships, sexual relationships and non-monogamous relationships in addition to the ending of exclusive romantic relationships	Defined break ups as the ending of exclusive romantic relationships. “You cannot breakup with somebody if you are not exclusively together” (Kathryn, heterosexual woman).
Friendship with an ex	LGBT people mostly saw friendships with exes as possible and desirable. “You can like platonically love someone even if you don’t romantically love them. You can still be close” (Skylar bisexual non-binary person).	Cisgender heterosexual saw the transition from a romantic relationship to a friendship as unlikely. Romantic feelings were perceived as long lasting and young people worried that ongoing contact with an ex-partner would renew these feelings.
Concerns around violence	Sexual minority youth worried about queerphobic discrimination during breakups, this included the risk of being outed or concerns about their physical safety during a breakup: “I’d always have someone there, even if it’s in public. ‘Cause see 90 percent of the time I doubt, I stand by it, that a watcher will actually stand up for you. Especially in a LGBT relationship”. (Charlie likes men, non-binary person)	Young heterosexual women discussed safety concerns during breakups. Both General Groups normalised forms of violence such as post-breakup harassment if denied answers during a breakup Declan: There’s always going to be a reason and you have to tell them. Matt: 99.9% of the time, even if you refuse to give a reason, they will nag you basically in-person. They’re more likely to know where you live. Hazel: Yeah, they just like harass you. (General Group 2)

## 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.