

## **Who Can Be Friends? Characteristics of Those Who Remain Friends After Dissolution of a Romantic Relationship**

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**ABSTRACT** - The choice to maintain a friendship following the dissolution of a romantic relationship is a decision that many will face and that has important implications. The present study investigated the role of personality and conflict styles in friendships following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. The study was conducted via an on-line survey ( $N = 522$ ) where personality was assessed by the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) and conflict style by the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983). Findings suggest that conflict style and personality were important predictors of who did and did not remain friends following the dissolution of a romantic relationship.

Friendships are an important part of human social life and are typically the first intimate relationships individuals form with non-family members. During adolescence, the interactions learned with friends help prepare individuals for intimate relationships (Savin-Williams & Bemdt, 1990). It is during these friendships that skills including sharing and conflict resolution are developed. During adulthood, individuals may have several romantic relationships and many individuals report that they will remain friends with past romantic partners (Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989). The present study investigated the relationship between personality, conflict style, and self-reported post-romantic friendships in order to gain a better understanding of the variables influencing post-relationship friendships.

Given the changing face of the American family, the ability of ex-romantic partners to remain friends has important implications not only for the individuals exiting the relationship, but also for the children that sometimes result from these failed relationships. Even within intact families, research suggests that, especially in families with low cohesiveness, parents relying on more hostile conflict styles have children who are more fearful that marital conflict will escalate and are more likely to blame themselves for conflict between their parents (Lindahl & Malik, 2011). Maintaining good relationships, perhaps friendships, following a break-up may rely on positive conflict

styles and may be more easily accomplished by those with specific personality characteristics.

### **Adaptive Conflict Styles**

Research suggests that the types of interactions individuals engage in with a significant other have important consequences for relationship longevity (Starratt & Shackelford, 2012) and, potentially, for post-romantic friendships. For example, research suggests that the ways in which individuals manage conflicts are better predictors of relationship satisfaction than the frequency of relationship conflict (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Specifically, attachment avoidance as a way to manage conflict is correlated with lower relationship satisfaction (Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010). Distinct styles of handling interpersonal conflict that differ in degree of concern with the self versus the other have been identified (Rahim, 1983). In order to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, friendships and romantic relationships, individuals must evidence a healthy interest in their own and their partner's well-being. Because of this, preferences for the ways individuals adapt to conflict are a potential factor explaining why some people remain friends following the end of a romantic relationship and others do not. This information is important for romantic relationships, and also for breakups. Research signifying that the conflict styles adolescents learn within their families spill over into their friendships, suggests that conflict resolution styles within intimate relationships may spill over into subsequent relationships between the once-partnered (Van Doorn, Branje, VanderValk, De Goede, & Meeus, 2011).

Studies have shown that conflict styles are mediated by gender as well. For example, Holt and DeVore (2005) found that females exhibited more compromise than males, while males exhibited more domination than females. In addition, Brannon, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, and Chin (2005) found that men demonstrated more avoidance than women, while women were more collaborative than men in their conflict styles.

Despite the importance of this issue, there is a paucity of research investigating post-relationship friendships. Bullock, Hackathorn, Clark, and Mattingly (2011) found that satisfaction while in the romantic relationship predicted post-romantic friendship maintenance, but it remains unclear what, if any, individual differences might influence these friendships. One potential factor is the particular ways individuals resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise in interpersonal interactions. In addition, multiple research findings suggest that personality is linked to ratings of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Barelds, 2005; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007) and may therefore influence post-relationship friendships.

### **Personality**

Personality has been associated with marital relationship quality and stability (e.g., Donnellan, Assad, Robins, & Conger, 2007; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000). Personality is thought to influence marital relationships by its impact on interpersonal interactions and adaptation to stress which in turn influence stability and longevity of relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In other words, some personalities facilitate interpersonal interactions and stress adaption allowing relationships to persist and flourish. Because post-relationship friendships are a continuation of a relationship, albeit in a new form,

personality variables might provide insight into understanding who remains and who does not remain friends after a relationship ends.

Among the various approaches to conceptualizing personality, the Big Five is widely accepted and utilized (see John & Srivastava, 1999 and McCrae & Costa, Jr., 1999). This descriptive model suggests that differences in personality can largely be explained by differences in five empirically distinct domains- openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. The Big Five conceptualization has also been investigated with regard to gender differences with various results suggesting that females may score higher on several of the domains (see Costa, Jr., Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001 and Chapman, Duberstein, Sørensen, & Lyeness, 2007). Research has linked the Big Five to various outcomes including relationship outcomes. One meta-analytic study suggests that emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are important for relationship satisfaction (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004). Individuals scoring highest on these three factors reported greater satisfaction with their relationships which is associated with greater relationship longevity. Previous research has suggested that specific personality characteristics are associated with constructive relationship strategies. According to Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, and Malcolm (2003), agreeableness was positively associated with constructive conflict resolutions among children. Although both agreements and disagreements are part of friendship formation (Hartup, 1992), solving conflicts in a constructive manner is necessary for the continuance of a relationship. Since personality appears to influence longevity of marital relationships, the authors sought to investigate whether these same personality domains might help in understanding who maintains post-relationship friendships. The Big Five model was chosen for this study because the five traits described, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability are traits that should affect relationship maintenance.

### **Hypotheses**

Personality (as measured by Big 5) was expected to be related to adaptive conflict styles. Individuals with higher scores on each of the Big Five were expected to report greater use of adaptive conflict styles involving concern with others, resulting in a positive correlation between the Big Five traits and the adaptive conflict styles. These styles include integrating, or forming a new solution that pleases both parties involving little or no sacrifice; obliging, where one party continuously submits to the other, and compromising, where each party is expected to sacrifice in order to find a solution). Previous research has suggested that specific personality characteristics are associated with constructive relationship strategies (Jensen-Campbell, et al., 2003) therefore suggesting to the authors that a similar relationship would be evidenced for conflict styles reflecting concern for one's partner. It was expected that agreeableness would correlate with the three above adaptive conflict styles, as well as emotional stability.

Conflict style was also expected to be related to the maintenance of post-relationship friendships. Previous research found that the manner in which conflicts are addressed influences relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) and a similar post-relationship outcome was posited. Fatima and Ajmal (2012) also found that compromise was related to relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution, as was open discussion

and concern for the partner (Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002) and therefore the authors expect that conflict styles were would be linked to friendships among ex-partners as well. The present study predicted that conflict styles focused on concern for the other would be related to maintaining friendships following relationship dissolution due to a focus on and concern with the continued well-being of the ex-partner. These conflict styles include integrating, compromising, and obliging.

Lastly, personality was expected to be related to the maintenance of post-relationship friendships. Emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were expected to be related to preference for maintaining favorable, conflict-free relationships after a break-up much as they are related to marital relationships (Heller, et al., 2004).

**Method**

***Participants***

Participants included 522 college students and friends and family of college students drawn from a larger sample of 1564. The larger sample included additional measures that participants completed based upon responses to key demographic variables (for example, participants' response to "Have you ever been in a romantic relationship?" determined if the participant was eligible to respond to additional questions regarding post-relationship friendship) or that were randomly assigned to only some participants in order to keep the survey to a manageable length. The sample utilized for the present study included all participants who completed the measures of interest. The survey was delivered online via email to students enrolled in various psychology courses who completed it and earned extra or required research credit. They were also offered credit to recruit friends and family to be participants by forwarding the survey link. Participants provided informed consent and then completed a subset of various measures, along with demographics, and relationship biography questions including items covering relationship breakups and cohabiting.

The mean age of the 522 participants was 32.52, with a standard deviation of 10.69. The sample consisted of 179 males and 345 females, who were mostly Caucasian (32.2%) and Latino (55.4%) participants, but also included African-American (6.1%), Asian (3.4%) and Middle Eastern (.4%) participants.

Of the 522 participants, 369 reported being in a romantic relationship, and 210 of those were married. The vast majority of the sample had experienced a relationship in the past, as 499 reported having endured a relationship breakup, and 328 reported being friends with at least one former partner after a breakup. See Table 1.

**Table 1**  
***Demographic Statuses of Sample***

	Post-relationship Friendship	
	Remained friends	Did not remain friends
Have experienced a breakup ( <i>N</i> = 499)	323 (64.7%)	176 (35.3%)
Male ( <i>n</i> = 167)	100 (59.9%)	67 (41.1%)
Female ( <i>n</i> = 332)	223 (67.2%)	109 (32.8%)

*Note.* Participants who reported having experienced a break-up include divorced, widowed and never married individuals.

### **Measures**

*Demographics and relationship biography.* All participants completed a survey including basic demographic questions and various relationship questions. The relationship questions addressed past relationships including whether or not participants were currently in a relationship, length of relationship, whether they had experienced a breakup, whether they remained friends after the breakup, who was responsible for the breakup, reason for breakup, and other relationship characteristics.

*Personality and conflict measures.* Participants completed two scales relevant to the current study, the TIPI and the ROCI-II. The Big Five personality characteristics were measured using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). According to Gosling et al., (2003), the TIPI has a mean test-retest reliability of .72, and the five factors have test-retest reliabilities ranging from .62 to .77. The scale uses two items to measure each of the Big Five factors. Participants respond to each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale where 1 is disagree strongly and 7 is agree strongly. One of the two items for each factor is reverse scored before adding the two items to create a score for each of the five factors. Although the TIPI is a brief assessment of the Big Five, research suggests that it is an adequate measure of personality that is a reasonable measure to be used in place of lengthier Big Five assessments (Jonason, Teicher, & Schmitt, 2011). Research has found that the TIPI has convergent and discriminant validity, good test-retest reliability and correlates appropriately with various external measures (Gosling, et al., 2003).

The ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983) measures five conflict styles by presenting a series of statements and asking respondents to indicate their endorsement of each on a five point Likert-type scale. Example items include, "I exchange accurate information with my partner to solve a problem together" (integrating), "I try to stay away from disagreement with my partner" (avoiding), "I use "give and take" so that a compromise can be made" (compromising), "I give in to the wishes of my partner" (obliging), and "I use my influence to get my ideas accepted" (dominating). For the purpose of the current study, integrating, obliging, and compromising are considered adaptive conflict styles by the researchers, as they involve positive work toward conflict resolution, and avoiding and dominating are considered non-adaptive styles by the researchers because avoiding and dominating can both be detrimental to relationships. Frisby and Westerman (2010) did find that integrating and obliging conflict styles predicted relationship satisfaction. The ROCI-II is a 35-item scale that measures five conflict styles. Participants respond to each item on a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 is strongly agree and 5 is strongly disagree. The entire scale is reverse scored so that higher scores indicate greater use of a conflict style. The ROCI-II has a test-retest reliability of .60 to .83 for the five subscales (Rahim, 1983). Cronbach's alpha levels, reported by Rahim (1983) for each subscale are as follows: Integrating, .77; Obliging, .72; Dominating, .72; Avoiding, .75; and Compromising, .72. Newer conflict measures are specifically designed for relationships (Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009; Straus & Douglas, 2004), but do not contain factors that include integrating styles (finding a new solution without demanding the sacrifice of a compromise), a variable of interest in the correlation of this conflict style to unique factors of relationship breakup and personality. Although the scale is most often

used in organizational settings, Rahim (1983) wrote the original scale to be used in various contexts. The word “partner” was used for this study, whereas “subordinate” could be used in an organizational setting. The scale has been used in the context of intimate relationships previously (Frisby & Westerman, 2010). The reliability analyses were conducted using both MBA students and general undergraduates as participants. A reliability analysis was performed on the current sample, using the word “partner” in the items, and the Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale was even higher than that of the original scale: Integrating, .87; Obliging, .81; Avoiding, .84; Compromising, .78; and Dominating, .82.

## Results

The first hypothesis, that participants with higher scores on the Big Five would demonstrate higher scores on the adaptive conflict styles measure, was supported. Significant relationships were found between the integrating conflict style and agreeableness, openness to experience, and emotional stability. Other significant relationships were found between the compromising conflict style and emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness, although the relationship with openness was weak. No significant relationships between the obliging conflict style and any of the Big Five factors were found. An unexpected relationship was found between dominating conflict style and conscientiousness and extraversion, although the relationship with extraversion was weak. It is important to note that internal consistency of two-item factors is often low, and the TIPI’s internal consistencies ranged from .40 to .73. Gosling et al. (2003) stated that the validity of the scale does exceed reliability. Nevertheless, the low inter-item correlations could have contributed to the low correlations with other scales. See Table 2 for correlation coefficients.

**Table 2**  
*Correlations Between the Big Five and Conflict Styles*

Big Five	Conflict Styles				
	Compromising	Integrating	Avoiding	Dominating	Obliging
Extraversion	.066	.175	-.023	.110*	.069
Agreeableness	.173**	.227**	-.025	-.070	.105*
Conscientiousness	-.027	-.032	-.066	.237**	.033
Emotional Stability	.210**	.261**	.024	-.074	.108*
Openness to Experience	.108*	.221**	-.062	-.075	.106*

Note. \*indicates values significant at .05 level; \*\*indicates values significant at .001 level.

The second hypothesis, that conflict style would be related to the maintenance of post-relationship friendships was supported. A 2 X 2 (gender: male or female and friendship: remain or did not remain friends) factorial ANOVA was conducted for each conflict style. Three main effects were found for conflict style comparisons between those who reported remaining friends and those who did not. Those who remained friends with ex-partners had a higher integration conflict style score,  $F(1, 495) = 7.155, p = .008$ , a higher compromising conflict style score,  $F(1, 495) = 7.996, p = .005$ , and a higher obliging conflict style score,  $F(1, 495) = 5.673, p = .018$  than those who did not remain friends. Results also found two main effects for gender. Males had higher obliging

conflict style score,  $F(1, 495) = 9.703, p = .002$ , and higher avoiding conflict style score,  $F(1, 495) = 17.549, p < .0001$ , than females. No gender by friendship interactions were found.

The final hypothesis, that personality would be related to the maintenance of post-relationship friendships was supported. Scores on the TIPI were analyzed for those who had and had remained friends with a partner after breaking up. Those who reported remaining friends with ex-partners had higher extraversion scores than those who did not report remaining friends post-breakup,  $t(497) = 2.391, p = .017$ . In addition, those who reported remaining friends had higher agreeableness scores than those who did not remain friends,  $t(497) = 2.532, p = .012$ . The remaining Big Five factors were not significant. For complete results, please see Table 3. A 2 X 2 (gender X remained friends or not) factorial analysis of variance was computed for each personality style, but no interactions were significant. However, a main effect for gender was found in the agreeableness style: females were significantly more agreeable than males,  $F(1, 518) = 12.017; p < .001$ .

**Table 3**  
**Personality and Post-relationship Friendship**

<i>Personality Styles</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Extraversion	2.391	.017*
Agreeableness	2.532	.012*
Conscientiousness	.502	.616
Emotional Stability	1.921	.055
Openness to Experience	.107	.107

Note.  $N=499$  \* $p < .05$

**Table 4**  
**Predictors of Those Who Remained Friends vs. Those Who Did Not Remain Friends**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Personality Styles</b>		
Extraversion	-.081	.089
Agreeableness	-.059	.234
Conscientiousness	-.019	.680
Emotional Stability	-.041	.388
Openness to Experience	-.001	.977
<b>Conflict Styles</b>		
Integrating	.030	.637
Avoiding	.109	.037*
Dominating	.024	.616
Obliging	-.074	.208
Compromising	-.106	.065
$R^2$	.043	
$F$	2.181*	

Note. \* $p < .05$

In an attempt to predict who remains friends after a breakup, a linear regression using conflict styles and personality as predictors was performed with variables entered

simultaneously. Participants who had previously experienced a breakup ( $N = 499$ ) indicated whether they had remained friends following the breakup (yes or no), and this was used as the criterion. The five conflict styles and five personality styles were entered together into the equation as predictors. Conflict style and personality style did predict a significant amount of variance in who remained friends post-breakup,  $R^2 = .043$ ,  $F(10, 488) = 2.181$ ,  $p = .018$ . Specifically, avoidance was a significant predictor of remaining friends,  $B = .109$ ,  $t(488) = 2.092$ ,  $p = .037$ . See Table 4 for a summary of regression results.

### Discussion

The current study suggests that more extraverted and agreeable individuals remain friends after the end of a romance than less extraverted and agreeable individuals. Individuals who preferred resolving conflicts in ways that reflect concern with others (i.e., integrating and compromising) were also more likely to remain friends after the end of a romance and these same individuals scored higher on Big Five ratings of agreeableness, openness, and emotional stability. Taken together, the results indicate that conflict style and personality are predictors of who does and does not remain friends following the dissolution of a relationship.

The findings are compatible with other research using a social exchange framework to explore post-relationship friendships. Resources that individuals contribute to relationships, before and after the romance ends, appear to be key to the survival of both friendships and romances (Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2002). One explanation of the current findings is that adaptive conflict styles are associated with behaviors that are viewed as favorable personal resources. Specifically, styles that are indicative of concern with others may provide supportive psychological resources that make post-dissolution friendships worthwhile. Personality may also be linked to resources. For example, extraverts may provide informational and status resources that help to maintain friendships.

The current study adds to the understanding of post-relationship friendships by suggesting that person-level variables and behavioral or attitudinal variables are influences. This has potential implications for co-parenting. Conflict in partners both pre- and post- relationship affects parenting choices, adding hostility on the part of the parents and a lack of understanding of the child's emotional state (Togliatti, Lavadera, & di Benedetto, 2011). Finding ways to become friends after a breakup may not only reduce the stress of the former partners, but also reduce stress on their children. Together the results suggest that some individuals are more likely to remain friends due to personality characteristics and others may be able to maintain friendships due to specific behavioral approaches to conflict that provide friendship resources. Knowing what variables predict post-breakup friendships has implications for marriage and family counseling, especially for couples who might not successfully reconcile.

### Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, findings indicated that conflict and personality were significant, but weak, predictors of remaining friends following a breakup. Thus, major factors explaining post-relationship friendships remain unknown.

Because of the implications for personal well-being as well as the well-being of children in co-parenting situations, these findings should be considered, but research must continue to better predict post-relationship friendships.

Also, information provided by participants was gathered by self-report. Individual partners may perceive entirely different experiences of the same relationship, so couple observations may be useful in a future study. The present results also do not distinguish between participants who experienced a divorce and those who ended a non-marital romantic relationship. It remains unknown if dissolution of a marriage may result in a different likelihood of post-relationship friendship than non-marital relationships. The presence of children may also exert an influence on remaining friends.

The conflict scale used (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983) was originally developed for use in the workplace. Because it includes the integrative conflict style, the investigators preferred to use it for this study. Newer scales have been created specifically for romantic relationships (Zacchilli, et al., 2009), and a future study should be conducted using that scale as well.

Despite the limitations, the finding that who remains friends after a breakup is predicted by personality and conflict style is useful in that it may allow for more positive outcomes not only of former partners, but of their children. Future studies that focus specifically on children post-breakup would aid in a better understanding of this issue and provide useful information for professionals in a family counseling setting.

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