

Romantic Relationships and the Actions (or Inactions) That End Them: Blaming Self or Other Influences Feelings of Regret

Todd McElroy ¹ and Joanna Salapska-Gelleri ²

¹ Psychology Department and The Water School—Florida Gulf Coast University

² Psychology Department—Florida Gulf Coast University

ABSTRACT

Romantic relationships can greatly enhance our lives, creating intimacy and bonding. Yet, not all relationships succeed, and when they fail, the resulting feelings can be intense, often leaving us feeling regret. The regret we feel is determined in part by whether we decide to take action or rely on inaction. Research shows that actions typically elicit more regret than inactions. However, research also shows gender differences for romantic regret, with men sometimes reporting more regret over inactions and women more regret over actions or equal regret for actions and inactions. The decision justification theory posits that regret is driven by two components: the event's outcome and self-blame. In the current investigation, we manipulated self and other blame in a hypothetical romantic situation and showed that when blame is attributable to one's self, actions (e.g., breaking up) elicited more regret than inactions (e.g., staying in a relationship). However, when blame for relationship failure is attributed to one's partner, participants reported equal regret for actions or inactions. More specific analyses showed that men and women both have more regret for actions when self-blame is involved but when other-blame is involved, women showed equal regret for actions and inactions whereas men trended toward more regret for inactions.

KEYWORDS

regret
decision-making
thinking
gender

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships can enhance one's life experience, but it can also be overwhelming when things go wrong. For example, research has shown that having a more satisfying relationship with one's partner is associated with better health (Slatcher & Selcuk, 2017) and better quality of sleep (Selcuk et al., 2017). Relationship dynamics often encompass many aspects of one's physical and emotional world. Consequently, the success of a person's relationship is a strong predictor of overall health and longevity (Stanton et al., 2019; Stavrova, 2019; Whisman et al., 2018). Because of the powerful influence that relationships can have in one's life, it is not surprising that potent feelings will be experienced when relationships fail. Therefore, investigating factors that influence feelings which arise when romantic relationships fail is important, not just for theoretical advancement, but also for improving quality of life.

People can think about past emotional experiences in two fundamentally different ways (Markman & McMullen, 2003). One way that people think about past experiences is through a type of self-reflection of perceived state, which usually leads to assimilation of emotions. Another way people think of past emotions involves comparing one's current situation to an aspirational target. This usually results in emotional contrast. When looking back on failed romantic relationship experiences, people often self-reflect. Many emotions can emerge, but one feeling that is often evoked is regret (Joel et al., 2019). It is likely that

the regret people feel from failed romantic relationships has developed as an evolutionary adaptation to facilitate pair-bonding (Fletcher et al., 2015). Similarly, regret may play an important role in human behavior by controlling sexual activity in future relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 2019). In the current study, we examined how the actions a person takes, such as breaking up with a romantic partner, or the inactions they choose, such as staying together, influence the regret they feel.

REGRET AND ACTION/INACTION

Much research has shown that how much regret a person feels is dependent upon whether they act (taking action) or do not act (inaction). This is sometimes referred to as commission and omission (Feldman, 2020; Feldman et al., 2020). An aspect of regret is the valence of the behavior that is involved, namely, whether it is something that is viewed as positive or negative. When the behavior is something positive or beneficial (e.g., eating healthy), inaction toward the desirable behavior tends to produce more regret. Most theoretical work involving regret

Corresponding author: Todd McElroy, Department of Psychology, Florida Gulf Coast University.

Email: tmcelroy@fgcu.edu

has focused on negative behaviors. For example, early research on norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) suggested that when a negative behavior is involved, a person will feel more regret over actions than inactions. Later studies showed that regret appears to be associated more strongly with action than with inaction (Feldman & Chen, 2019). This action/inaction effect can occur across temporal perspectives, such as anticipating and improving future decisions (Zeelenberg, 2018) as well as evaluating one's past decisions (Kutscher & Feldman, 2019; McElroy et al., 2020). Another aspect of how action/inaction can affect regret is whether the person's predisposition (to act or not act) is consistent with the actor's behavior (taking action or inaction). Research investigating this question shows that inconsistency between predispositions and behavior leads to higher levels of regret (Seta et al., 2001). This also extends to inconsistencies between one's own personality and behavior. For example, the personality variable of action/state orientation identifies action-orientated people as being more focused on the task at hand and favoring an active, involved approach when solving problems or making decisions. State-oriented people tend to be less active when facing decisions and brood over alternatives rather than seek solutions, especially when they are facing negative outcomes. Research shows that action-oriented individuals experience more regret when they do not act (e.g., stay home) whereas state-oriented individuals experience more regret when they act (e.g., go out with friends, McElroy & Dowd, 2007). Later work shows that this effect is flexible. For example, when people are in failing situations that are imbued with regret, they tend to escalate commitment to a bad decision, and this induces them to become more action-oriented (Feldman & Wong, 2018).

To consolidate and better understand the wide array of findings in regret research, Connolly and Zeelenberg (2002) proposed the decision justification theory (DJT). According to this view, regret reflects two combinatorial, yet independent, components: a comparative component that contrasts the outcome with some standard, and a self-focused component that centers around self-blame (Wu & Wang, 2017). The two components may at times have differential effects on regret, or work in tandem. That is, a person may engage in a behavior that is very detrimental, such as drinking and driving, and experience no bad outcome but they may also experience regret because of self-blame for the irresponsible behavior. Alternatively, a person may have regret over a bad outcome, yet experience no self-blame. For example, someone could offer to take a friend home who has had too much to drink, but while driving them home, an accident occurs and the other driver is completely at fault, but their friend is hurt. In this instance, the person should feel regret over what happened, but they should not have self-blame. According to DJT, this lack of self-blame should attenuate the negative feelings of regret. In other words, self-blame acts to intensify regret. Important for the current investigation is the component of self-blame, which can be a decisive factor in the regret process.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN REGRET

The research reviewed above highlights the consistent finding that, for negative behaviors, actions tend to elicit more regret than inactions.

Researchers in this area have advanced this topic theoretically from many different avenues. Yet, investigating gender differences has been somewhat limited. However, some research has addressed gender differences in related questions of judgment and decision making (e.g., Fagley & Miller, 1990). In one study, Fagley et al. (2010) found that women, more than men, take an affective perspective when dealing with risky choice dilemmas, and such a perspective leads to stronger framing effects. Similar findings were reported in a study by Eriksson and Simpson (2010), where they suggested that women are more sensitive to the emotional aspects of an outcome. While these studies suggest gender differences may be present for the emotion of regret, it is unclear how these differences may play out in the regret process.

One important theoretical view that distinguishes between gender differences in human mating strategies and the associated feelings of regret is the contextual-evolutionary theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). According to this view, men and women have developed different underlying behavioral strategies because of adaptations to evolutionary pressures. Specifically, men were not constrained by the number of women with which they could reproduce, which led to an adaptation of seeking a wide range of sexual partners. Women were constrained by external resources to support themselves and their offspring, which led to relatively less promiscuity and more emphasis on resources. These strategies can involve both short-term and long-term situations. Because women have developed less promiscuity in their sexual behaviors, they should be more likely to regret poorly chosen romantic/sexual actions. On the other hand, because men have a developed predilection towards more varied sexual encounters, they should be more likely to report regret over romantic/sexual inactions. In other words, men should report more regret over not acting, or things they did not do in a romantic/sexual situation, and women should report more regret over things they have done in romantic/sexual situations. So, in a romantic situation that has become troubled, men should have more regret when they did not take action whereas women should feel more regret over the actions they took.

In a related series of studies, Roese et al. (2006) also relied on an evolutionary framework for understanding why gender differences would be expected in romantic or gender domains and not in others. According to this approach, in the context of a romantic encounter, women have far greater investment in the support of possible offspring (e.g., Trivers, 1972). As a result, women have become more selective with their sexual encounters and men have evolved a greater desire for casual sex (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clarke & Hatfield, 1989; Symons, 1979). Based on this reasoning, Roese et al. (2006) propose that men and women will differ in their reported regret over actions and inactions in romantic/sexual situations. When they asked participants to retrospectively evaluate romantic situations, women reported equally high regret for actions and inactions. However, men reported greater feelings of regret over inaction, that is, when they did not act on sexual interest (e.g. "should have tried harder to sleep with ____").

In a recent analysis, Webster et al. (2020) tested predictions from several theoretical accounts that centered on the prediction that men experience more regret over omissions (inaction) and women experi-

ence more regret over commissions (actions). Webster et al., utilized a large real-world data set of 61,412 Craigslist personal ads across all 50 states, focusing on two types of Craigslist postings. They observed ads for “missed connections” (people looking to contact another person they saw briefly in public) and “FMyLife.com” (intimate or socially embarrassing experiences people share anonymously). In a novel procedure, they categorized missed connections as involving “sexual or romantic omission regret” and FMyLife.com as involving “sexual or romantic commission regret”. In other words, the “missed connections” ads should correspond to romantic/sexual inactions and the FMyLife ads to romantic/sexual actions. They then compared the number of postings for men and women in each of the respective ad groups. They found that men were more likely to post missed connections (i.e., sexual or romantic omission regret) and women were more likely to post in the FMyLife love and intimacy section (sexual or romantic commission regret). Thus, this study provides supporting evidence that men have more regret over romantic/sexual omissions (inactions) and women have more feelings of regret over romantic/sexual commissions (actions).

Failure, but Who's to Blame?

Taken together, the limited research on gender and regret shows that women may experience more regret than men for actions in a negative situation. However, an aspect of regret not covered in the gender differences research is where the blame for the outcome is attributed: Specifically, whether the blame for the failed romantic outcome is being placed on oneself or the other person. Because DJT identifies self-blame as an important factor in the regret process, the designated target of blame (self or other) may substantially influence how the different genders experience feelings of regret in a romantic situation¹.

At first glance, it might seem unclear what type of attribution (i.e., self or other) a person is likely to make in a failed romantic situation. However, in social psychology there is an extensive literature concerning attributions for failures. The basis for this is that people tend to take credit or make self-directed attributions (what we refer to as self-blame) for success and attribute failures to others (what we refer to as other-blame, e.g., Heider, 1958). This self-enhancement bias appears to have pervasive effects on people's lives, leading them to be better adjusted in their everyday functioning (Dufner et al., 2018). It probably benefits mental health as well (Humberg et al., 2019). It even persists at a more cognitive level in reflective memories. Research shows that when people evaluate negative words, they have better recall for ones that do not refer to them personally (non-self-referent), but worse recall for ones that do (self-referent, Zhang et al., 2018). In other words, participants had a self-enhancing memory bias for the negative words. This self-enhancement bias likely accounts for a good deal of the variability in human decision-making and regret (McElroy et al., 2023). In fact, self-enhancing attributions are pervasive across human interactions and are often referred to as the self-serving bias (Bradley, 1978; Miller, & Ross, 1975). They are common in most types of situations, including interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campbell et al., 2000). According to this line of research, when a romantic relationship fails,

people should tend to make external attributions (i.e., other-directed) for the failure, or, in other words, blame the other person.

Overview of Research

In the current study, we set out to observe how self- or other-blame would influence regret for a failed romantic situation and whether gender differences would emerge when self-blame was removed. In one condition, we presented participants with a scenario that depicts a failed romance with the person's partner to blame. Thus, an external attribution should be made, and self-blame is excluded. In another condition, we focused blame for the failed relationship on the self. In this situation, the attribution of blame is directed to the person themselves. Given that the element of self-blame is included in this condition, it may yield findings consistent with other domains. Specifically, the action/inaction effect may emerge with actions eliciting more regret than inactions (e.g., Kahneman & Miller, 1986). We controlled the outcome aspect of regret by keeping the outcome (ending of an important romance) consistent for all participants.

At first glance, the relationship between self-blame and regret might appear straightforward, and self-blame would be an unnecessary part of our study design. However, given the complementary role that self-blame is thought to contribute to the regret process (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002), the inaccurate overestimation people have of it (Gilbert et al., 2004), and the fact that DJT eludes to it being continuous (e.g., high self-blame, Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002, p. 213), we felt it was important to include a self-blame condition along with an other-blame one in our study design. To test our predictions, participants reported self-perceptions of their behavior in hypothetical relationships, a design that has been extensively used in decision research on romantic relationships. This method provides a unique look at the interaction of self-other attributions and action-inaction effects, as well as interactions involving gender.

Predictions

Our review of the literature suggests that there is strong evidence that, in general, actions elicit more regret than inactions when negative behaviors are involved, such as breaking up in a romantic relationship. Further, there is limited but suggestive evidence that in this type of failed romantic situation, women experience more regret over actions than will men. Lastly, the target of blame, self or other, should influence regret such that when self-blame is involved, the action/inaction effect should emerge, but when the focus of blame is the other person, the action/inaction effect should not be observed. Thus, we developed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: When a failed romantic situation is structured to contain self-blame for the bad outcome, the common action-inaction effect should be observed, and actions should elicit more regret than inactions.

Hypothesis 2: When a failed romantic situation is structured to contain other blame for the bad outcome, the common action-inaction effect should not be observed, and both actions and inactions should elicit similar levels of regret.

Hypothesis 3: The action/inaction effect in romantic failures may not be consistent across the genders. Men will report more regret over romantic inactions relative to actions. Women will feel more regret over romantic actions, or experience equal levels of regret for both actions and inactions.

METHOD

Participants

To determine sample size, we relied upon an a priori sample of 50 participants, all of whom were enrolled in a General Psychology course the semester prior to the main study and who participated for course credit. We targeted a sample of 50 to achieve sufficient variance for the power analysis. In this initial sampling, participants rated a set of scenarios, presented in Appendix A. However, the self and other conditions (presented parenthetically in Appendix A) were omitted for this comparison sample. The rating scale used in this sample was the same scale used for the main study. Participants' responses to the vignette with the self/other condition removed were used to generate a variability comparison. We used JMP software to determine that, with an $\alpha = 0.05$ error probability, and a desired power level of 0.80, a sample size of 54 per condition should be sufficient².

A total of 249 participants, including 125 self-reporting women and 124 self-reporting men, ranging in age from 18-32, took part in the study. The participants were all college students enrolled in a General Psychology course in their first or second year of matriculation at a small private college. Participants were randomly assigned to each of the experimental conditions. The study took place in small groups and data gathering continued until at least the minimum number of participants per condition had been obtained. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants received class credit for their participation. Participants had several options to obtain course credit and were free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Design

The study design included the manipulated variables of self- versus other-blame, action/inaction, and the observed variable of gender. Both self- versus other-blame and gender were between-subjects variables and action/inaction was a within-subjects variable. This yielded a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (gender [man, woman] \times blame [self, other] \times behavior [action, inaction]) mixed factorial design. The dependent variable in our study was participants' reported regret over the romantic situation.

Materials and Procedure

Before beginning our study, we provided a separate set of participants with a hypothetical romantic situation. This vignette was similar in nature to the one used in our study, but it did not contain a behavior associated with the bad outcome. We asked participants to provide thoughts about the situation. After a discussion, it was apparent that

the one behavior related to breakups in this type of situation was alcohol consumption. Therefore, we used an alcohol-related event as the basis for manipulating self- versus other-blame.

Participants in our study were first provided with an informed consent form detailing the participation in the study. After giving consent, they were asked to read the vignette describing a romantic situation that had ended. The scenarios in the vignette varied in accordance with the self- versus other-blame manipulation. The full vignette for this study is presented in Appendix A. Participants' self-reported anticipatory regret was measured on a 100-point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much." After participants had completed the study, they were allowed to ask questions and were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

We first examined whether the self- versus Other-blame manipulation and gender would influence regret responses to the action/inaction variable across all participants. We performed a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with condition (self- vs. other-blame) and gender as variables and action/inaction as the repeated measure (see Table 1). The results revealed an action/inaction main effect, $F(1, 245) = 28.1, p < .001$. Both condition and gender main effects were not statistically significant, $F_s < 1$. The action/inaction \times gender interaction $F(1, 245) = 2.4, p < .13$, and the condition \times action/inaction \times gender interaction were not statistically significant as well, $F < 1$. These findings fail to provide support for Hypothesis 3. Importantly, the condition \times action/inaction interaction was statistically significant, $F(1, 247) = 42.82, p < .001$, providing evidence that the self- and other-blame conditions interacted differently with action/inaction, a crucial aspect of Hypotheses 1 and 2.

To more directly test Hypothesis 1, we performed the same analysis within the self-blame condition, treating action/inaction as a repeated measure and gender as a between-subjects variable. The results revealed a strong main effect of the action/inaction variable, $F(1, 128) = 62.5, p > .0001$ (see Table 2). Actions were associated with more regret than inactions, supporting Hypothesis 1. Neither the main effect for gender, $F(1, 128) = 1.8, p = .179$, nor the interaction between gender and action/inaction, $F < 1$, were statistically significant, which failed to support Hypothesis 3. To directly examine Hypothesis 2, we performed the same analysis in the other-blame condition. Consistent with predictions, this analysis revealed a nonsignificant effect for action/inaction, $F(1, 117) = .916, p = .341$ (see Table 2). Neither the gender main effect, $F < 1$, nor the gender \times action/inaction interaction, $F(1, 117) = 1.78, p = .185$ were statistically significant. Again, this finding failed to support Hypothesis 3.

TABLE 1.

Means and SDs of Participants' Regret Responses to the Romantic Vignette as a Function of Action/Inaction and Self-Other Blame

	Self-Blame (Self drinking and flirting)			Other-Blame (Partner drinking and flirting)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Inaction (staying in relationship)	50.2	130	27.5	63.5	119	24.8
Action (Breaking up)	76.2	130	25.6	60.6	119	28.8

DISCUSSION

On the surface, it may seem that romantic failures necessarily involve self-blame. However, blaming others for failures is common, so much so that researchers refer to it as the self-serving bias. In the current study, we manipulated blame for a failed romantic relationship, targeting either one's self or one's partner. Our findings revealed that when self-blame was present, the action/inaction effect was observed, revealing higher levels of regret for actions than inactions. When blame for the failed romance was attributed to the partner, we found similar levels of regret for both actions and inactions. We failed to find any support for gender differences, as both men and women reported similar levels of regret across the different conditions.

Thus, our findings coalesce around prior theoretical work on DJT (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002) and gender differences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Roese et al., 2006; Webster et al., 2020). According to DJT, regret is composed of a comparison process involving the event's outcome and the element of self-blame. When we made self-blame inherent in the situation, men and women did not differ in their regret ratings and both showed more regret for actions than inactions, similar to findings in other domains. Prior theoretical work (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Roese et al., 2006; Webster et al., 2020) suggests that gender differences manifest in romantic situations, proposing that men have more regret over inactions whereas women have equal regret for actions and inactions. We found no statistically significant gender differences in either the self- or other-blame conditions. Future researchers should explore the conditions under which gender differences are present in regret and identify specific factors that may influence the likelihood these differences will be observed.

There are several limitations that also should be noted in this study. First, the hypothetical situation we created may not have been as realistic as it could have been. As noted earlier, this approach has advantages in research, but it also may have limited the external validity in this study. Second, our sample population consisted of college students who may be somewhat limited in their romantic relationships. Sampling from a population of older adults with more relationship experience is an important consideration for future research endeavors in this domain. Our sample was also limited by the ability to contrast heterosexual relationships with homosexual ones. Our vignette was constructed so that participants were asked to imagine this situation with

their "partner," so no participant would have been excluded because of their sexual preference. While we have no reason to believe homosexual relationships may differ in their regret responses, it is an important component to be mindful of in future research planning. Finally, an additional procedural element that would improve the internal validity of this type of design is to include a manipulation check for blame. Specifically, an improvement to the study design would be a measure of whether participants in the self-blame condition attributed more blame to themselves than did participants in the other-blame condition.

A central question that emerges for future research is whether women and men are equally likely to make self- or other-attributions for failed romantic situations. Future research addressing this question would likely benefit from adapting the scenario-based methodology we employed in this paper. An interesting and expansive way of furthering this research would be to incorporate elements of self-framing, a technique originally developed by Wang (2004). Normally, decision researchers manipulate and structure the decision task so that the valenced frame of the decision task is assigned to participants, thus ignoring their own predispositions. However, in this novel design, Wang structured a decision-making environment so that participants impose their own hedonic tone. Specifically, participants were able to interpret and frame the expected choice outcomes themselves before making a choice by using pie charts and an additional sentence-completion task. An important development for researchers in both personality and decision-making (e.g., McElroy et al., 2007; Wang, 2004; Zhang & Wang, 2008). By incorporating this procedure, future researchers should be able to gain better insight into how self-imposed self- and other-attributions influence feelings of regret.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the current study was to test whether participants' blame attribution, decision to act or not act, and gender influenced their regret in a situation of breaking up in a romantic relationship. To examine our hypotheses, we had participants evaluate a hypothetical vignette that portrayed a relationship that had gone badly and, because of their decision to stay or leave, they missed out on another ideal relationship. We then asked them to evaluate how much regret they would feel. Our findings showed that self- or other-blame played a profound role in the

TABLE 2.

Means and SDs of Participants' Regret Responses to the Romantic Vignette as a Function of Gender, Self-Other Blame Condition and Action/Inaction

	Gender					
	Women			Men		
	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-Blame (Self drinking and flirting)						
Inaction (Staying in relationship)	50.87	69	27.53	49.34	61	27.6
Action (Breaking up)	79.71	69	25.38	72.3	61	25.5
Other-Blame (Partner drinking and flirting)						
Inaction (Staying in relationship)	61.25	56	24.43	65.56	63	25.1
Action (Breaking up)	62.3	56	25.8	59.1	63	31.4

action/inaction effect. Specifically, when self-blame was involved, we observed the typical action/inaction finding, as participants reported more regret over actions than inactions. However, when the situation was centered on other-blame (i.e., the partner), regret ratings were the same for both action and inaction situations. Further, our findings failed to show support for prior research that suggests men have more regret over inactions and women have more regret over actions. Thus, it seems that, for both genders, placing blame for failed relationships plays an integral role in the regret felt about decisions.

Romantic relationships play a profound role in many people's lives. Their effects reverberate into emotional experiences and physical health. When they fail, the effects can be profoundly impactful. Research that provides insight into the processes involved in the regret people feel over failed relationships can help better inform and prepare us for these types of situations. The current study adds to the growing body of research that depicts what happens and how people might feel, for better or worse, when a relationship fails.

FOOTNOTES

¹ It is important to note that the romantically focused vignette in our study involved a situation that depicted a hypothetical, close intimate relationship. The current study is not an exact replication of any prior study, but it shares conceptual similarities with the prior gender differences research we discussed.

² The methods used in this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Greensboro College, 012019, approval information available from the first author.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Data for this study can be accessed from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX

Inaction condition: Imagine that during the past year you were in a romantic relationship with someone. While you were in a relationship with this person you were out on a date one night hanging out with a group of friends. (**Self-blame condition:** While hanging out you have too much to drink and begin to flirt with someone else.) (**Other-blame condition:** While hanging out your partner has too much to drink and begins to flirt with someone else.). This causes you to consider breaking-up with your partner to date someone else. You decided against breaking up and stayed in the relationship with your partner. Now imagine that the relationship with your partner failed and you realize that the person you were thinking of switching to date might have been the perfect match for you, your soul mate.

In the above situation, how much regret would you feel from not breaking up to date someone else? (Response given on a 11-point Likert-type scale, from 0 to 100, in 10 increments, 10 = *none at all*, 100 = *very much*)

Action condition: Imagine that during the past year you were in a romantic relationship with someone. While you were in a relationship with this person you were out on a date one night hanging out with a group of friends. (**Self-blame condition:** While hanging out you have too much to drink and begin to flirt with someone else.) (**Other-blame condition:** While hanging out your partner has too much to drink and begins to flirt with someone else.). This causes you to consider breaking-up with your partner to date someone else. You decided to break up and ended the relationship with your partner. Now imagine that the relationship you switched to failed and you realize that the partner you left might have been the perfect match for you, your soul mate.

In the above situation, how much regret would you feel from breaking up to date someone else? (Response given on a 11-point Likert-type scale, from 0 to 100, in 10 increments, 10 = *none at all*, 100 = *very much*)