Cooling the break-up out

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Abstract

This article posits that relational dissolution is a process that can be understood in terms of a metaphorical process that Erving Goffman referred to as “cooling the mark out.” Using the empirical research from communication studies, this article specifically articulates how this metaphor applies and suggests two implications concerning relational dissolution on a social and interpersonal level. This article also contributes to scholarly conversations on cooling the mark out by providing additional insights into this metaphorical process from the dissolution literature that Goffman did not mention.

Keywords: compliance-gaining, cooling the mark out, Goffman, relational dissolution
Cooling the break-up out

Relationship dissolution can be tragic. The thought of having to tell someone, who you were once intimate with or had created the hopes of being intimate with, that you no longer desire such a future with him or her can be hurtful, stressful, and disappointing. On the other hand, perhaps it can be liberating for either one or both parties which can make it necessary at times. Hence, many interpersonal communication scholars have undertaken the enterprise of investigating how dissolution occurs; what strategies people use (Cody, 1982), what trajectories dissolution interactions follow (Baxter, 1984), and the relational stages of dissolution (Duck, 1982; Lee, 1984). While such research has been insightful, there is a prominent scholar’s lesser-known publication that can provide a holistic framework to approach breaking up which can unify much of the literature into one concept and provide new insights into our current understanding of relationship dissolution.

Erving Goffman (1952) wrote about a metaphorical process called, “cooling the mark out.” The phrase comes from the lexicon of criminal fraud, where con-artists who have just successfully conned an individual (or “mark”) console him or her into accepting not merely the financial loss that he has just incurred, but more so the loss of face associated with “being fooled” by con-artists. This practice of consoling and helping the mark adapt to the blow to his or her image is important to the practice of conning because if the mark is left angry without consolation he may threaten to kill the con-artists or go the authorities.

A key argument in Goffman’s (1952) article is that this practice of “cooling out” is not just applicable to con-artistry but to many practices of social life. Throughout his paper, he mentions a few examples: a person getting fired, a person failing to pass a board exam, a senior citizen getting forced into a retirement home, the act of rejecting a date, a military leader accepting defeat, and a few others. In all of these cases, the person suffering the “role death”
needs consolation, someone to soften the blow of the harsh news, and bring acceptance to the situation. Thus, while con-artistry is one context where cooling out can occur, there are many other applicable contexts that do not involve deception. In general, cooling out typically is needed in cases of involuntary role termination where the person is responsible for the loss of her role or blow to her self-image. A person can lose a role due to promotion (a boy becoming a man) or abdication (a wealthy CEO voluntarily leaving his/her position to become a humanitarian aid worker), but these situations that do not typically involve being cooled out because these changes are regarded as an improvement on the previous role and not a status degradation.

In response to Goffman’s article, there have been a few studies that have applied this process to other phenomena such as the junior college and its role in helping low-achieving students accept “alternative” careers (Clark, 1960), the strategies that outplacement consulting agencies use in helping terminated employees accept their loss (Miller & Robinson, 2004), and the strategies women use to reject men who approach them in singles bars (Snow, Robinson, & McCall, 1991). While all of these studies have been fruitful in studying their respective phenomena, there has been no formal application of cooling out to the process of relational dissolution in interpersonal communication research.

This lack of application of Goffman to the process is all the more surprising given Hagestad and Smyer’s (1982) analysis of divorce as a process involving three types of loss: loss of attachment (reduced love); loss of role (husband/wife); and loss of routines of daily life associated with married partnership. Their analysis points out that the loss of the role of husband or wife is one that carries stigma – another concept famously illuminated by Goffman – and this is often as hard to deal with as is the loss of affection implied by divorce or breakup.
Therefore, applying Goffman’s metaphorical process of cooling the mark out to relationship dissolution is academically significant for three reasons. First, the application can contribute a coherent framework for breaking-up. Scholars can make sense of much of the research on various aspects of breaking up by using one coherent process and also gain new insights into the endpoints of relational dissolution. Second, the application can provide new suggestions about the process of cooling the mark out. There are certain findings in the relationship dissolution literature that can help expand the metaphor of cooling the mark out and add new facets to the metaphor that Goffman never mentioned. Finally, the application is significant because Goffman himself specifically called for it in his original article. After describing when a mark needs to cooled out he writes:

This leads one to consider the ways in which we can go or be sent to our death in each of our social capacities, the ways, in other words, of handling the passing from the role that we had to a state of having it no longer. One might consider the social process of firing and laying off; of resigning and being asked to resign…of being dropped from a circle of friends or an intimate social relationship…” (Goffman, 1952, p. 10)

To begin, I will discuss the context of relational dissolution and cooling out by first applying to much of the relational dissolution research the metaphorical process of cooling the mark out. Then, I will discuss the implications that such an application brings to our understanding of relational dissolution and also to cooling the mark out. I will then discuss limitations to the metaphorical process. Finally, I will suggest future studies that can shed further light in scholarly conversations.
Relational dissolution

An important distinction must begin our considerations. There is a difference between “breaking the news” and “cooling the mark out.” “Breaking the news” is simply what it sounds like; telling someone the bad news (e.g. that he is fired, dying, jilted, etc.). “Cooling the mark out” is the consolation associated with the loss of a role that takes place after the bad news is disclosed (e.g. reframing the situation, showing objective facts, etc.). These two conceptions may also overlap or be handled stylistically: for example, the person telling the news can also be the one who cools out (as in the case of break-ups) by announcing the break up and saying “It’s not about you it’s about me” (if they are truly unoriginal). The two, however, do not necessarily imply each other. Due to space limitations, my manuscript mostly addresses the latter case of break-ups, where the break-up initiator is the one who informs and also cools out. For future research, one could study cases where the initiator informs but leaves cooling out to friends, family, or generally for the released partner to handle on his or her own.

Hence, to discuss the breadth of the relational dissolution literature in terms of cooling the mark out, I will use the following format which happens to be loosely based on the chronology of Duck’s (1982) dissolution model. First, I will discuss the intra-psychic considerations of dissolution, where a break-up initiator considers the relationship and how to end it which can have effects on how she delivers the news and cools out his/her partner. Second, I will discuss the dyadic process which includes the actual disclosing of the desire to break-up, which involves using certain compliance-gaining strategies to deliver the news. Third, I will then discuss methods that break-up initiators use to cool out their partners. Fourth, I will discuss resistance strategies that the break-up receiver can use to refuse from being cooled out or broken
up with. Finally, I will briefly discuss how break-up receivers cope with the role-death after the cooling out session.

**Intra-psychic considerations**

Duck (1982) argues that the first step in the dissolution of personal relationships is one or more of the partners being psychologically dissatisfied or unwilling to continue the relationship. A person’s level of dissatisfaction with the relationship is high enough such that she begins to critically focus on her partner’s behaviors and performance. The person considers the costs of leaving the relationship and the value of alternative relationships. Most importantly, the person becomes a potential break-up initiator and so considers how to inform his or her partner of the desire to end the relationship (Miller & Parks, 1982).

While the potential break-up initiator considers the costs of leaving the relationship and how to do so, the person may contemplate if there are ways he or she can avoid having to cool out the partner if he or she were to leave. Cooling out is something people prefer to avoid doing since the process can be emotional, face-threatening, and sometimes unpredictable (Snow, et. al 1991; Goffman, 1952). For Goffman, people may avoid it by using either using probationary periods or “carrying” the person. Both of these methods can be applied to relational dissolution. Furthermore, relational dissolution research has uncovered the use of indirect strategies and cost-escalation as additional strategies to avoid cooling out that can be added to the repertoire of strategies to avoid cooling out that are not included in Goffman’s original article. This section will discuss all four of these strategies to avoid cooling out in the context of breaking-up.

When Goffman speaks of “probationary periods” he is speaking of roles that people take on that are made clear to them that they must be ready for the loss of that role at any moment. An example would be “temporary staff” where it is known by the title that they can be let go at any
moment if they do not perform well or become no longer needed. Similarly, dating can be seen as a sort of probationary period for dissolution. Cody (1982) found that people consider the level of intimacy they had with their partner when deciding how to dissolve their relationships. Thus, a break-up initiator may feel less obligated to directly give a break-up speech or cool out her partner if they only went on one date or knew each other for a short period of time (Cupach & Metts, 1994). If they were together romantically for a long time, however, then a break-up interaction and cooling out is much more called for. Overall, people may avoid having to cool out when the mark was on a probationary period, or in this case, when they merely went on one date with their partner.

The second way Goffman speaks of avoiding the need to cool out is when a person is “carried.” This is when a person who is a failure at a role is still allowed to formally hold the title of that role in order to prevent negative consequences of formally terminating that person from their role. In romantic relationships, despite total dissatisfaction, people may still choose to “carry” their partners and continue to be in the relationship rather than break-up with them for various reasons. Perhaps the partner is going through a difficult time and would not be able to psychologically handle a break-up, perhaps the break-up would cause strife and division among family and friends, perhaps the person fears potential financial gloom without her partner bringing in the additional income, and so forth (Johnson, 1982; Strube & Barbour, 1983). Thus, a person may simply “carry” her partner by just suffering through the dissatisfaction hoping for better days. The person may also “carry” his partner by secretly going elsewhere to get her needs met while remaining formally committed (Glass & Wright, 1992).

A third way to avoid cooling the mark out that the break-up literature demonstrates is the use of indirect strategies. Baxter and Philpott (1982) found that once a person intra-psychically
COOLING OUT

decides to end a relationship, the initiator can employ strategic communication to persuade her partner that either she is no longer interested in being in a relationship or that she is no longer worth investing in. If an initiator can successfully persuade her partner of at least one of these conditions, then dissolution can occur. Although having a direct conversation with the partner to end the relationship is the most efficient of methods to achieve dissolution, it is also the most face-threatening. The initiator’s positive face is subject to be argued with, discredited, and seen as a hurtful, and the receiver of the break-up is subject to having his image questioned which attacks positive face as well (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

Thus, to achieve this task, Baxter and Philpott (1982) argue that the initiators often employ indirect strategic communication to “hint” towards their desire for dissolution. Baxter (1985) found that break-up initiators will sometimes simply withdraw by decreasing disclosure, becoming less available to the partner, and lessening frequency of contact. If the partner is able to pick up on these cues and attribute it to a desire to dissolve, then ideally the partner will move on and no direct relationship talk will be necessary. Starks (2007) found this approach to be common in online relationships, and Wilmot, Carbaugh, and Baxter (1985) found indirectness to be a central strategy for terminating long-distance relationships. Thus, the initiator avoids the cooling out his partner by avoiding any direct conversations to break the news or to console, and by letting the partner come to her own conclusions about what happened to the relationship.

The fourth way that an initiator can avoid cooling out is by making the role seem costly and undesirable to the point where her partner claiming the role no longer wants to claim it. Baxter (1985) found that initiators may engage in cost-escalation where the break-up initiator attempts to persuade the partner to initiate the break-up by making the relationship more costly or by engaging in behaviors that would cause the partner to want to initiate the break-up first
(e.g. by being hostile, becoming high-maintenance, cheating, etc.). In these cases, cooling out is avoided because ideally the partner will end up initiating the dissolution and will avoid being the receiver of an involuntary role termination.

There are also direct strategies that researchers identify that I will discuss in the next section. Nevertheless, withdrawal and cost escalation are both additional ways people can avoid cooling out, in addition to probationary periods and “carrying” as Goffman suggested. Therefore, in this section, I have described what happens intra-psychically prior to a break-up. Some dissatisfaction or desire to discontinue the relationship exists among one or both of the partners prior to a break-up, and a break-up initiator may try to avoid breaking the news and cooling out her partner if other working options are at hand.

Notice, however, that I have used the word “ideally” in describing the outcomes of using indirect communication strategies. Sometimes, an initiator may use indirect strategies initially and then later resort to direct strategies if the partner does not understand or “pick up” on the cues. Other times, a partner may simply demand an explanation or an account for the break-up even when she has picked up on the cues. This leads to the investigation in the next section of the dyadic process of breaking-up.

Breaking the news

According to Duck’s (1982) partners in potentially dissolving relationship enter a dyadic phase where the initiator seeks to confront his partner about dissolving the relationship. The initiator considers how he is going to break the news to the partner, possible trajectories that such a conversation can take, and to consider alternatives to breaking up. Once these things are considered, the initiator and the partner have a conversation about their relationship.
According to Baxter (1982), relationship disengagement strategies appear on two dimensions; directness and other-orientation. These dimensions are ultimately about politeness and saving face. So far, I have discussed one-sided indirect strategies to dissolve the relationship that are also ways to avoid cooling out. I will now discuss one-sided direct and two-sided direct strategies for dissolving relationships.

In terms of one-sided direct ways of dissolving relationships, Baxter (1984) identifies two; fait accompli and state of the relationship talk. Fait accompli occurs when the initiator simply informs the partner that the relationship is over with no opportunity for discussion. These sorts of break-ups can happen when the initiator just sends a text message or an e-mail informing of her desire to end the relationship. It can be argued that this is another way of avoiding to cool out because the initiator merely breaks the news but does not console. While this argument can be true, it is contingent on what is said or written along with the desire to break-up. If the message simply states that the relationship is over and nothing else, then perhaps it is a way to avoid cooling out. If the message, however, states the relationship is over and also includes cooling out messages which I will discuss in the next section, then it did not avoid cooling out, it rather avoided in-depth interaction.

The second one-sided direct strategy identified by Baxter (1984) is state of the relationship talk. This is when one of the partners decides to end the relationship during a mutual discussion about the relationship. Perhaps the partners were discussing the big fight they had last night and one of them finally decides that the relationship is not worth it anymore and ends it on the spot. Cody (1982) also identified additional direct strategies for one-sided dissolution. The first strategy is negative identity management, where the initiator ends the relationship blaming the other and points out all of the other’s faults. The second is justification, where the initiator
simply justifies and reasons with the other for the termination of the relationship. The third is de-escalation where the initiator argues how seeing less of each other would be a good thing. Finally, there is positive identity management, where the initiator tries to attend to his partner’s feelings and try to leave the relationship on a positive note.

These strategies for initiating a break-up are important for understanding cooling out because they can set the stage for how such cooling out might be accomplished. If an initiator tries to use negative identity management, then perhaps she will use different methods of consoling the partner versus an initiator who uses positive identity management. Plus, part of an initiator’s break-up strategy may include cooling out her partner. We will see how this can work after we have investigated methods of cooling out in the next section.

Although initiators may have strategies in mind when they enter a break-up conversation, Baxter (1984) found that such conversations can undergo different trajectories in non-accordance with the initiator’s original plan. For example, an initiator may decide during the conversation to actually give the person a second chance due to a seemingly genuine plea from the partner that he will change. Additionally, sometimes initiators develop emergent goals in the midst of the conversation, as Hopper and Drummond (1997) found in a recorded break-up conversation over the phone. Baxter (1984) identifies a pair of two-sided strategies; attributional conflict and negotiated farewell that can happen in such a fashion. Attributional conflict is when the parties agree to break-up but for different reasons. A woman may accuse a man of cheating on her, but the man denies it, so the woman breaks up with him because she thinks he’s cheating and he breaks up with her because he thinks she is too possessive. Negotiated farewell is when both partners talk about the relationship and come to a conclusion to end the relationship free of hostility. Perhaps the initiator initiates the break-up anticipating resistance and actually receives
nothing but positive reception to the idea. As a result, breaking-up is not necessarily a clean linear process and can be subject to many twists and turns in the midst of the interaction.

Overall, I could not begin to discuss methods of cooling out without first discussing strategies for initiation of dissolution and breaking the news for two reasons. The first reason is because they can overlap. One’s strategy for dissolving a relationship can include methods of cooling out the partner. The second reason is because they can also be distinct and yet set the stage for each other. How one informs the partner of his desire to dissolve may determine what methods of cooling out ought to be used later. Goffman (1952) never made any commentary on how the news is broken to someone affects how that person may be cooled out, which can be another new insight into the process of cooling out. This could be because Goffman was never formally a communication scholar although he has contributed much to our field. Let’s now understand how cooling out happens and its relation to dissolution.

**Methods of cooling out**

According to Duck (1982) once the relationship in its current form is dissolved, the dissolution goes through a social process where the partners create an agreed post-dissolution relationship of some kind and have it recognized by the partners’ peers and social networks. This is where I claim cooling out happens. The initiator has informed the partner that the relationship is over, and now the initiator will help console the partner over his role death and provide a new role identity for the partner, whether it is to become friends, acquaintances, etc. There are numerous ways to cool someone out that Goffman (1952) describes and an additional method that I will identify using the break-up literature.

In general, cooling out involves a cooler (the break-up initiator) providing a mark (the break-up receiver) a new set of apologies for herself, a new perspective on a situation, and
redefinition of the self in way that helps the mark take a loss. One way a person can cool another out, according to Goffman, is by offering a new role status to the mark. To use Clark’s (1960) research on junior colleges as an example, career counselors will often urge low-achieving students who seek to be lawyers to instead strive to be “legal assistants.” Or in the athletic world, when an aspiring football player fails to make the cut at tryouts, the coach may offer him the chance to play on the “practice team” instead. Similarly, break-up initiators can and do offer alternative statuses to their partners to cool them out. Metts, Cupach, and Bejlovec, (1989) argued that relationship termination can simply mean redefinition of a relationship rather than total annihilation. They found that respondents were more likely to be friends after a break-up if positive tone strategies were used (which also demonstrates a link between strategies and methods of cooling out). Therefore, it is possible for break-up initiators to offer alternative statuses to their partners, namely “let’s just be friends.” The objective of offering alternative statuses is to convince the partner that although his role is formally gone (e.g. the partner no longer bears the title of boyfriend), there are still some things about that role that he can enjoy to some extent (e.g. the partner and initiator can still talk in class, be in choir together, etc.).

Another method of cooling out identified by Goffman is offering the mark another chance to qualify for her lost role at a later time. Going back to the athletic world, the coach may tell the released football player, “Hey, there’s always next season!” In the case of break-ups, initiators can allow a partner another chance to qualify in two ways. The first way is identified by Baxter (1984) where once the initiator has delivered the news about the desire to break-up, the partner seeks to repair the problems cited by the initiator. This can lead to a negotiated repair, where the initiator ultimately withdraws the request to dissolve and gives the partner a second chance to fix his behavior. Although the partner is allowed to retain his role as boyfriend and
does not completely suffer the role-death, the partner must return differently in the ways that he promised to change. I would argue that causing someone to modify how one performs a role is a method of cooling out, for although it is not a total role death, it is a modification that forces the person to adjust to a set of changes and abandon certain old habits as if they were dead. It is, in a sense, a partial role death, and thus a partial cooling out.

The second way an initiator can offer a second chance to the partner is to leave open the opportunity to get back together at a later time. An initiator may claim that he wants to simply “take a break” from the relationship implying that there is a chance they can get back together at a later time. Thus, the objective of offering second chances as a means to cool someone out is to instill a glimmer of hope that the role is not dead permanently and that someday it can or will return.

Goffman also identifies “stalling” as another method of cooling out. This is when the cooler either completely avoids interacting with the mark or somehow makes an impression on the mark that the loss may not have actually occurred after all. The idea behind this strategy is that there is no target for the mark to convey his feelings to because the news is never officially delivered to him because after a period of time of being uncertain, the mark becomes comfortable with the idea of the loss and is not surprised when he is finally told officially. In break-ups, this occurs when the initiator initially uses indirect strategies to hint towards her desire to dissolve before actually delivering the news as identified by Baxter (1987). During the period when the initiator is withdrawing, the partner may begin to consider the idea of having lost the relationship and becomes accustomed to the idea even though he has not “officially” been broken up with. When the news is finally delivered it comes as less of a surprise, and the partner is much more able to take the loss due to the mental preparation beforehand.
“Tacit understanding” is another method identified by Goffman, which is when the cooler and the mark agree to construct an illusion where the mark appears to be leaving on her own accord in order to save the mark face and not appear a failure before her peers’ eyes. Goffman cites the example of allowing the military officer to take his own life instead of being publicly humiliated and executed, or allowing a person in a high-office to resign for “personal reasons” rather than be fired publicly for indecent ones. Similarly, with breaking-up, Hopper and Drummond, (1997) found that people can develop emergent goals in a break-up conversation to save face. Specifically in the phone conversation that these researchers monitored, the initiator claimed that the reason that he was initiating the break-up was because they did not have much in common and are at a loss for words, and the partner claimed that she had been very busy with activities, and then the initiator responded by blaming outside circumstances such as busyness and lack of time to save face for his partner. Thus, what started out as a personal reason, became an environmental/circumstantial reason which saved face in the end. The partner was able to accept the loss more easily because the initiator agreed to blame outside circumstances rather than her personality that he had initially targeted.

Another common example of tacit understanding is when an initiator says about the reasons for breaking up, “It’s not you, it’s me.” The initiator takes the blame for the break-up which is supposed to make the partner seem to be without fault in the situation and will ideally enable the partner to move on more gracefully. If the partner accepts the initiator’s bid for taking the blame for the break-up, then the partner can leave the relationship claiming that she did nothing wrong and that the initiator was the problem. In both cases, tacit understanding arises by enabling face to be saved through the construction of a story where the partner is not to be blamed for the downfall of the relationship. Either an outside circumstance is attributed or the
initiator takes the blame, which in both cases saves face for the partner by preventing an involuntary role termination. Hence, an implication that can be derived from this example is that cooling is a jointly-operated practice such that the mark participates in her cooling out and public account for the loss of her role.

Like tacit understanding, Goffman also identifies bribery as a method to cool someone out. This is a situation where a mark offers to leave quietly and without a fuss so long as the mark receives an exit package of his choice. In the case of corporate retirement, Goffman uses the example of the senior person being willing to retire voluntarily only if he receives a nice pension to go along with it. The idea is that the person will benignly leave a role so long as she is given something else to look forward to in exchange, be it a nice severance package, a private beach house, or something similar. With relationship dissolution, bribery may come in different forms depending on the relational circumstances and the individual being bribed. In the case of marital dissolution (and maybe cohabitating relationships in general), an initiator may seek to reduce the stresses of divorce and dissolution by allowing the partner to have the majority of the assets in the shared household. As another instance, the partner may be willing to leave the relationship if a “friends with benefits” relationship is accepted by the initiator, as adolescents have been found to renegotiate their relationships (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Overall, bribery in relationship dissolution is about letting the partner receive something in return for being the one broken-up with.

Goffman also discusses the method of allowing the mark to simply vent and “blow off his top” to the news. According to Baxter (1984), one trajectory that a break-up interaction can take is an unwelcoming response by the partner to the idea of ending relationship. Hence, there is likely to be emotion and venting that comes with this scenario. The role of the initiator in these
cases is to cool the partner out by simply listening and waiting for the partner to finally unload all that she has in frustration. Perhaps the partner will disclose telling information in the process of venting, run out of things to say, or simply feel better after unloading it all (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rime, 2001).

According to Goffman, sometimes bosses will have close colleagues and friends of the employee present during a firing to help cool him or her out. The advantage to having such company present is that they may know best how to rationalize the situation to the employee and cool her out more effectively with such personal knowledge. Similarly, in the cases of fait accompli break-ups, an initiator may send a partner off to his friends to cool him out. Thus, using friends and people close to the mark is another method of cooling out.

An additional method of cooling out that Goffman does not identify but the break-up literature discovers is called “rendering to obsoleteness.” The basic idea is that when a person claims a role, that role has a set of prescribed functions. In the case of romantic relationships, that role may be (let’s suppose) providing emotional support and going out on dates. If an initiator begins to withdraw, then there will be less opportunity for the partner to provide emotional support and to take the initiator out on dates. Hence, over time, the partner’s role becomes obsolete; there are no jobs or functions for the partner to perform because the initiator no longer needs them or is at least “too busy” to have them met by the partner. What makes this a form of cooling out is that the partner suffers the death of the usefulness of her role rather than the death of her ability to uphold that role. To use the corporate world as an example, rendering to obsoleteness is similar to being laid-off as opposed to being fired. When a person is laid-off, the implication is that it was not her fault for the loss of her job, rather it was a set of
circumstances outside of her control that made her job no longer necessary (in this case, necessary corporate budget cuts and downsizing).

In the case of break-ups, the initiator may cool out the partner by showing how the role of the relational partner is unneeded in his life at the moment. The initiator can claim to be too busy, too far away, or wants to enjoy the single life for a while. In a more unpleasant scenario, the initiator may tell the partner that he has been cheating and getting his needs met elsewhere. In all of these cases, the role of the partner is rendered obsolete. It may be less hurtful for the partner in these cases, because the partner is never accused of doing anything wrong or being unable to uphold his role. However, it is still a way to console a partner over the death of the usefulness of his role. Just like how a person who is laid off from a job that they loved may need cooling out despite the external causes of the layoff, the partner is being consoled for the loss of the usefulness of her role by being told that she did nothing wrong.

Overall, I have shown the various methods of cooling the mark out and how they can relate to relationship dissolution. I have also added an additional method to cool someone out through rendering the mark’s role as obsolete. Of course, relational dissolution is never so easy and linear. There are cases when the mark or the relational partner refuses to be cooled out. The next section will discuss strategies of resistance to being cooled out used by the mark.

**Cooling out resistance strategies**

Goffman (1952) identifies five ways a mark can resist being cooled out. The first way is by continuing to react emotionally. Borrowing from the corporate world again, while it may be common for an employee to perhaps be angry upon receiving news of her termination, it is possible and undesirable to be emotional for long periods of time (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2008). For one thing, the employee may inflict physical or verbal violence upon the boss or other people
in workplace. For another, the mark may commit physical or verbal violence against himself such as suicide or depression. In the case of relational dissolution, it is possible for the mark to react emotionally at first, and possibly stalk the initiator later on (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Williams & Frieze, 2005). According to McLaughlin, Cody, and Robey’s (1980) interpersonal compliance-resistance typologies, adverse emotional reaction may be a case of non-negotiation where the partner simply refuses to cooperate or accept the social facts.

The second way a person can be refused to be cooled out according to Goffman is by making a complaint to higher authorities. Goffman gives several examples of this such as the teacher not wanting the angry student’s parents to appeal to the principal, the floor salesperson not wanting the dissatisfied customer to seek the store manager, and a wife initiating a divorce to not have her soon-to-be ex-husband sue her for alienation of affection. Similarly, in dissolving romantic relationships, it is possible for the partner to appeal to higher authorities. The higher authorities being in this case the social networks affiliated with the dyad. Duck (1982) argued that after partners break-up, they immediately go to their respective social networks to give an account of what happened to their relationship. Breaking up, for Duck, is not an isolated process, but is one embedded within social networks, which has consequences on future relationships among the partners of the dyad and the rest of their mutual social networks. For example, if a couple breaks up, it may force some of their mutual friends to “take sides” on the break-up and cause some friends to see one of the former partners less. When these accounts are given to social networks, there is an opportunity to speak badly or well of the break-up and the partner. Therefore, it is possible for a relational partner to resist being cooled out by threatening to spread
rumors, share secrets, or tell others in their mutual social network of the break-up initiator’s abuse.

According to Goffman, the third way a person can resist being cooled out is by “turning sour.” This is when the mark accepts his, but then withdraws psychologically from the role that is he is allowed to have. There are two ways one can turn sour; through retaliatory acts or through pseudo de-escalation. For retaliatory acts, Buchanan, O’Hair, and Becker, (2006) studied disengagement resistance strategies used by marital partners who did not want to divorce. At least two of these strategies are instances of “turning sour” such as the use of negativity, where the partner tries to derogate and emotionally manipulate the divorce initiator. Harm was also identified as a strategy, where the partner threatens violence against potential romantic rivals of the divorce initiator.

In addition, Baxter (1985) found that partners can pseudo de-escalate which is when one of the partners asks to transform the relationship to something “lesser” like a friendship. Although the partners may agree to be friends in these scenarios, they either end up never seeing each other again, or when they do see each other again, “it’s really awkward.” Thus, one or both of partners “turn sour” when the new role that is taken on is not embraced in the same way psychologically and interpersonally. Previously, I mentioned that partners can and do offer alternative statuses as a method to cool out, and sometimes partners do remain friends afterward. However, as identified by Baxter’s (1985) study, it is not always the case that they “truly” remain friends. Overall, I have identified two ways for a partner to “turn sour;” either through retaliatory acts or becoming less than what the agreed alternative status post-dissolution called for.
Finally, a mark can resist being cooled out, according to Goffman by “going into business for himself.” This is when a mark attempts to carry his lost role status to another setting to keep it alive. Goffman gives the example of a political leader who loses support of her own party, who then starts her own splinter party. In the case of dissolution, seeking a remarriage or new relationship out of vengeance can be a form of going into business for oneself. Perhaps to make the break-up initiator jealous or sorry, the former partner may seek to date one of the initiator’s friends or someone else in general to fulfill that wish (Barber, 2009). Overall, it is resistance to cooling out because the partner is not accepting the role death but rather moving it elsewhere to spite the initiator.

Overall, we can understand how a break-up partner can resist disengagement through Goffman’s metaphorical process of cooling the mark out. We gain a unified concept or metaphor to make sense of much of the research not only about breaking the news or cooling out, but also nuances during the process including break-up resistance. Not only are there ways for a partner to resist being cooled out, however. There are also ways for a partner to avoid being cooled out in the first place, just as there are ways for an initiator to avoid having to cool out a partner.

Avoiding being cooled out

Goffman also addresses four ways how marks seek to avoid being cooled out in the first place. One way is through hedging, which is when a mark ensures that she is never completely committed to a particular role. This lack of complete commitment enables the mark to accept losses because they are not integral to her identity. In the case of relationships, some people may not expect much when they date, which enables them to handle break-ups easily because they do not “give their hearts away so easily.”
A second way is through the use of secrecy, for which all Goffman writes, “There is the strategy of secrecy, by which a person conceals from others and even from himself the facts of his commitment;” (1952, p. 8). It appears that Goffman is stating that people may avoid being cooled out by not publicly or formally proclaiming a role, but perhaps maintaining a mere affiliation or association with one. An example may be in a cross-sex friendship where the partners do everything that a romantic couple does, yet they bear the title as friends. This prevents cooling out because if one of the partners falls in love with someone else then no official cooling out session needs to take place since the original partners were never “officially” together. Thus, the friendship played the role of a romantic relationship, although it never officially or publicly proclaimed the title of a romantic relationship.

A third way to avoid being cooled out, according to Goffman, is through the ability to take hints quickly so that the mark can participate constructively in the saving of her face. Baxter (1987) argued that partners in relationships have a “cognitive repository of relationship process knowledge in addition to their conceptions of various static relationship types” (p. 193). This means that partners not only have cognitive schemata as to what a certain kind of relationship should look like (e.g. friendships, romantic relationships, work-relationships, etc.), but that they have also have familiarity with how such relationships develop. Additionally, Baxter (1987) argues that this sort of process knowledge enables partners to communicate ambiguously and indirectly to their advantage to achieve certain relational goals. Therefore, partners who are effective at picking up hints towards dissolution and have a mature repository of relationship process knowledge will be more likely able to cooperatively participate in saving their own face and avoid being cooled out by the initiator.
Finally, Goffman identifies the strategy of “playing it safe” where there is some kind of assurance in the role that one will assume will never have to be cooled out. Marriage is thought to be a role that is safe from being cooled out, particularly in cases where partners do not believe in divorce. Although it is possible for a person to become widowed and suffer a role death, it is a role death that is not due to his actions or ability to uphold that role (as indicated at the beginning of this manuscript). Otherwise, there are no other permanent romantic roles that one can take to prevent from being cooled out, although there may be sexual ones that are not permanent but avoid the need to be cooled out (e.g. booty calls, friends with benefits, etc.).

Overall, not only are there ways for people to resist being cooled out, but there also certain precautions that partners can take to prevent from being cooled out as well. As argued in the first section of this manuscript, cooling out is something that people prefer to avoid. This section shows this to be the case from both the initiator and the receiver’s perspectives of the break-up. Although a cooling out conversation may go effectively, there is still some coping and additional cooling out that a break-up partner may have to do alone. The next section discusses an important finding in the coping literature and how it converses with Goffman.

**Coping**

Although I am mostly interested in the communicative processes of cooling out, it is important to at least briefly discuss the psychological aspects of a person coping with a role death on his own. Goffman’s work can enable us to make sense of coping and perhaps why it happens the way it does. Moreover, coping “completes the picture” of breaking up and how it happens. In this section, I will demonstrate that point and also draw an implication that will be discussed more fully in the next section.
Goffman (1952) defines a person as “an individual who becomes involved in a value of some kind – a role, status relationship, ideology, and then makes a public claim that he is to be defined and treated as someone who possesses the value or property in question” (p. 8).

Goffman adds that the person’s ability to claim a certain role or status is limited to the extent that other people are willing to let that person carry that claim based on the social facts and people’s willingness to be lenient and sympathetic in interpreting those social facts in that person’s desired direction.

Therefore, when a person makes a claim to be someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend, that person is making a claim to a status or role that calls for being treated in a distinctive way. It may for example be that the person demands from the partner exclusive sexual intimacy, in-depth conversation, and time allotted to be spent in private. Additionally, the person (along with the partner, possibly) may demand from society (i.e. their social networks, families, acquaintances, etc.) recognition of this relationship and therefore for people to respect their sexual exclusivity and the legitimacy of their romance. Part of breaking-up is the presentation of the objective social facts that the break-up partner is no longer the initiator’s boyfriend or girlfriend, which then prevents the break-up partner from making the role demands that he or she once was making towards the initiator and from society.

An additional facet Goffman adds to his idea of the self is that people constantly define themselves in terms of the roles they play. If they lose one role, they can typically resort to another role. Emmers and Hart (1996) found that there are two categories of behaviors that break-up initiators and break-up partners engage in to cope with dissolution. Initiators engaged in avoidance and self-enhancement. For avoidance, they would both stop calling and lessen affect for the partner; for self-enhancement they would turn to their social network roles and begin
dating other people. From the perspective of the break-up partners, they engage in self-enhancement. Self-enhancement behaviors include taking a new outlook on life, using self-empowerment strategies (going to the gym, getting a makeover, etc.), and relying on social networks for reinforcement. Hence, when break-up partners suffer a role-death, they go to social networks to seek refuge in other relational roles and also attempt to improve their current public image through exercise, self-enhancement, etc. just as the outplacement companies help to improve a terminated employee’s resume to find a new job.

Overall, the way Goffman defines the person lends us to see breaking-up as a sort of role death and enables us to make sense of the practice of coping in that respect. What we can also glean from Goffman’s view of the self is that cooling out is not simply an act of facework. First, not all cooling out is face-saving, as in the case of allowing a mark to blow his top or accepting a bribe. Secondly, face-work is a communicative practice that is constituted in an interaction moment (Arundale, 2011). For Goffman occupying a role is essential to a person’s self and identity. Thus, there are psychological consequences to a loss of a role that have implications prior to and after the interaction moment that lie outside the scope of face theory as demonstrated in this section of coping and the prior section in intrapsychic considerations. Most importantly, cooling out is about consolation, helping a person accept a role death and possibly take on a new one. This consoling involves the presentation of social facts and encouraging a person to move-on. If anything, cooling out is more about persuasion and compliance-gaining. Thus while facework is relevant to cooling out, it would be an oversimplification to claim that they are conceptually equivalent. Facework is a tool used in the practice of cooling out, but it is not the entire practice itself. As a result, there seems to be a greater implication about the self,
relationships, and society that I will address in the next section, along with two other implications. I will also suggest future studies along the way.

Implications and future study

The self, relationships, and society

One idea that Goffman does not discuss in his article is the two levels of demands that a role claims in a relationship. There is the dyadic level, the demands from the partner, and there is social level, the demands from peer groups, etc. There can be cases when there is mutual recognition between the dyad of their romantic relationship, but there is not societal recognition as in the cases of stigmatized relationships (e.g. homosexual, interracial, etc.). There can also be cases where there is social recognition of a dyad, but not dyadic recognition, as in the cases of cross-sex friendships being accused of being sexual or romantic by others (Elsesser & Peplau, 2006; O’Meara, 1989). Initially, cooling out seems to be necessary when the dyadic partner seeks to dissolve the relationship. However, an interesting future study would be to study cases where friends have to cool a mark out. A case might be when friends inform a person in a relationship that she is being cheated on. Does cooling out happen in that conversation?

Additionally, as shown by Emmers and Hart (1996), initiators seem to have to cope with a break-up as well, albeit differently. While it can be the case that a break-up initiator may not so much grieve the death of the dyadic partner role due to the dissatisfying nature of the relationship, it seems that there can still be a sort of loss experienced on a social level. In other words, an initiator may not be aggrieved about giving up his partner in particular (although there can be cases where this is not so), but an initiator may be aggrieved about giving up the romantic partner role in general. The initiator may suffer the death of no longer having anyone in particular to get Valentine’s Day gifts from, have intimate conversations, or whatever other roles
that a dyadic partner fulfills. This can also have implications on the social level because now the initiator has to be single again and answer the “What happened to you and....” question. A future research question would be whether there are cases where a break-up initiator who voluntary ends a relationship still perceives the losses associated with her romantic role on a social level to be involuntary?

Overall, this implication recognizes a complexity of role demands by the self that Goffman did not discuss. The two suggested studies may assist us in understanding the nature of breaking-up and cooling out. It recognizes that relationships do not exist in a vacuum but have social implications for networks and the self. Additionally, the two studies may potentially help us recognize different kinds of role-death which can further advance the concept of cooling out.

The joint performance

The second implication of this analysis is the role of the joint performance in cooling out and the trajectories such conversations can go. While Goffman recognized that people can cooperate or resist being cooled out, he did not discuss the ways in which marks may change the goals of the cooler or help jointly construct the new acceptable narrative or account of the role-death. Therefore, it may not always be the case that the cooling out process is one-sided in the sense that a cooler is “selling” a particular story or account for the mark to use to save his own face and/or accept a loss. Rather, it can also be the case that the mark and cooler work together to organically construct a story or explanation acceptable to both parties. For example, a break-up initiator may initially bid to end the relationship permanently, but due to the mark’s open reception to breaking up, they may in the end choose to remain friends.

Therefore, this implication suggests that cooling out is indeed a persuasive process, but not necessarily in a one-sided sense. While Goffman recognized the necessity of cooperation in
cooling out, he did not discuss the features of cooperation or the communicative aspects of cooperation. Additionally, Goffman does not discuss how breaking the news works in conjunction with the methods people use for cooling out. While it would be difficult to get access to actual break-up conversations, an interesting future study for the break-up literature would be to investigate retrospectively how people have cooled out previous partners and how their methods of cooling out changed throughout the interaction.

**Limitations**

There are two limitations to applying the cooling out metaphor to breaking-up. First, Baxter (1985) argued that relationship dissolution is complicated, nuanced, and thus cannot be accurately represented by a single linear model. While I have used a seemingly linear model to apply to breaking-up, one should not take breaking-up to necessarily be linear even when seeing it as a cooling out process. In this manuscript, for simplicity, I have presented cooling out in a linear form to emphasize the key components of the process. In other words, I have presented breaking up and cooling out in their most basic form. However, cooling out can take more complicated forms and trajectories with all of the elements highlighted in this manuscript still present in the process. Perhaps a break-up initiator will try to break-up with the partner, the partner rejects the break-up, and the initiator tries again later. Breaking-up scripts reported by college students often include multiple interactions before an “official break-up” (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998). Perhaps the mark will resist being cooled out so much that the break-up initiator decides to retract his desire to end the relationship, and then resort to another method. The possibilities are endless. Nevertheless, to reject the basic ideas of this manuscript solely on the grounds that it makes breaking-up appear to be linear only attacks the model of how cooling out happens, not the proposal that cooling out happens.
A second limitation is that Goffman never formally defines when the cooling out process starts and when it ends. For this manuscript, I have assumed that the cooling out process is a communicatively performed act, which means that it starts and ends when the cooling out conversation(s) do so. However, I have also highlighted the aspect of coping, which occurs after the cooling out conversation(s). There seems to be a way for a person to cool herself out through coping rituals, going to the gym, embracing other roles, and so forth. It seems that there is then a bridge between the psychological concept of “coping” and the communicative concept of “cooling out.” Future studies should explore this bridge and continue to study how cooling out has psychological implications for coping. Furthermore, a psychologist may be able to take this metaphor further to include more of the psychological aspects of being cooled out. Together, we should explore parameters of the beginning and the end of the cooling out process and breaking up in particular.

**Conclusion**

Overall, I have shown how Goffman’s metaphorical process of “cooling the mark out” applies to breaking-up. I have contributed to further scholarly conversations in two ways. First, I have contributed to the understanding of the cooling out process. I have shown that there are additional ways for people to avoid cooling out, which is through role cost escalation and withdrawal. I have also proposed another method for cooling someone one out which I call “rendering to obsoleteness.” I have suggested that there may be different kinds of role deaths with differing results (i.e. social and dyadic deaths), and I have illustrated further the role of joint-performance in cooling someone out. All of these new findings due to the break-up literature can help complicate and advance our comprehension of the cooling out process.
Second, I have contributed to our scholarly understanding of breaking-up. I have shown how the current literature on breaking up can be unified under the cooling out concept. I have shown how the break-up studies demonstrate the avoidance, practices, resistance, and adjustments of cooling out (or in this case getting “broken up with”). I have also emphasized the role of joint performance in breaking up and that there is a dyadic and a social role aspect to being in a relationship that are distinct from each other and yet have implications on the break-up process. Ultimately, we can see breaking-up as a role-dying process, where persons are presented with social facts that run counter to a role identity that they claim and have to be consoled over this loss. In this case, the role identity is being a relational partner to a particular person, the social facts is the partner’s desire to break-up, and the cooling out is the instruction on how to take a loss or in this case, how to get dumped; gracefully.
References


