Face, Accounts, and Schemes in the Context of Relationship Breakups

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This article investigates account strategies that individuals employ to neutralize identity threats caused by breakups from romantic relationships. I distinguish three narrative frames for such accounts: dumper, dumpee, and consensus narratives. Individuals who employ a consensus narrative frame provide accounts by default: they deny that any harm was done to anyone. Dumpers dismissed the breakup's conflictuality, used externalization strategies, and depicted themselves as empathetic. Dumpees used externalization strategies and denials of injury, emphasized their agency, and pointed out valuable changes of self. I then analyze the results from a phenomenological perspective to identify connections between accounting practices and the structure of the self. I argue that accounting for traumatic breakups is important for the development of schemes that guide perception, action, and the interpretation of biography.
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Breakups from intimate relationships are important and problematic social events. In many cases, breakups have at least a temporarily negative effect on the former partners. Breakups may even become turning points in the unfolding of individuals' selves and biographies. Yet personal reorientation is not the only activity preoccupying newly separated individuals. They also have to explain their new status and the reasons for their transition into singlehood. Everyone in their personal environment who learns about the breakup will wonder about the reasons. For personal and social concerns, individuals must construct narratives that plausibly explain the breakup without losing face.

This article investigates how individuals maintain face (Goffman 1967) in the context of relationship breakups. I analyze six biographical interviews with a total of twenty-four breakup narrations to identify account strategies that individuals use

to defend their identities against negative readings. Along with Scott and Lyman (1968:46), I define an account as "a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry."[1] As a second task, I outline a theory of how breakup accounts affect the accounters' selves by sedimenting into schemes of perception (Schütz [1932] 1967). From these immediate tasks follow the intended contributions of this article. First, I hope to stimulate future research by illustrating the fecundity of breakup narratives for interactionist research. While identifying account strategies, I stay close to the data to keep their vivacity intact. This allows some insights into this underresearched area of social life: How, precisely, do individuals talk about and account for their breakups? This question has never been addressed in detail. Although remaining close to the data, my conceptual classification of the respondents' presentation of self abstracts from the immediate context and should therefore prove useful in other areas of social life, as well. Thus, as a second contribution, I am working toward an empirically grounded understanding of the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) for accounting in general. In particular, accounting practices for instances of role exit (Ebaugh 1988) should closely resemble each other. Some potential areas of application beyond relationship breakups are indicated in the discussion section.

This type of dramaturgic analysis remains on the level of talk without exploring implications for cognition and the structure of the self. To remedy the necessary blind spots of this approach, I connect individual accounting practices with the structuring of self and cognition. Does the choice of accounts for a particular breakup have a lasting impact on the accounter? If so, how is it manifested in the individual's behavior? With the help of phenomenological and cognitive sociology, I propose an answer to these questions. By doing this, I formulate an argument that may bridge the gap between the growing literature on accounts as face-management strategies (e.g., Järvinen 2001, Scully and Marolla 1984, Silva 2007) and symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches focusing on the interrelations between self and biography (e.g., DeGloma 2007, Denzin 1989, Howard 2006).

No research has investigated accounts in the context of breakups, but there have been applications in studies of divorce (Hopper 1993a; Vaughan 1986; Walzer and Oles 2003; Weiss 1975). Before beginning, it seems useful to discuss how this article relates to divorce. Is accounting for breakups different from accounting for divorces? I argue that this is an empirical question. No detailed typology of accounts has been developed for cases of divorce. Thus we cannot tell how different accounting practices are. As my typology abstracts from the immediate context, it should be applicable to divorces, as well as to other processes of role exit (Ebaugh 1988). The institution of marriage, however, is much more committing and symbolically charged (Simmel [1908] 1992:108–12; Hopper 2001; Waite and Gallagher 2000:13–46) than common relationships. This difference may result in different face-management practices when such ties are dissolved. It is plausible to anticipate some differences between breakup and divorce accounts, even though we can also expect significant overlap. Only a comparative study could answer this question conclusively. But since divorce is a more significant social problem than breakups,

why study breakups when research on divorce is incomplete? What are the advantages of studying breakups? By studying breakups, we are in a good position to follow respondents' biographical trajectories through a series of relationships, which will usually be impossible in the case of divorce. This fact will be valuable for the phenomenological analysis focusing on the patterns of individual cognition and behavior as a result of past experiences. Furthermore, experiences with breakups are likely to socialize individuals' expectations and behaviors in regard to relationship dissolution. In this way, the study of breakups may support research on divorce.

In the following section, I discuss the accounts concept and its roots in Goffman's dramaturgic method, approach relationship breakups with this theory, and review the relevant existing research. After a section on methods and data, I introduce the types of accounts that I found in the data. These sections are succeeded by a second empirical analysis, which is concerned with phenomenological implications of the data. At the end of the article, I explore some of my findings' wider implications and suggest further lines of research.

FACE, ACCOUNTS, AND BREAKUPS

Goffman (1967:5) defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." If an individual fails in some way to maintain a favorable image of self, interactants' tact usually prevents them from openly confronting him or her with that failure (Goffman 1990:222–30). People expect each other to make some efforts to maintain a nonconfrontational atmosphere. Interactants may still draw negative conclusions, however, without reproaching the individual. If the deviant does not provide an account, others will engage in motive ascriptions to make sense of the event in question (Blum and McHugh 1971), either in private or through gossip.

Some researchers have argued that accounts are located in larger "account episodes," that is, interactive steps that participants must comply with around the account-giving process (e.g., Schönbach 1990). In these episodes, similar to Goffman's corrective interchange (1967:19–23), interactants reproach a deviant act. The individual then offers an account, which the interactants evaluate. If they accept it, order is restored at the end of the interchange. While accounts may be embedded in this fashion, individuals can also anticipate face damage before a reproach occurs (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Thus an interactional conflict is not a prerequisite of account giving: anticipation is a sufficient motivator (Goffman 1961:51).

If interactants reproach the deviant, the issues at stake are clear. The reproach communicates the aspect of the deviant's face that interactants now find dubious. Without an explicit reproach, account givers relate their explanations to imagined "worst possible readings," which are "interpretations of the act that maximize either its offensiveness to others or its defaming implications for the actor himself" (Goffman 1971:108). Personal awareness of a worst possible reading will usually

lead to the presentation of an account. If the deviant did not provide one, consequences would usually not be as devastating as these readings suggest. After all, they are only hypothetical. If the individual gives an account, however, this reveals anticipated face damage.

Scott and Lyman (1968) distinguish two types of accounts, justifications and excuses, and discuss typical account strategies they subsume under them. By providing a justification, the actor accepts responsibility for a particular event, but denies the occurrence of anything wrong or deviant. An individual offering an excuse acknowledges that he or she was involved in something problematic while refusing to bear responsibility. I discuss some of Scott and Lyman's strategies where the empirical context provides opportunities to do so. While their typology has stimulated numerous applications (e.g., Järvinen 2001, Scully and Marolla 1984, Silva 2007), it was not explicitly grounded in a systematic analysis of empirical data. This also applies to a range of authors who have tried to expand or modify the typology on the basis of theoretical reasoning alone (e.g., Nichols 1990, Schlenker 1980, Tedeschi and Reiss 1981). In this article, by contrast, I propose a typology rooted in data analysis.

I have found that respondents' breakup accounts fall into three narrative frames, two of which correspond to distinct social roles. I refer to persons who identify as initiators of a breakup as initiators or dumpers (Hopper 1993b). For lack of a better term, people who identify as having been left by their partners will be called dumpees. A third category of narratives comprises cases in which respondents identified neither as dumpers nor as dumpees. Instead, they depicted the breakup as a mutual decision. I call these consensus narratives. Note that I categorize narratives according to the respondents' self-ascriptions, which need not coincide with the actual role-distribution during the breakup (Hopper 1993a; Walzer and Oles 2003).

Which worst possible readings may breakups convey? McCall (1982) has argued that *any* termination of a personal relationship stigmatizes their former members. This negative reading applies to all individuals formerly engaged in romantic relationships regardless of the role they played during the dissolution process.

> Because personal relationships are almost universally viewed in success/failure terms, any party to a terminated or even a spoiled relationship is tarred by failure and—even more than the widowed or the orphaned—regarded as somehow odd, deficient, or deviant. (McCall 1982:219)

Additional problems derive from taking the role of dumper or dumpee. Dumpees may seem deficient because they were unable to live up to their partners' expectations. The most intensive emotion they could possible invest—their love—was still insufficient to sustain their relationships. As a result, the dumpee will appear to be somewhat of a failure. Collins (2004) argues that individuals want to interact with people who have high emotional energy in order to profit from their company. Being dumped drains emotional energy and thus impoverishes the dumpees' ability to contribute to social encounters. They become less interesting partners for future interactions, even more so since one individual's stigma can contaminate an entire group (Goffman 1963:47).

Dumping a partner, on the other hand, may appear cruel or egoistic. A romantic relationship involves a social bond between the partners. One cannot end such a relationship without just cause; it is legitimate to expect a potential dumper to make some efforts to save it. If these efforts remain unsuccessful, the initiator still has to bring forward acceptable reasons and explanations. Otherwise, he or she reveals a tendency to disregard social commitments. By engaging in motive ascription, interactants may conclude that this tendency is symptomatic of the dumper's true character (Blum and McHugh 1971). To summarize, both dumpers and dumpees may be discredited by their respective roles. Even consensus-based dissolutions pose the question why the relationship failed. Therefore we expect individuals to account for their breakups: they want to protect themselves from discrediting information.

Because of the absence of work on breakup accounts, I now review the existing research in the field of divorce. As noted earlier, we should be careful of lumping breakups and divorce together. Nevertheless, some of the research in this area is clearly relevant to my study. Weiss (1975:14) was the first to speak of accounts in the context of divorce, while using the term in a broader way as "the history of the marital failure." He recognizes that accounts are important for face-management (pp. 15, 64–65), but pays no systematic attention to these aspects. He is more interested in divorce as a social process that moves from the erosion of attachment toward the creation of a new social life. Vaughan's (1986:139–52, 174–75) analysis is similar in this regard, although her discussion of face-management is more extensive. She mentions dumpers' and dumpees' requirements to offer "socially acceptable reasons for the break" (p. 141) in front of others, but does not develop a typology. The first study to investigate divorce accounts in some more detail was done by Hopper (1993a; see also 1993b, 2001). He found that "initiators generally articulated a vocabulary of individual needs and noninitiating partners invoked a vocabulary of familial commitment" (Hopper 1993a:805). According to Hopper, initiators emphasized the negative aspects of their marriages and justified their divorces with frustrated personal needs. Dumpees, in turn, stressed positive aspects of their marriages and the imperative of marital commitment and to work problems out—thus blaming the initiators for giving up in the face of trouble. Clearly, this distinction operates on a high level of abstraction. The internal accounting differences between dumpers and dumpees remain unanalyzed. This may be so because Hopper's main goal is not to develop a typology but to demonstrate that vocabularies of motive emerge after the decision to divorce and thus do not lead up to it as causal factors. My data in the following sections demonstrate that—at least in the case of breakups—dumpers and dumpees make use of a broad range of accounts that cannot be captured by a simple dichotomous distinction between vocabularies of personal needs and vocabularies of relationship commitment. More recently, Walzer and Oles (2003) have argued that gender roles influence the choice and presentation of dumper and dumpee roles. Men, they argue, seek to identify as dumpers even when there is little factual basis for this claim. By contrast, women hesitate to present themselves as dumpers, since this role conflicts with culturally dominant conceptions of female behavior.

Like Hopper's studies, they present important findings, but quickly abstract from the data to make their main points—theorizing gender roles in this case. They do not analyze specific accounting strategies and do not develop a typology of accounts that can guide further research.

METHODS AND DATA

I collected the data for this article through biographical interviews with three men and three women from Germany. All respondents were in their twenties. In total, they talked about twenty-four past relationships. Each respondent reported three to six dissolved relationships. Because of the limited number of cases, my account typology may not represent the entire range of possible strategies. All respondents had been both dumpers and dumpees at one or more points in their biographies. I cannot investigate their current romances in terms of accounts, because these narratives do not include breakups. They are, however, useful material for understanding the accounts' impact on the respondents' selves, as I show in the second part of the empirical analysis.

I had never personally met the respondents before the interviews and made sure to interview people whom I would be unlikely to meet again. Respondents were only informed that my research dealt with "personal experiences with love." My method follows the guidelines of the "narrative interview technique" (Schütze 1983), a German tradition in phenomenological, biographical research (Bertaux and Kohli 1984). I initiated the interviews with the following question: "Please think back to the time when you got to know your first boyfriend or girlfriend. I would like you to tell me about your experiences with relationships from that point to your situation today." I did not interrupt the succeeding narratives. I only gave signs of focused attention and continued interest to support the constant flow of talk. I did not take a directing role and allowed respondents to decide which topics they would speak about in what detail. I did not define what a relationship is, and when respondents were in doubt about classifying an experience, I encouraged them to talk about it. Once the narrative section was complete, I followed up on some biographical phases with a loose questionnaire and notes I had made during the narratives.

The total length of the interviews ranged from seventy-five minutes to three hours. I transcribed the narrative sections and some additional information from the conversational parts when it seemed important to understanding the breakups. However, the data analysis predominantly focused on the narrative sections, as it is here that respondents were least constrained in what they wanted to talk about. An advantage of this method is that all accounts occur unsolicited. Respondents only gave accounts if they felt compelled to do so. Therefore the data allow us to evaluate the extent to which individuals feel that talk about breakups conveys worst possible readings: unsolicited accounts reveal anticipated face damage.

The amount of time elapsed since the breakups had an impact on how respondents talked about them. In general, respondents devoted less time to breakups that

occurred long ago, but still provided accounts for long-past relationships. It is thus possible to analyze the account strategies for all cases in the same fashion. However, I do not ignore the impact of time on accounting. I devote more attention to the evolution of accounts over time in the section on the sedimentation of accounts.

For the purposes of the present article, I translated examples illustrating the various account strategies from German into English. Speaking from an interpretive perspective, it is undesirable to use translated data, as they are soaked in the translator's interpretations. Nevertheless, the examples can serve the pragmatic function of demonstrating the usefulness—the empirical "grip"—of the categories. In the three following sections, I discuss the account strategies according to the narrative frames in which they were used: dumper, dumpee, and consensus narratives.

DUMPER NARRATIVES

Leaving a partner may be considered cruel or egoistic. To prevent these readings, respondents used three basic account strategies. Not all dumpers' narrations included each strategy, but I found at least one in every case. The first approach is to emphasize one's empathy with the dumpee. This strategy prevents the initiator from appearing cold or cruel. The second is to dismiss the breakup conflict by either downplaying or exaggerating it. This strategy minimizes the hurt done to the dumpee, but it does not deny it altogether. The third type I call *externalization*. I define externalizations as the attempt to shift responsibility onto one's former partner, social circumstances, or personal faculties beyond one's conscious control.

Emphasizing Empathy

A simple strategy of face-management in this context is to emphasize one's empathy with the former partner. Shott (1979) has argued that empathy furthers social order, because it prevents people from engaging in deviance and motivates altruistic behavior. Nevertheless, as a self-ascribed character trait, it can also serve as a strategic means of impression management. Individuals may self-ascribe empathy when they talk about how they pondered the effects the breakup would have on their partners. Respondents employing this strategy described the indecisiveness and doubts they had to work through before eventually ending the relationship. Having endured some hardship themselves, the dumpees do not have the "privilege" of merely being the victims of the process: breaking up was hard for both sides. In the following case, the respondent Lukas talks about how he left his second girlfriend to initiate a relationship with another woman.

> It was back and forth for a time since I was torn between two women. That's a really awkward situation when you have the choice between two women. You could make a decision, but you just have such a hard time to choose. Because you also um know what you cause in the other person that somehow um . . . yes, that somehow loves you.

Lukas points out the difficulties he faced in this situation. He was not unaffected by the breakup. Rather, he acknowledges his partner's attachment and his social commitment. In the end, this did not keep him from breaking up with her, but he has demonstrated a general respect for the responsibilities a relationship entails. In doing so, he counteracts the potential reading of him as someone who easily disregards social commitments. One may also create an impression of empathy during the description of the breakup event itself. Some respondents claimed to have uttered apologies and concern for the dumpee's feelings at the time of the breakup. Some also stressed the emotional intensity they experienced during the breakup. Finally, respondents conveyed empathy by displaying prevailing interest in the former partner's well-being, as Kathrin does, about her second boyfriend, in the following example.

> And . . . and two years ago or so . . . two years ago he found a new girlfriend . . . and they are very happy, the two of them. It's very different, she's a totally different type than I am—of course you watch and compare—and that was . . . he told me this at some point . . . and yes . . . Nice, somehow.

Dismissing Conflict: Denials of Injury

Dumpers dismissed breakup conflicts by either downplaying or exaggerating them. I look at downplaying first. Dumpers who depict themselves as empathetic can effectively combine this strategy with a downplayed description of the breakup. Taking the role of the dumper always implies some breakup tensions. Otherwise, no distinction between dumper and dumpee could be drawn. Leaving someone inevitably constitutes an imposition on one's partner. However, individuals may still downplay the conflictuality of the breakup. This minimizes the damage done to their partners and thus the threat to their own faces. The strategy represents an instance of Scott and Lyman's (1968:51) denials of injury, a subgroup of justifications. The smaller the amount of grief and anger on the dumpee's side, the less cruel the breakup appears. The following case, Kathrin talking about her first boyfriend, exemplifies this strategy.

> We went for a walk and I told him the relationship was over, because I didn't . . . love him that much anymore um . . . that I was sorry, but . . . yes. . . . And that went pretty quickly. He didn't even say much in response . . . well . . . actually I can't remember anything he said. I only know that we didn't walk for a long time. Didn't make it very far. And then that was over.

Going for a walk is a calm and peaceful activity. This complements the fact that no trace of an argument is included in the story. Kathrin simply explained her lack of feelings. She portrays his reaction as calm and unemotional. The event was trivial enough for her to forget the details of what he said in response. This description downplays the dumpee's stakes in the relationship, as he did not try to resist the breakup at all. Note that she also points out her empathy by apologizing for breaking up. Her strategy combines empathy and a downplayed breakup event. Such a

combination would not work in the next case. As a very different approach to dismissing the breakup conflict, an individual may exaggerate the description of the breakup as to deny the authenticity of the partner's feelings. Prior to this passage, the respondent Jens had described at several points his former (second) girlfriend's tendency to be "melodramatic."

> What a hassle. So there was a lot of whining and "No, don't go" and what not [takes a deep breath] . . . whatever. Eventually I really had to *escape* from her, because . . . ah whatever [laughing] . . . she clung on to me, "*No*, who am I without you" and "*Argh*" [sound of intensive pain]. Horrifying. And I said, "Now let me go, I am going now." . . . Pretty funny, in retrospect. (italics here and throughout indicate strongly emphasized speech)

The respondent depicts the breakup in strongly emotional, yet highly stereotypical, terms. He overemphasizes her statements, repeating them in direct speech, like phrases from a bad movie. While Kathrin downplayed the emotional intensity of her breakup, Jens exaggerates it so much as to frame it as a farce. He denies his girlfriend's emotional authenticity. Instead, he feels she was acting melodramatic once again. He does not have to feel guilty, because no genuine emotions were involved. This aggressive approach to conflict dismissal clearly forbids self-ascriptions of empathy. A combination with externalization strategies is possible, however, as I show in the next section.

Externalizing Responsibility

Externalization is a form of excuse that dumpers use to shift responsibility to factors beyond their control. Dumpers acknowledge that they have been part of a problematic event, but deny responsibility for it. The externalizations varied considerably in their content, but they all fulfill the same purpose: to blame something or someone else. One way to externalize responsibility is to discredit the dumpees and thereby hold them responsible for the circumstances that necessitated the breakup. In the following, Jens comments on his second girlfriend's inability to grasp his sense of humor:

> She would be really insulted for a whole week and act in a cold way. So I always had to deliberate what I could say in front of her . . . and that I couldn't be like I am. . . . I think this was . . . an important point.

Jens's girlfriend, the "melodramatic" girl, did not let him be himself. She failed to understand his humor, got offended too easily, and overreacted by remaining offended for excessive periods of time. Note that this passage serves as further proof of her melodramatic tendencies. This externalization account works in combination with the conflict dismissal cited in the last section. Less conflictual forms of externalization refer to a factor external to the relationship, such as spatial distance between the partners making the relationship less attractive. This second type of externalization, targeting external circumstances, is more consistent with ascriptions of empathy. A third type essentially leaves the responsibility on the level of the dumper, but refers

to a realm beyond the individual's agency. Two such realms appeared in the data: emotions and mental illness. For example, Lukas talks about how medical school worsened his obsessive-compulsive disorder:

> I um was thinking that um . . . well, I was pretty out of it because of my studies, this anatomy class really drove me crazy—psychologically as well—and um when I met up with Sonja [his new girlfriend] I was doing better. In this situation. And eventually I came to think: if you are doing better when she is around then it has to be *love*. If you know what I mean. And then I said . . . I have now been um . . . this whole time been trying this with Anna [his old girlfriend] and somehow it didn't work.

When he realized that he felt better in another student's company, he came to interpret this as a sign of love. From this perspective, Lukas's mental disorder and the strenuous circumstances made him break up with Anna to get together with Sonja. This excuse makes particular sense in this case. From his present perspective, breaking up with Anna was a biographical mistake. In the meantime, he has broken up with Sonja and is now dating Anna again. The respondent Kathrin also externalizes responsibility by invoking her fading love for her former (first) boyfriend.

> And then came this period for me um . . . when I think I didn't really love him anymore, when he wasn't that important to me anymore. Most *clearly*, I noticed this from the fact that I didn't really want any bodily closeness anymore, that this somehow *became* . . . somewhat of a . . . chore. [. . .] And I still remember how my mother told me later . . . that um . . . she had noticed it. That I was somehow burdened by this. Even in the weeks before.

Kathrin regards her emotions as revealing information about her deeper, real self (Turner 1976). In Turner's terms, Kathrin is an impulsive rather than an institutional character. Instead of understanding her emotions as produced and controlled by herself, she thinks of them as signifiers of her deeper self and feels committed to listening to this inner voice. She validates her decision by citing her mother, who—as a qualified observer of her daughter—had recognized her burden even before she herself had become fully conscious of it. Consequently, emotions, if considered a realm beyond one's free will, may be invoked to externalize responsibility, as well. Yet I should stress that this third form of externalization will work only in front of audiences with a similar perspective on personal agency. Institutional characters (Turner 1976), for example, see emotions as something to be controlled rather than followed and will not accept an "impulsivistic" account. Likewise, some audiences may consider mental illness to be a personal weakness or character flaw rather than a genuine illness.

DUMPEE NARRATIVES

We can generally expect dumpees to talk about breakups more often than dumpers, especially in interactions where dumpees anticipate supportive audiences. Both dumpers and dumpees have to prevent worst possible readings, but dumpees must

also deal with threatened self-conceptions (Turner 1968), thus having a second incentive to develop appropriate accounts. Therefore dumpees should present more elaborate stories than initiators, because of the simple fact that they rehearse and refine them more often. My data support this argument. This narrative frame comprises more multifaceted and idiosyncratic stories than the other two. Nevertheless, four account strategies run throughout the narratives. Dumpees, like dumpers, employed externalizations to blame someone or something else, although—as I argue below—the consequences may be problematic in some cases. Second, dumpees may downplay the breakup's impact on themselves. These again are instances of Scott and Lyman's (1968) denials of injury. Third, some respondents emphasized their agency in the breakup. They acknowledged their dumpee roles, but reduced the imbalance of the events. They refused to be regarded as passive objects of the dumpers' actions. Fourth, some dumpees pointed out valuable changes of self that were triggered by the breakups. This strategy transforms a harmful event—the breakup—into something positive, as it turned out to have positive long-term effects.

Externalizing Responsibility

The respective roles of dumper and dumpee are very different, yet respondents used externalization strategies in both frames. Externalizing responsibility to circumstances did not occur in my data. Nevertheless, we could expect to find instances of this strategy in larger data sets, for example, in the form of "she moved away and did not want to do this long distance thing." There are examples, however, of blaming the partner or individual faculties beyond one's agency. The respondent Michael externalizes responsibility to an anxiety disorder that eventually forced him to become institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital.

> I was institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital and um Janina [his fifth girlfriend] and I were together for two more weeks and then it was over. So, she broke up um because she didn't have any hope for me to get better and just imagine, I was nineteen, she was eighteen, and then the boyfriend is institutionalized and stuff. Of course that was really difficult for her, so she broke up, you know?

Michael conveys understanding for his girlfriend's decision to break up. He does not feel responsible for his mental illness, because he regards it to be beyond his agency. Consequently, he does not feel responsible for the failure of the relationship either, as it was prompted by uncontrollable causes. This externalization removes his agency from these events to such an extent that he can even express empathy for his girlfriend's situation—an action usually restricted to dumpers. Another externalization strategy is to blame the partner, as Lukas does in talking about why his first girlfriend was interested in him.

> Because um she had to fill this gap in her life. [. . .] And so she had . . . all kinds of—I think like two more people or so after we broke up—to sort of build up her self-esteem.

Lukas stated that his first girlfriend had just been dumped by a partner whom she had loved intensely. He thinks that her motive to engage in a new relationship was to build up her self-esteem. This motive ascription serves to blame her for the inevitable failure of the relationship. Building up one's self-esteem is apparently an unacceptable motive for starting a relationship. He underscores the ascription by stating that she continued with this approach two more times after breaking up with him. His desire to depict her in a negative way can be inferred from his use of "all kinds of," since two partners cannot properly be called "all kinds of" people.

Initially, I was surprised that few cases of discrediting one's partner appeared in this group of narratives, but on a closer look, avoiding this strategy may be reasonable. New negative implications emerge from its application. While one may be able to convince an audience that the dumper was responsible for the relationship's failure, one inevitably admits strong emotional stakes. This implication is particularly undesirable when the relationship ended a long time ago. Dumpees then demonstrate that they are still feeling bitter and uneasy, and are somewhat unable to move on with their lives. Sustained negative feelings highlight lasting impact. According to Schlenker (1980:131–32), the severity of a predicament is determined by the amount of damage and the amount of responsibility for it. Dumpees discrediting their partner merely achieve a trade-off between these factors.

Denying Injury

A second strategy is the denial of injury account. In choosing this approach, respondents identified as dumpees, but claimed that it did not matter to them much. For instance, Jens downplays the lovesickness that he experienced when his first girlfriend left him: "It's not like I was down for half a year, you know?" Another respondent pushed this approach to extremes. In Alexandra's narration about her third boyfriend, the breakup events even sound somewhat pleasurable:

> Well, about *him* I was sorry, as a *friend*, but not because of the relationship. And then he still made me a tape, which I had forever. . . . And it was something like, he came, then we talked about all this and a few days later he put this tape into my mailbox. That was actually pretty cute, but it wasn't . . . tragic.

Emphasizing Agency

In the same way that dumpers dismiss breakup conflicts, dumpees may emphasize their agency in the breakup process. As I argued before, dismissing conflictuality makes the breakup appear more balanced. Ascriptions of agency serve the same purpose. Respondents argue that they played an active role, setting their own standards and conditions. Christiane, talking about her fourth boyfriend, said,

> After he told me, something like um . . . "let's just have fun together, but something serious . . . I just don't *want right now*." I eventually said, "*Nope . . . Nope.* No way. Then I am not doing this." . . . *Because* um . . . with him I either wanted something real or nothing at all.

The respondent was trying to build up a stable relationship with her partner. After a period of six months, she confronted him with her plan, which he then refused. She recognizes that he dumped her, because he was unwilling to start a "serious" relationship. However, she demanded that an either/or decision be made, refusing to continue with the previous state of affairs. She set her own standards, and when they were not fulfilled she chose to end the relationship. In this way, she reduces the event's inequality by emphasizing her agency. The strategy does not fully protect her against damages to her self-conception and her identity, but it does provide some buffering effects.

Depicting Self-Change

A fourth account strategy is to invoke valued changes of self that the breakup induced. Dumpees usually combined this strategy with ascriptions of agency. They admit that their self-conceptions were threatened by the events, but create a barrier of biographical distance. This barrier separates their present identities from who they were at the time of the breakup. Christiane describes the positive side of her experiences with her fourth "boyfriend," who refused to start an official relationship with her.

> It was disappointing, but I was also glad to notice that I had fallen in love for the first time. You know, that something like this actually exists. You know, now you . . . have experienced it and *now you know what you want*. You know, what kinds of feelings you want and all.

Instead of focusing on the failed relationship, she concentrates on the discovery of her emotional self. The experience was disappointing, but it created an awareness of her capacity for love. This helped her establish the more satisfying relationship she has today. Respondents employing this strategy distance themselves from their past selves, because they believe they have changed significantly since and as a result of the events. Consequently they are biographically dissociated from these episodes and do not have to take full responsibility for them.

CONSENSUS NARRATIVES

While the previous two narrative frames essentially include a confession of a problematic event that must be accounted for, consensus narratives are accounts in themselves: they deny the problematic event. In the consensus narrative, the breakup causes no identity threats, because no harm was inflicted on either party. The respondents' basic claim is that the decision to break up was mutual and nonconflictual. From a theoretical perspective, it seems improbable that a breakup would be truly mutual. Using a quantitative approach, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1979) report that one partner almost always wants the breakup more than the other. For a truly mutual breakup, both partners would have to decide to break up at the same time

and raise the issue together. Of course, one partner could propose a breakup at a time when the other has already concluded that going separate ways would be best. However, Hopper (2001) found for divorces that this situation creates conflicts and oppositional role identities nonetheless: it is humiliating to be confronted with the partner's wish to break up even if one also wants the relationship to end. In my data, respondents only used this strategy when describing long-past breakups. This makes sense, because faded memory allows the account givers to avoid going into detail. For example, Christiane does not recall how she and her first boyfriend split up.

> I don't remember how we split at all . . . I don't remember. . . . I think both of us said, "No . . . we don't want this anymore. It sucks." Just totally [laughing] . . . it was . . . you just really figured that it was just nothing serious, sort of.

Christiane declares that she has forgotten the details of the breakup, then describes it in comical terms. Most likely, a couple breaking up would not mutually agree that their relationship "sucks," but she maintains this as further proof that the relationship was "nothing serious." The respondent Michael, talking about his fourth girlfriend, provides another instance of a consensus narrative at an early age.

> Hold on, when did this . . . how did this end? . . . I think . . . I think it was something like I told her that it doesn't work anymore, simply because the um . . . because the distance was too great. For me this was, I . . . mhm . . . that was just too exhausting, sort of. We could only see each other on the weekends . . . and um I was only fifteen at the time and she was sixteen and a half, almost seventeen, she didn't have a car . . . and by train this all would have become pretty expensive. And so we decided that we . . . would not see each other anymore for the time being, so to say.

Michael also points out his difficulties in remembering how the relationship ended. His narrative becomes somewhat conspicuous because he identifies himself as the initiator in the first sentences by speaking in first-person singular ("I told her"; "For me this was"). He then switches from a subjective to a factual perspective: it was not only too exhausting for *him*, it *was* too exhausting. It was not too expensive for *him*, it *was* too expensive. Instead of saying "I," he now proceeds with the plural "we."

THE SEDIMENTATION OF ACCOUNTS

Up to this point, I have used a purely dramaturgic approach. Following this methodology, we make as few assumptions as possible about the subject's inner life. We assume that individuals are interested in a beneficial presentation of self and nothing more. Their cognitive processes are inaccessible to the observer and thus irrelevant for sociology (Goffman 1990; Lyman and Scott 1975; Mills 1940). This is why we analyze accounts as strategic devices rather than indicators of a subject's inner life. Nevertheless, I found that a phenomenological perspective on the self is necessary to understand some features of accounting practices. I outline the connections in this section.

Five of the six respondents' biographies included one particularly traumatic relationship. These are the most negative points, the "slumps" of their love biographies. They can be easily distinguished from all other narrative sections. They are marked by emotional language and some emotional agitation during the interviews themselves, including cases in which the experiences occurred years ago. All respondents emphasized the significant impact the experiences had on their lives. They are instances of what Denzin (1989:39) calls "epiphanies": biographic events that "cut to the inner core of the person's life and leave indelible marks on them." How can we understand these marks in the case of breakups? I found that respondents, while talking about subsequent relationships, referred back to traumatic events—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. They used their epiphanies as normative guidelines to evaluate later relationships in two ways. They stressed positive aspects of subsequent relationships that become visible when compared with the traumatic relationships. Additionally, they invoked their epiphanies to explain action they took when facing similar dilemmas later. I argue that these patterns represent the impact of accounting on the respondents' selves and cognition. Accounts sediment into schemes of perception (Schütz [1932] 1967), the deepest levels of meaning making and experience; more recently, Zerubavel (1997) speaks of "mental lenses."

> A scheme of our experience is a meaning-context which is a configuration of our past experience embracing conceptually the experiential objects to be found in the latter but not the process by which they were constituted. . . . The synthesis of recognition takes the lived experience that is to be classified, refers it back to the schemes on hand, and fixes its specific essence. (Schütz [1932] 1967:82–83)

I suggest that epiphanies resulting from traumatic breakups represent a typical biographical instance of scheme acquisition (DiMaggio 1997:269) for two reasons. First, schemes are created or revised only once previous expectations are severely violated, as is the case with traumatic breakups. This is consistent with Mead's ([1934] 1977) conception of mind as induced by blocked lines of action (Collins 1989). Second, emotionally salient experiences imply more ruminating and reworking (Scheff 1979) that makes the sedimentation of experience more likely (DiMaggio 1997). Additionally, individuals will seek to discuss epiphanies more than mundane experience. These narrations and discussions are likely to feed back onto the organization of their lives and biographies (Bruner 1987).

Therefore we expect the respondents' epiphanies to evoke new or revised schemes of perception, which in turn exert a significant influence on their actions and experiences in the present. As I show in the next section, the choice of account strategies in these cases is of great importance for the development of the self. I go through the five cases and provide data to illustrate both the roots and the impacts of their schemes. Michael's case is special insofar as his epiphany occurred very recently. Thus we cannot observe any long-term impact yet. Nevertheless, this case allows me to show what the earliest stage of accounting and scheme creation looks like. Alexandra's and Christiane's epiphanies resemble each other as both respondents accept partial responsibility for their relationships' failures. This has led to similar

schemes with similar outcomes. Lukas and Jens, on the other hand, fully blame their former partners, thus producing very different schemes. This may actually point to a gender pattern in accounting for traumatic breakups (cf. Walzer and Oles 2003). Because of my small sample, however, this may be a chance result. Future studies should explore this question with larger samples.

Five Case Studies

Alexandra and Christiane identify their first long-term relationships as their most traumatic experiences. Both of their partners exhibited behavior that is unacceptable from their present perspective. Both respondents also endured these relationships much longer than they now think they should have. Retrospectively, they see patterns of gendered exploitation throughout these relationships. Christiane's second boyfriend frequently arrived at her apartment late at night under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. Alexandra's sixth boyfriend relied heavily on her emotional and practical support, but was unwilling to reciprocate. Eventually, both women initiated the breakups. Their accounts are similar; they describe changes of self that create a barrier of biographical distance between the traumatic relationships and their present selves. They also blame their partners by invoking their deficiencies: excessive drug use (Christiane) and selfish ignorance (Alexandra). They are careful, however, to emphasize their personal responsibility for the unfolding of the traumatic relationships. Instead of unilaterally blaming their former partners—conceivably, they could have done this—they partly blame themselves, since they allowed their partners to exploit them.

> Christiane: I was a little mad at myself that I let him do all these things with me . . . that I wasn't strong in this relationship at all and stuff, you know, that I just let him do his thing, you know, for such a long time . . . and I was really angry that I didn't assert myself. Once in a while . . . when I thought about it or when there were situations and stuff . . . that reminded me . . . and eh . . . right. Yeah, it came up once in a while.

> Alexandra: This is still an ego issue for me, because I think I see myself as a very independent person . . . and he just tyrannized me all the time.

Both respondents state that these relationships haunted them for the next years, which could point to a phase during which they constructed new relationship schemes. Accordingly, they describe a long phase of relationship aversion that ensued after these breakups.

> Christiane: Eh . . . I would say that this relationship sort of . . . screwed me up for the next couple of years. [. . .] I just didn't care for men anymore.

> Alexandra: I was definitely fed up with men. [. . .] I think . . . at least for the first year . . . I thought every guy sucked.

Which schemes resulted from the epiphanies? As demonstrated, both respondents recognize their past selves as deficient, since they passively allowed their partners

to exploit them. They regard their own actions as important elements in maintaining a relationship's power balance. Therefore problems like the ones encountered during their traumatic relationships could not be avoided by just finding the "right," nonexploitative partner. Since they admit their personal responsibility retrospectively, they were able to learn important lessons about their personal roles in creating satisfying relationships. The respondents emphasize that they are now careful to prevent and recognize gendered power differentials. Alexandra engaged in a new relationship with her current boyfriend Ethan only after she had established that he was more supportive than her former boyfriend. This demonstrates the normative impact of her scheme.

> And then, right, with Ethan I came to realize: *Ah*? There are normal men? [laughs] Who are nice? [laughs] Who don't just exploit you? Who are really interested in you? [...] He's probably the first who, sort of, where I have the feeling that . . . that he is carrying me, that he does something sweet once in a while. I am not the only one, who sees a book somewhere and thinks "*Yeah*, he'll love this" or something, but that this comes from both sides.

Christiane, at some point, found out that her current boyfriend was consuming marijuana regularly. Unpleasantly reminded of her traumatic relationship, she confronted him and broke up until he agreed to quit and seek professional help. This demonstrates the behavioral impact of her scheme.

> And a week later he said . . . "Yes, I quit smoking pot entirely and I get drug counseling now . . . and . . . I started this, I started that" and . . . then we met up and we got together again.

More generally, she describes her transformation of self from the epiphany to her current role in relationships, which is demonstrated by her successful effort to end her boyfriend's drug consumption.

> I changed from this little, shy mouse, that can't assert itself into someone who says what she wants. . . . And who knows, what she wants.

Thus we see that at least some of the respondents' major choices and evaluations are grounded in their epiphanies. Had they chosen to blame their partners for the relationships' fault lines, other schemes would have resulted and could have affected their biographies in different ways. Lukas's case demonstrates this alternative approach. His trauma occurred at the end of his first relationship, when his girlfriend dumped him. Until she did so, he felt that the relationship was perfect. He thinks that people can have only one true love in their lives. For him, this was his first girlfriend.

> You only have *one love* . . . in your life. One *true* love. . . . And that is usually the first one. This true, unspoiled . . . without reservations . . . only devoted love. And then something happens . . . eh then . . . you will never again love anyone that much as this one person.

Lukas's account has already been cited in the (dumpee) section on externalizing responsibility. According to him, his girlfriend was trying to cope with her previous,

failed relationship and exploited Lukas's attachment to build up her own self-esteem. Although he was too naive to realize it at the time, this necessarily reduced their relationship to a temporary episode. Note that, in contrast to Christiane and Alexandra, this narrative allows for no personal agency: the outcome was determined from the start. He bears no responsibility for the breakup. His only fault was to be vulnerable and naive. The breakup itself was devastating for him and apparently still is, although it happened almost a decade ago.

> It took me a while until I was over this. . . . Yeah, five years, I think. Mh, I am actually still not *totally*, I am still not totally over it . . . I have to say [laughs].

The scheme that resulted from his account is a decidedly misanthropic stance on relationships and the world in general: individuals maximize their pleasure in their friendships and relationships. As soon as better options become available, the more powerful partner initiates the breakup. Lukas argues:

> There is always one person in a relationship who is stronger and one who is weaker. There is always one who loves the other one more than he is loved back. It's always like that.

Compare Christiane and Alexandra's perspective with this statement. They make efforts to maintain equality in their relationships. Lukas, by contrast, believes that power differentials are inevitable patterns of relationships. I argue that this perspective is the generalized result of his account for his first breakup. Accordingly, his present behavior and evaluation of relationships is attuned to these power differentials: his epiphany sensitized him in this way. As power differentials are inevitable, there are few moral considerations involved. After having been exploited by his first girlfriend, he feels justified to think and act instrumentally, as well. Numerous instances for this impact could be cited, but, for reasons of space, I cite only one, from his present relationship. His current girlfriend, Anna, would like to move in with him and get married soon, but Lukas has reservations.

> Well um Anna already thinks, "Should we move in together?" and I don't know what, you know? . . . And, for me it's like . . . that I kind of notice that my market value increases while I get older. You know, men are more like wine . . . that gets better when stored well . . . and women are more like fruit . . . when you, you know, a fruit, they get worse when they age. And therefore women are interested in getting married as quickly as possible [laughs] and men aren't.

In his relationship with Anna, Lukas feels that the power differential is in his favor. Because of his increasing "market value," he feels uneasy about getting more tightly bound to her. In addition to this everyday theory of age, gender, and physical attractiveness, he has recently graduated from medical school and is aware of the rise in social status that this entails. He is considering breaking up with Anna to use his improved status to find a more attractive partner.

Jens's case is less spectacular, although there are some similarities. Jens's epiphany occurred during his second relationship with the "melodramatic" woman mentioned before. He accounts for the breakup by denying the authenticity of her emotions and

blaming her for not letting him be himself (see the dumper sections on dismissing conflict and externalizing responsibility for the accounts). Like the other respondents, Jens emphasizes the long-term impact of the relationship.

> Well, after that I took a pretty long break . . . three years actually . . . because I was fed up with relationships for the time being.

Since Jens denies all responsibility for the relationship's failure, he draws no far-reaching conclusions about his personal role in relationships. He does acknowledge that he has a tendency to be insensitive. This frequently alienated his second girlfriend. He regards this, however, as a legitimate part of his personality. Thus, in contrast with Christiane and Alexandra, the problem *can* be solved by finding the right partner.

> I can be really insensitive sometimes, I'll admit that much . . . but that just means that I need a girlfriend who can cope with this. Um . . . because I won't be sensitive about stuff either, you know?

His evaluation of his present relationship is positive. Although his new partner is emotionally expressive like his former girlfriend, she does not act offended for long periods of time. Instead, tensions sometimes erupt in cathartic outbursts, which is more to his liking. Jens's account for breaking up with his second girlfriend allows him to view his insensitivity as a normal part of his personality. The problems, then, really stemmed from his ex-girlfriend's melodramatic tendencies. From this experience, Jens has learned that his girlfriends must be easygoing and able to cope with his occasional insensitivity.

> When we fight—and I like it this way—things get pretty heated . . . but then afterward everything's all right again. And it's not like with my previous girlfriend, for example . . . um . . . that . . . when you say something wrong . . . you don't um talk for a week . . . or something. You know? Well, or that there's . . . only . . . um dark clouds, you know, that . . . that doesn't happen with her. . . . I am OK with her flaws and she is OK with my flaws.

Michael's case is distinct from the previous ones, as his traumatic breakup occurred rather recently, about six months ago. After a three-year relationship, his girlfriend broke up with him. His narrative is very long and emotional. According to him, at some point in the relationship the balance of power shifted from his side to hers.

> After two years um the relationship completely changed. Almost, well, almost 180 degrees. Because then it was suddenly like I became jealous, very much so.

He has not yet developed an efficient narrative to make sense of the failed relationship. His narrative lacks an overarching theme to organize individual events (Gergen and Gergen 1987). The only thing that becomes clear is the impact the breakup had on his life.

> And then it was over! And I . . . it was crazy. It . . . um . . . I almost didn't get things straight [laughs], you know, I was, I was really totally devastated.

In line with my theory, he is also unable to account for the breakup. He gives multiple explanations that frequently contradict each other. For example, one emerging theme is to focus on her mendacity. He cites several instances in which she lied to him, secretly read his e-mail or text messages, and so forth. He speaks very negatively about her in this context, calling her a "slut" ("Schlampe"). According to this theme, her mendacity destroyed the trust between them and eventually caused the breakup. This emerging line, if he decides to focus on it, will most likely result in an externalization account in the form of blaming one's partner. I assume that a scheme focusing on power, possibly similar to Lukas's scheme, will result. On the other hand, he still thinks she is the "perfect partner" for him and keeps the early stages of the relationship—before mutual trust crumbled—in the highest esteem. He also sees some personal responsibility for the atmosphere of distrust that eventually came to dominate the relationship. If he chooses to focus his accounting in this way, the emerging scheme should more closely resemble Christiane's and Alexandra's schemes, since he would have to draw lessons about his personal behavior and responsibility in maintaining a good relationship. Because of the breakup's emotional salience, I am sure that his accounting will ultimately sediment into a scheme of relationships. The scheme's exact shape is not clear yet, although he seems to lean toward blaming his partner. This would further support the assumption that gender patterns are at work: men blame their partners; women see their own responsibility as more salient. The five cases demonstrate that individuals have some agency in creating their schemes, although they are constrained by actual events: there is some but not unlimited leeway in accounting for breakups. Additionally, individuals may not be aware of the impact these choices may have on them. As Schütz ([1932] 1967) argues, schemes may not be readily available for conscious reflection.

In what sense are these schemes structures of the self rather than merely narrative patterns? It is, of course, theoretically possible for individuals to revise their relationship accounts at any point. In this case, the material from which the schemes are constructed would change and thus so should the schemes. Such a perspective is consistent with Mead's ([1934] 1977) emphasis on self-as-process rather than self-as-structure. I argue, however, that schemes are more resistant. The respondents' biographical narratives, including the breakup accounts, are consistently aligned with their schemes. The schemes provide the mental lenses (Zerubavel 1997) through which individuals perceive and categorize new information. They could change the schemes, but this would require them to reinterpret large parts of their biographies—or to endure a fairly high amount of cognitive dissonance. The longer a scheme is used to interpret experience, the less likely it is to be revised, because the greater the amount of experience that would have to be reinterpreted. Accounts and schemes structurally support each other: their interrelation provides for some degree of structural durability. As Bruner (1987) puts it, one eventually becomes the story one tells.

DISCUSSION

In this article, I have developed a typology of breakup accounts. It is the first empirically grounded typology for the dissolution of romantic relationships—including divorce. While there may be important differences in accounting for breakups and for divorces, I assume that there is also significant overlap. Future studies should approach romantic relationship dissolutions in a comparative fashion and with larger data sets. The possible use of this cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986), however, may expand even further, to all instances of relationship dissolution and role exit. Ebaugh (1988:2) has argued that "regardless of the types of roles being departed, there are underlying similarities and variables that make role exit unique and definable as a social process." Accounting will oftentimes be required in cases of role exit, and the cultural tool kit for these cases must be similar.

We are familiar with many "parallel" roles to the dumper and the dumpee, for instance, human resource managers firing an employee, graduate students having their funding withdrawn, and parents ceasing contact with their homosexual daughter. When accounting for these actions in front of others, individuals must first choose a narrative frame. Do they want to take the role of the dumper or the dumpee? The manager can claim that the employee quit and left him hanging, thus taking the role of the dumpee. Likewise, the homosexual daughter can argue that it was she who ceased contact with her parents. They can also attempt to present a consensus narrative. Maybe the department and the graduate student mutually decided that it is in everyone's best interest for the student to leave. Unless a consensus narrative is presented, worst possible readings have to be deflected with accounting strategies similar to the ones that I have introduced. Otherwise, interactional disorder and conflict may ensue (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). In all the potential areas of application, the pool of possible strategies must be limited. In the process of further application, it is likely that the typology must be revised and expanded to fit the data. Nevertheless, it will also be important to attend to the idiosyncrasies, the strategies specific to the context at hand, because they may allow insights into the specific character of these contexts and the institutions involved. For instance, do divorcees eventually come to describe their divorces as consensus based, or are consensus stories restricted to common breakups? If consensus narratives never or hardly ever occur in the context of divorce, this would point to a fundamental difference between divorce and breaking up—and thus marriage and common relationships. Hopper (2001) would then be correct to point to the inevitable emergence of oppositional identities in the process of divorce.

Aside from this attempt to develop a more abstract typology, what are the concrete implications of the findings for the study of breakups and divorce? I have found that respondents accounted for their breakups in vastly different ways, too complex to be categorized as vocabularies of personal needs for dumpers and vocabularies of commitment for dumpees as Hopper (1993a) has proposed. Dumpees, for instance,

denied injury or emphasized their agency in the breakup, which is clearly different from stressing the norm of commitment to one's relationship. I have also found it useful to base my analysis in the narrative frames that respondents chose to employ: dumper, dumpee, and consensus narratives. These distinctions are based not on factual events but on the respondents' self-ascriptions. Indeed, unless direct observation is possible, I argue that we should avoid proceeding in an objectivist fashion. When we have access to retrospective interpretations only, we may not be able to establish who initiated a breakup and who did not—whatever the factual criterion may be. It will then be best to rely on the self-ascriptions that individuals make. Had I imposed a factual criterion on the data, consensus narratives as a third category of narratives in addition to dumpers and dumpees would have remained invisible. Even if true consensus-based breakups are rare or even impossible—depending on the criteria one applies—individuals still use this frame, and it should thus be real enough for us to take it into account. Vaughan (1986), Hopper (1993a), and Walzer and Oles (2003) assume that there is always one dumper and one dumpee identity to distribute. The occurrence of consensus narratives in my data illustrates that sometimes there may be at least one person who denies these identities altogether.

In the second part of the empirical analysis, I have demonstrated that the importance of accounting may go beyond face-management. In cases of epiphanies, the respondents' accounts structured their evaluative and behavioral schemes for relationship life. I conceptualized this as the sedimentation of accounts into schemes of perception. Social psychological effects have been noted by Weiss (1975), Vaughan (1986), and Hopper (1993b). They have generally referred to the importance of "making sense" for getting on with one's life by creating a stable narrative. Yet they have been unable to investigate behavioral and evaluative impacts, because they investigated only one divorce for each person. The impact of scheme acquisition becomes visible only over longer periods of time. Thus it seems reasonable to extend the time periods investigated by students of divorce so that we find out more about long-term adaptation. Most interpretive studies of divorce appear to focus on the process of divorce and the immediate period of transition—months rather than years. This is a major advantage of studying breakups: studies of entire love biographies allow us to trace the unfolding of self and biography over time.

I have discussed five case studies to illustrate the salience of epiphanies for the self. The usefulness of this analysis rests predominantly in its exemplary character. I have shown that an identification of schemes is possible with this material. My sample is too small to identify shared patterns in those schemes. This is an important task for future studies. What, for instance, is the role of gender? Are women's epiphanies similar? In my sample, Christiane and Alexandra accepted some responsibility for their relationships' failures and thus learned to adapt their own behavior in very different ways than Jens and Lukas, who blamed their partners for the relationships' failures. The fifth respondent, Michael, seemed to tend toward blaming his partner, as well.

DiMaggio (1997) argues that socially generalized schemes are more important objects of study for the sociology of culture than purely idiosyncratic ones. This makes

sense if we want to explain more macro sociological patterns. If we are able to identify shared and perhaps predictable patterns in individuals' reactions to traumatic relationships (according to gender, for instance), we have found a crucial part of the cycle of personality and society (Turner 1988). For schemes of relationships, the extent of social generalization is still very much an open question that needs to be resolved. These issues are significant even for more quantitative researchers with an interest in marriage and divorce. Today, many married people will have had previous experiences with relationships and breakups. These experiences shape their marital behavior. The importance of biographical schemes for positivist research on marriage and divorce will depend on whether clear social patterns can be identified. For instance, if it is the case that breakup schemes differ by gender, these findings can be integrated into more quantitative approaches. And if traumatic breakups are frequently the biographical events that catalyze such schemes, we will have gained important information about the structure of the life-course.

Finally, I have combined face-management theory with a phenomenological perspective on the self. In the cases of the respondents' most significant, traumatic breakups, patterns emerged that served as means of orientation and action in the successive stages of their love biographies. Therefore accounts have a transsituational, biographical impact on individuals if these accounts explain biographical events of major significance—epiphanies in Denzin's (1989) terms. In this fashion, it may be possible to reconcile dramaturgic studies with more narrative, biographical studies (cf. DeGloma 2007; Howard 2006). Scott and Lyman went to pains to stress their commitment to a strictly situational understanding of social interaction. Consequently, they were very skeptical of personal attributes transcending the immediate situation (see Lyman and Scott 1975:101–14 for an explicit critique). The same is signified by Goffman's (1967:3) "moments and their men" rather than "men and their moments." As a result of my analysis, I propose that a biographical and a dramaturgic perspective on the self do not necessarily contradict each other. We must continue to analyze the presentation of self as determined by situational demands without ignoring the molding impact of major life events on the individual's understanding of self and biography. Future studies should continue to explore this connection.

NOTE

1. Accounts are part of the group of actions referred to as aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976), serving to extenuate or to prevent interactional disorder. Some similar concepts include neutralizations (Sykes and Matza 1957), disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), and vocabularies

of motive (Mills 1940). Scott and Lyman (1968:51) integrated Sykes and Matza's earlier work on neutralizations as justification accounts. Disclaimers are accounts directed toward future actions and thus also represent a subgroup of accounts, if we expand the term to include future events (Nichols 1990). Vocabularies of motive, however, are conceptually distinct from accounts, although they are usually treated synonymously. Vocabularies of motive denote a historically variable repertoire of motives that individuals may use to explain a specific action. Individuals can draw from these vocabularies to justify their actions, but in themselves, vocabularies of motive are no means of identity defense. For instance, individuals can also use them to express disapproval. A vocabulary of motive includes typically inappropriate reasons for engaging in certain activities, as well. Thus, while accounts are means of identity defense, vocabularies of motive may be used to such ends, but serve additional purposes. Unfortunately, researchers have paid little attention to the disrespected elements of vocabularies of motive. While this is not a main focus of the present article, I give some empirical examples when I discuss externalization strategies in the form of blaming one's partner.

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