

# Appraisals and Distancing Responses to Hurtful Messages

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The goal of this article is to clarify the conditions under which intensity of hurt influences how much people distance themselves from hurtful friends or dating partners. This article draws on appraisal theories of emotion, which explain both the causes and consequences of emotions, to derive predictions about the role of variables relevant to hurtful episodes. The authors replicate previous research designs for the study of hurtful messages to test the hypotheses and research questions. Results reveal significant main effects for intensity of hurt, perceived intentionality, relational quality, and frequency of hurt on relational distancing. Additionally, perceived intentionality and frequency of hurt moderated the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing, contingent on the respondent's sex and the type of relationship. The discussion highlights the utility of appraisal theories of emotion as a framework for the study of hurtful experiences.

*Keywords:* hurtful messages; hurt; emotion; appraisal theory

**H**urt feelings are a common occurrence in relationships; in one study, 60% of participants reported experiencing hurt feelings more than once a month, and 20% reported feeling hurt at least once a week (Leary & Springer, 2001). Hurt arises from the judgment that a person's behavior is a transgression (Weiner, 1986) or violates expectations within the relationship (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). More specifically, hurt is a negative emotion that involves feeling unjustly harmed or emotionally injured by another person; like other emotions, hurt can range in intensity—in this case, from slight discomfort to intense pain (Vangelisti, 1994). Hurt feelings can come from a variety of sources, but many times, communication is the cause of hurt feelings. Sometimes, hurtful messages are direct, but even ambiguous messages "if sufficiently scrutinized, might seem to reveal a partner's irritation, disappointment, or disinterest in oneself (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003, p. 126). Because hurt is a common experience (Leary & Springer, 2001) that has the potential to undermine personal and relational well-being (e.g., Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), it is an important phenomenon to study in the context of personal relationships.

When people feel hurt, they may respond with a number of behaviors (i.e., crying, yelling, laughing; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998), but they also might withdraw from the relationship. Feeling hurt often leads to relational distancing, which is a relational rift in an otherwise close relationship (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987). One might expect that a more severe instance of hurt feelings would promote relational distancing, but prior research has revealed weak associations between intensity of hurt and distancing (Vangelisti & Young, 1999, as cited in Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Because relational distancing is an especially damaging consequence of hurt, we seek to clarify the conditions under which intensity of hurt influences distancing between friends or dating partners.

We draw our theoretical foundation from appraisal theories of emotion, which explain both the causes and consequences of emotions. Although appraisal theories of emotion have been loosely applied to the phenomenon of hurt (see Vangelisti & Young, 2000), we believe that a more precise application of the theory can clarify when feeling hurt will or will not lead to relational distancing. By doing so, we hope to gain a better understanding of the experience and consequences of hurtful messages in personal relationships. We begin by reviewing extant research on hurtful messages. Then, we discuss the assumptions of appraisal theories of emotion and how they apply to the experience of hurtful messages. Finally, we report and discuss a study that evaluated our perspective.

## Hurtful Messages in Personal Relationships

A variety of constructs have been considered in the study of hurtful messages. Many researchers focus on the intensity and frequency of hurt as key characteristics of the phenomenon (e.g., Miller & Roloff, 2005; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). The explanations people construct for their experiences of hurt, including the perceived intentionality of hurtful messages, have also figured prominently in previous research (e.g., Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). Other studies have explored communicative reactions to hurt (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998), other emotions associated with hurt, and victim and perpetrator accounts of hurt (e.g., Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Thus, a rich body of work can inform theoretical accounts of hurt.

Efforts to theorize about experiences of hurt have focused primarily on explaining variation in the intensity or outcomes of hurt. Vangelisti and Young (2000), for example, showed that attributions of intentionality are associated with more intense feelings of hurt, increased relational distancing, and less satisfaction. Studies have also indicated that the perceived intentionality of hurtful behavior is positively associated with destructive communication responses (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006), is inversely associated with forgiveness (Fincham, 2000), and moderates the relationship between perceived severity of the hurtful event and forgiveness (Fincham et al.,

2005). The quality of a relationship and the perceived frequency of hurtful experiences have also been examined with respect to relational distancing and intensity of hurt (Vangelisti & Young, 2000).

Although extant research has revealed associations between facets of hurtful experiences, questions remain about the theoretical logic that links these variables. For example, some studies focus on how attributions of intent might amplify hurt feelings or relational distancing (e.g., Mills et al., 2002; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Other research has highlighted the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing (e.g., Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). In addition, relationship qualities have been characterized as both a factor that influences hurt (e.g., Feeney, 2004) and a consequence of hurtful episodes (e.g., Leary et al., 1998). We believe that the body of work amassed to date can support a more integrated theoretical framework to account for relational distancing responses to hurtful messages. In the following section, we turn to appraisal theories of emotion to provide such a framework.

## **Applying Appraisal Theories of Emotion to the Experience of Hurtful Messages**

Appraisal theories of emotion focus on how people's perceptions of situations shape the experience and manifestation of emotion. As individuals interact with their environment, they evaluate the impact of the situation on their well-being and their behavioral options (Lazarus, 1991). These appraisals shape both the experience of specific emotions and how people act on their feelings. Thus, appraisal theories offer a framework for organizing and understanding the factors that influence relational distancing as a response to hurtful messages. In the following sections, we define primary and secondary appraisals, and we discuss how they operate in the context of hurtful messages.

### **Primary Appraisals**

Primary appraisals are assessments about the implications of the environment for a person's goals or desires (Lazarus, 1991). These appraisals occur almost instantaneously and alert people to anything that is relevant, beneficial, or harmful to their well-being (Smith & Kirby, 2001). More specifically, appraisals index the extent to which the environment presents opportunities or obstacles to obtaining goals. These appraisals, then, initiate the emotional experience. If a situation is congruent with goals, then positive emotions typically arise; when there is incongruence between circumstances and what an individual desires, negative emotions arise. Within this general framework, a variety of specific primary appraisals have been linked to particular emotional experiences (Oatley, 1992).

The emotions generated by primary appraisals orient the individual toward behavioral responses. In this way, emotions can be considered "modes of operation,"

because they represent changes in a person that can alter behaviors and future interactions with the environment (Scherer, 1982). Emotions include a motivational system embodied in action tendencies or the inclination to behave a certain way because of the emotion. In general, positive emotions prompt individuals to engage with the surrounding environment, and negative emotions are associated with disengagement (Cannon, 1953).

In the context of hurtful messages, the relevant goal is a person's desire to be valued by a partner (Leary et al., 1998) or to maintain a view of self as worthy of love (Feeney, 2005). When a person perceives that a partner's communication conveys a lack of regard, hurt feelings can be evoked (Leary et al., 1998). The intensity of hurt can range from mild to intense depending on the extent that the relevant goal is obstructed and/or perceived as important. In this way, intensity of hurt reflects the strength of the emotion evoked when people appraise a message as threatening their goal of being valued by a partner or worthy of love.

The expected action tendency for some negative emotions is withdrawal from the environment or the source of the feeling; in the context of hurt, withdrawal takes the form of relational distancing. Of course, the action tendency for a particular emotion can manifest in a variety of different behaviors. For example, the function of fear is to alert individuals to danger so that they can enact the action tendency of protection either through flight or fight (Scherer, 1982). Whether and how people act on their action tendencies is influenced by secondary appraisals.

## Secondary Appraisals

As individuals experience emotions, they gather information to help them decide how to act on their feelings. Secondary appraisals are self-judgments about a person's available options and resources to cope with the stimulus event and possible consequences of it (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A variety of secondary appraisals may be relevant to understanding the manifestations of emotional action tendencies. For example, evaluations of one's ability to change the situation, the need for additional information before acting, or the consequences of action all constitute secondary appraisals that may shape the performance of action tendencies (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Furthermore, secondary appraisals may prompt a reappraisal of the initial situation (Lazarus, 1991), such as when the perceived ability to fend off an attacker might prompt a person to appraise a threatening situation as less frightening. Reappraisal "implies the continuous nature of a person's evaluations of transactions with the environment and emphasizes their responsiveness to feedback" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 134).

In the context of hurtful messages, Vangelisti and Young (2000) observed that people's perceptions of the intentionality of a hurtful message affected how they felt about a partner and how much they engaged in relational distancing. Additionally, Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) found that relational satisfaction was negatively

associated with the perceived impact and intensity of hurt. The frequency of hurt in a relationship has also been linked to the degree of hurt felt (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Thus, we consider how judgments of intentionality, relational quality, and frequency of hurt might inform secondary appraisals that shape relational distancing responses to hurtful messages.

*Judgments of intentionality.* Judgments of intentionality focus on why the event is occurring. Judgments of intentionality encompass evaluations of a person's responsibility for a certain action or behavior (Vangelisti & Young, 2000) and can function in two ways: Individuals gain insight into social behavior, and they increase their ability to predict behavior in the future (Shaver, 1975). Moreover, judgments of intentionality clarify how a person might cope with or adapt to the other person's behavior. The causes of events or circumstances constrain how an individual can respond to the situation; thus, judgments of intentionality are a prime example of secondary appraisals (Lazarus, 2001).

Judgments of intentionality inform the meanings communication partners attach to each other's behavior. For example, if an individual perceives a behavior as unintentional, he or she may consider it more excusable, the impact of the event may be minimized (Malle & Knobe, 1997), and the transgression may be forgiven (Fincham, 2000). On the other hand, judging a behavior as intentional may lead to inferences about the actor's personality and, thus, magnify the response to the event. Consistent with this reasoning, Vangelisti and Young (2000) found that people who perceived a hurtful message as intentional indicated a greater distancing effect, more intense feelings of hurt, and less satisfaction than did those who perceived messages as unintentional. Building on Vangelisti and Young's work, we view perceived intentionality as a factor shaping secondary appraisals and moderating association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing:

*Hypothesis 1:* Perceived intentionality moderates the relationship between intensity of hurt and relational distancing, such that the positive association between intensity of hurt and distancing increases with perceived intentionality.

*Relational quality.* Relational quality encompasses the closeness, intimacy, and satisfaction that characterize an association. Relational quality provides a backdrop for understanding a partner's behavior, and depending on relational quality, an individual may have different options for responding to that behavior. To the extent that people look to the state of their relationship to determine options for responding and expectations for future interaction, the quality of the relationship informs secondary appraisals in the context of hurt.

Research on negative events within close relationships indicates how relationship qualities affect people's responses. For example, the quality of a relationship is linked to people's perceptions of and reactions to a partner's negative behaviors (e.g.,

Fincham & O'Leary, 1983). People also appear to assess intimacy and power dynamics when deciding whether to express or withhold complaints about a dating partner (Cloven & Roloff, 1994). Likewise, evaluations of satisfaction, investment, and commitment influence whether people react constructively or destructively to a partner's dissatisfying behavior (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Although these studies do not address hurtful experiences, per se, they are consistent with evidence that hurtful messages have a less negative impact on a relationship when partners are otherwise satisfied with their union (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). By our logic, relational quality influences the extent to which experiences of hurt lead to relational distancing. Thus, we advance the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Relational quality moderates the relationship between intensity of hurt and relational distancing such that the positive association between intensity of hurt and distancing increases with the reported quality of the relationship.

*Frequency of hurtful messages.* The frequency of hurtful messages refers to how often such messages occur in a relationship. Perceived frequency of hurtful messages is a contextual clue that shapes expectations for the future and informs people's judgments about their ability to cope with the situation. As such, perceived frequency of hurtful messages aligns with Lazarus's (1991) characterizations of secondary appraisals. Because behaviors that are seen as part of a stable pattern require different responses than one-time events, a person might look to the frequency of previous hurtful episodes to figure out what to anticipate in the future and how to best respond. Based on prior research, that response may take the form of either increased or decreased relational distancing.

Perceptions of frequent experiences of hurt may lead to an increase in relational distancing if hurt acts as a social allergen. Social allergens are emotion-arousing behaviors or violations by another person that are unpleasant but not terribly aversive (Cunningham, Shamblem, Barbee, & Ault, 2005). Allergens can be categorized as inconsiderate acts, uncouth habits, norm violations, or intrusive behaviors. Although initial exposure to allergens may only produce a small negative reaction, repeated exposure leads to more extreme negative reactions. Social allergies can be defined as a "reaction of hypersensitive annoyance or disgust to a repeated behavior" (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 273). Thus, as the frequency of the allergens increases, the negative behaviors become more noxious and produce more extreme reactions. Consistent with this reasoning, Vangelisti and Young (2000) found that the frequency of hurtful experiences was positively associated with tendencies to engage in relational distancing.

An alternative body of research suggests that frequent hurtful messages could lead to less, rather than more, relational distancing in reaction to a particular episode. Behaviors that occur frequently, including incidences of hurtful messages, can become integrated into the social norms for a relationship. When this happens,

hurtful messages neither violate expectations nor warrant relational distancing (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). In addition, people who have been hurt by a partner on a regular basis may have already withdrawn to a comfortable distance that allows them to maintain their relationships; because they have already adapted to hurtful messages that they anticipate, no further distancing is necessary. Accordingly, research has shown that negatively valenced interpersonal behaviors are more frequent in intimate relationships but that they have limited long-term effects (e.g., Knapp, Stafford, & Daly, 1986).

We propose that frequency of hurt shapes secondary appraisals by informing perceptions of coping options and expectations of the future. Because it is not clear whether perceptions of high frequency exacerbate or dampen the relational distancing effects of hurtful messages, we pose a research question:

*Research Question 1:* How do perceptions of frequency of hurt moderate the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing?

## **The Role of Relationship Type in the Experience of Hurtful Messages**

The majority of empirical studies contributing to our hypotheses and research question focused on relationships characterized by an attachment bond (i.e., romantic or family relationships; Feeney, 2005; Mills et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2003). Studies also examining messages between friends, coworkers, or roommates suggest that lacking an attachment bond may attenuate hurt. Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) found that messages from family members were perceived as more hurtful than messages from nonfamily relationships but not more hurtful than messages from romantic partners. Leary et al. (1998) observed that hurt from romantic partners was more hurtful than from acquaintances. These findings suggest there are relationship type differences in the experience of hurt.

Romantic bonds are communal relationships where partners are expected to protect each other and look out for each other's best interests; friendships, on the other hand, are not considered to be attachment relationships (Feeney, 2004). Although friends can certainly be sources of hurtful messages, the nonexclusive nature of friendships may make those experiences less hurtful or offer unique alternatives for coping. In contrast, the exclusive and communal bond in romantic relationships renders it a distinct context for hurtful episodes. To guide a comparison of these relational contexts, we pose a second research question:

*Research Question 2:* Does relationship type (i.e., friendship or romantic relationship) moderate the associations highlighted in Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Research Question 1?

## Method

We replicated previous research by asking participants to complete a questionnaire about experiences of hurtful messages (see Feeney, 2004; Vangelisti, 1994) to yield the same kind of data gathered in previous research.

### Participants

Three hundred sixty-two participants from introductory communication courses at a large eastern university received extra credit for completing a questionnaire about hurtful events in their friendships or dating relationships. Thirty-two participants were excluded because they could not recall an instance of hurt, or they described an incident that involved a hurtful action instead of a hurtful message (e.g., seeing a partner kiss someone else). Of the remaining participants, 165 were males, 159 were females, and 6 did not indicate their sex. Respondents ranged from 18 to 27 years old ( $M = 20.00$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Participants responded to the questionnaire in respect to a friendship ( $n = 189$ ) or a dating relationship ( $n = 141$ ), which ranged in length from 3 months to 216 months ( $M = 35.38$ ,  $SD = 39.84$ ).

### Experimental Design

At a campus location, respondents completed a questionnaire focused on a time when they received a hurtful message from a dating partner or friend. A 2 (Intensity of Hurt: High Versus Low) by 2 (Relationship Type: Friendship Versus Romantic Relationship) experimental design was created by varying the questionnaires used in the study. We manipulated the intensity of hurtful experiences by including two types of questionnaires: one that asked respondents to recall a message that was extremely hurtful and another that asked respondents to recall a message that was only minimally hurtful. We deemed this manipulation necessary because studies in which participants recall hurtful messages typically solicit especially intense experiences of hurt (e.g., Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Thus, the manipulation aimed to capture a broader range of hurtful messages.

We manipulated relationship type (per Research Question 2) by asking participants who were in a dating relationship of at least 3 months' length to complete a questionnaire focused on that relationship. Participants who did not meet that criterion (or who did not wish to answer questions about such a relationship) received a questionnaire focused on a friendship.<sup>2</sup>

### Measures

The questionnaires contained items concerning the participants' demographic and relationship characteristics. Participants also described a hurtful interaction in

narrative form and noted what happened right before and right after the hurtful message occurred. A series of closed-ended measures following these accounts provided quantitative measures of the experiences of hurt.

*Intensity of hurt.* To indicate intensity of hurt, the participants responded to two 7-point scales. One item required respondents to rate the extent to which the hurtful interaction caused emotional pain; the other item asked participants to indicate the extent to which the interaction was hurtful (from Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .86 ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ).

*Judgments of intentionality.* Per Vangelisti and Young (2000), we asked participants to write out why they thought their friend/dating partner said something hurtful. Next, the participants assessed the extent to which they perceived their partners hurt them intentionally on one 7-point scale ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). Two coders rated the participants' perceptions of intentionality from the open-ended explanations. The responses were coded as intentional ( $n = 94$ ), unintentional ( $n = 189$ ), or undecided ( $n = 41$ ).<sup>2</sup> Approximately 25% of the data were coded by both coders, and their level of agreement was 93%.

*Relational quality.* To assess relational quality, participants completed the Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire, which was modified to address either a friendship or dating relationship. In particular, respondents rated their relationship on eight 7-point semantic differential scales (e.g., *miserable-enjoyable*, *rewarding-disappointing*), which were averaged to form a composite variable ( $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) and on one single-item global measure of relational satisfaction. The final score was the average of the composite variable and the response to the single item ( $r = .79$ ,  $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). Higher scores reflect more intimate, close, and satisfying associations.

*Perceived frequency of hurt.* As an index of the participants' perceptions of the frequency of hurtful messages in their relationships, they responded to six items on 7-point scales (per Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Items were averaged to form the variable ( $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ).

*Relational distancing.* Participants responded to five 7-point bipolar scales assessing their tendency to distance themselves from their friend or dating partner (per Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Specifically, they indicated the extent to which the hurtful interaction made their relationship more close or distant, relaxed or tense, more friendly or hostile, more intimate or remote, and more open or closed. Responses to the five items were averaged ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ).

## Results

Before testing the hypotheses and research questions, we conducted three sets of preliminary analyses. First, we checked whether our manipulation of intensity of hurt produced variance in hurt, as expected. The intensity of hurt reported by participants in the low hurt condition ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) was significantly lower than for the participants in the high hurt condition ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $F(1, 328) = 24.87$ ,  $F < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Moreover, the combined sample for intensity of hurt was normally distributed around a scale mean of 4.35 (skewness = -0.36, kurtosis = -0.36). Thus, the measure of intensity of hurt was suitable for testing our hypotheses.

Second, we checked the validity of the measure of perceived intentionality by comparing it to open-ended explanations for the hurtful message. A one-way ANOVA with tukey post hoc comparisons revealed that responses to the closed-ended item covaried with the open-ended descriptions,  $F(2, 318) = 80.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .34$ . Open-ended responses coded as unintentional had the lowest average response on the single-item measure ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ), responses coded as undecided had the next highest average on the single-item measure ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ), and messages rated as intentional had the highest rating on the single-item measure ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ); all three means were significantly different from each other. Thus, we deemed the closed-ended score a satisfactory measure of perceived intentionality (see Vangelisti & Young, 2000).

Finally, we evaluated all of the measures of relationship type and sex differences. We performed a series of two-way ANOVAs with respondents' sex and relationship type as the independent variables and intensity of hurt, relational distancing, perceived intentionality, relational quality, and frequency of hurt as the dependent variables. Results indicated that friends reported greater relational distancing ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) than people in dating relationships ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ),  $F(1, 320) = 6.49$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ , people in dating relationships reported higher relational quality ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than those in friendships ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 320) = 23.52$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ , and friends perceived a greater frequency of hurt ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) than people in dating relationships ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $F(1, 320) = 10.84$ ,  $p < .005$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . We observed that females reported significantly higher intensity of hurt ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) as compared to males ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $F(1, 320) = 27.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ . In light of this difference, we included respondent's sex as a covariate in our substantive analyses. None of the interactions between respondent's sex and relationship type were significant.

### Substantive Analyses

Our hypotheses and first research question specified that the association between relational distancing and intensity of hurt would be moderated by the intentionality

**Table 1**  
**The Regression of Relational Distancing Onto Intensity of Hurt and Secondary Appraisals**

Step 1			
$R^2\Delta$	.03 <sup>#</sup>		
Relationship type	.14 <sup>#</sup>		
Participant sex	=.06		
Step 2			
$R^2\Delta$	.08 <sup>***</sup>		
Relationship type	.12 <sup>#</sup>		
Participant sex	-.14 <sup>#</sup>		
Intensity of hurt	.30 <sup>***</sup>		
Step 3			
	Intentionality	Relational quality	Frequency
$R^2\Delta$	.03 <sup>**</sup>	.22 <sup>***</sup>	.09 <sup>***</sup>
Relationship type	.11 <sup>#</sup>	-.00	.07
Participant sex	-.11 <sup>#</sup>	-.08	-.13 <sup>#</sup>
Intensity of hurt	.24 <sup>***</sup>	.20 <sup>***</sup>	.23 <sup>***</sup>
Secondary appraisal	.19 <sup>**</sup>	-.50 <sup>***</sup>	.31 <sup>***</sup>

Note:  $N = 327$  individuals. Cell entries for the variables are  $\beta$ s. Relationship type was coded 0 = dating, 1 = friendship; respondent sex was coded 0 = males, 1 = females.

<sup>#</sup> $p < .05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

of the hurtful message (Hypothesis 1), relationship quality (Hypothesis 2), and the perceived frequency of hurtful experiences (Research Question 1); Research Question 2 queried whether these associations were further moderated by relationship type. We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to evaluate these associations. As a starting point, we regressed relational distancing onto respondent's sex and relationship type to take the main effects of sex into account and to evaluate the influence of relationship type (Research Question 2). Next, we added intensity of hurt to the regression models. On the third step, we entered perceived intentionality, relationship quality, or perceived frequency; these variables were evaluated in separate analyses. Then, we added the two-way interactions between all of the variables in the model. On the two final steps of the analysis, we entered variables to evaluate the three-way interactions and the four-way interaction (see Table 1).

Results from the first step indicated that relationship type and respondent sex accounted for a small, but significant, proportion of variance in relational distancing; in particular, individuals referencing dating relationships reported more distancing than people describing friendships, but respondent's sex was not significantly associated with distancing. Consistent with our expectation that intensely hurtful messages generally encourage relational distancing, the second step of the analyses revealed a positive association between intensity of hurt and distancing. Respondent's

sex also emerged as a significant predictor of relational distancing on the second step; with the effects of relationship type and intensity of hurt covaried, females reported less distancing than males.

Our first hypothesis is tested by the analysis that included perceived intentionality of hurtful messages (see the first column in Table 1). Analyses revealed a significant main effect for intentionality on relational distancing. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, we did not observe a significant two-way interaction between intensity of hurt and perceived intentionality,  $R^2\Delta = .03$ ,  $\beta = .04$ ; however, results indicated a significant four-way interaction among intensity of hurt, perceived intentionality, relationship type, and respondent's sex,  $R^2\Delta = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ . We probed the form of this interaction by computing slopes for the regression of relational distancing on intensity of hurt when intentionality was high or low, relationship type was friendship or dating, and respondent's sex was male or female. To do so, we followed Aiken and West's (1991) procedure to generate estimates of main effect slopes when moderator variables take on different values. This procedure draws on the full sample of data to estimate slopes and evaluate whether those slopes are significantly different from zero.

As summarized in Table 2, results indicated that intentionality moderates the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing but that these effects are also contingent on relationship type and respondent's sex. For males referencing a friendship, intensity of hurt was positively associated with distancing when hurtful messages were perceived as intentional, but intensity was unrelated to distancing responses when hurtful messages were considered unintentional. For women describing friendships, the reverse pattern was observed: Intensity was not significantly associated with distancing when hurtful messages were judged intentional, but intensity was positively associated with distancing responses to unintentional hurts. Among male respondents focused on dating relationships, intensity was unrelated to distancing at both high and low levels of perceived intentionality. For female participants in dating relationships, the association between intensity and distancing was significant and positive for intentional hurts but nonsignificant for unintentional hurts. Although these patterns are considerably more complex than we anticipated, they do suggest that the link between intensity of hurt and relational distancing is shaped by perceptions of the intentionality of the hurtful message, as well as relationship type. Notably, we observed that perceptions of intentionality increased the positive association between intensity of hurt and distancing, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, only for males in friendships and females reporting on dating relationships.

Results of the regression model evaluating relational quality are also summarized in Table 1. Analyses revealed a significant main effect for relational quality, which was inversely related to relational distancing. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find evidence for relational quality as a moderator of the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing,  $R^2\Delta = .02$ ,  $\beta = -.01$ . In addition, the variance explained by the addition of the three-way and four-way interactions was not significant.

**Table 2**  
**Slopes for the Regression of Relational Distancing on Intensity of Hurt**

	Friendship	Dating Relationship
High intentionality		
Male	.37**	.08
Female	-.07	.57**
Low intentionality		
Male	.07	-.13
Female	.53***	.20

Note:  $N = 327$  individuals. Cell entries for the variables are unstandardized slopes.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In the model focused on perceived frequency of hurt (see Table 1), perceived frequency was significantly and positively associated with distancing. Although we did not find evidence of the two-way interaction between frequency and intensity of hurt,  $R^2\Delta = .01$ ,  $\beta = .03$  results revealed a significant three-way interaction between respondent's sex, intensity of hurt, and frequency of hurt,  $R^2\Delta = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ , that was subsumed by a four-way interaction among all the variables in the model,  $R^2\Delta = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ . We again probed this interaction by computing slopes for the regression of relational distancing on intensity of hurt, when frequency was high or low, relationship type was friendship or dating, and respondent's sex was male or female.

As summarized in Table 3, results indicated that frequency moderates the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing, contingent on relationship type and respondents' sex. For males referencing a friendship, intensity of hurt was positively associated with distancing when hurtful messages were perceived as frequent, but intensity was unrelated to distancing responses when hurtful messages were considered infrequent. The reverse was true for females describing friendships: Intensity was not significantly associated with distancing when hurtful messages were judged frequent, but intensity was positively associated with distancing responses when hurtful messages were judged infrequent. For male participants responding about their dating relationships, intensity was unrelated to distancing at both high and low levels of frequency. For female participants in dating relationships, intensity and distancing had a significant and positive association for perceptions of high frequency but were not significantly associated when perceived frequency was low. Notably, these patterns mirror the results for the role of intentionality, such that high frequency increases the association between intensity and distancing among males in friendships and among females in dating relationships and friendships. For females describing friendships, the tendency for intensity of hurt to lead to distancing was significant when such messages were perceived as infrequent.

**Table 3**  
**Slopes for the Regression of Relational Distancing on Intensity of Hurt**

	Friendship	Dating Relationship
High frequency		
Male	.31**	.22
Female	.10	.76**
Low frequency		
Male	-.01	-.06
Female	.55***	.22

Note:  $N = 327$  individuals. Cell entries for the variables are unstandardized slopes.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

We began this article advocating for a theoretical perspective to help clarify when hurtful messages will or will not promote relational distancing. Applying appraisal theories of emotion to hurtful experiences allowed us to posit hypotheses and research questions organizing variables that have been previously linked to hurtful messages. The results of an investigation of hurtful experiences in friendships and dating relationships suggest that perceived intentionality (Hypothesis 1) and frequency of hurtful messages (Research Question 1) moderate the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing, dependent on the type of relationship and the respondent's sex. Although we did not find evidence of relational quality as a moderator (Hypothesis 2), relational quality was negatively associated with relational distancing. In this section, we discuss the implications of our findings as well as the strengths and limitations of this investigation.

## Implications

Drawing on appraisal theories of emotion, hurt was defined as an emotional response that varies in intensity depending on the extent to which a person's desire to feel valued by a relational partner is obstructed (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Leary et al, 1998). Because negative emotions such as hurt are typically associated with a tendency to disengage with the environment, we measured relational distancing as the relevant dependent variable (per Vangelisti & Young, 2000). We observed a significant positive association between hurt and relational distancing that is consistent with this thinking.

We also made assumptions about secondary appraisals, nominating perceived intentionality, relational quality, and frequency of hurts as the judgments that shape secondary appraisals and moderate the association between intensity of hurt and

relational distancing.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to our expectations, we did not find a significant interaction between relational quality and intensity of hurt predicting relational distancing. Instead, relational quality shared a direct negative association with relational distancing ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ). Although speculative, we wonder if assessments of the quality of the relationship occur as part of the primary appraisal processes that inform perceptions of threats to goals. For example, a hurtful message may not pose a great threat to the person's goals of being valued if it occurs in the context of an otherwise close, satisfying relationship. On the other hand, people may be more reactive to hurtful comments when the relationship is vulnerable. Our reasoning here is consistent with Vangelisti and Young's (2000) argument that relational closeness and satisfaction act as a buffer against the impact of hurt. Moreover, prior research suggests that people have more extreme reactions to jealousy-provoking events when they have doubts about the relationship (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001).

Perceived intentionality and frequency of hurtful messages moderated the association between intensity of hurt and relational distancing, but these effects were conditional on the respondent's sex and the type of the relationship (Research Question 2). For males in friendships and females in dating relationships, results were consistent with Hypothesis 1; namely, intensity of hurt was positively associated with distancing when hurtful messages were perceived as intentional. Our reasoning suggests that intentionally hurtful messages afford fewer options for redress, and so more hurtful messages prompt more relational withdrawal. We observed similar patterns in the analysis focused on frequency of hurt: For males in friendships and females in dating relationships, intensity of hurt was positively associated with distancing when hurtful messages were perceived as frequent. In regard to frequency of hurt, then, these findings provide qualified evidence for the social allergen explanation for the effects of hurtful messages.

For males in romantic relationships, intensity of hurt was not significantly associated with relational distancing irrespective of perceived intentionality or frequency of hurtful messages. Although speculative, we wonder if hurtful messages are a less salient transgression for males in romantic relationships. Buss (1989) found that within romantic relationships, males feel more angry and upset over events, such as sexual withholding, whereas females were upset when their partners were inconsiderate and condescending. In the present study, we solicited accounts of hurtful messages, and we deliberately excluded accounts of behaviors or actions (i.e., kissing someone else). To the extent that Buss's findings generalize to experiences of hurt, the messages we examined would be less likely to prompt distancing behavior among males in romantic relationships. Furthermore, because men tend to monitor attachment relationships to a lesser degree than women (Acitelli, 1992), hurtful messages may be less likely than actions to trigger a distancing response from males.

For females in friendships, we found that intensity of hurt was positively associated with distancing when hurtful messages were perceived as unintentional and infrequent; these results run counter to Hypothesis 1 and the social allergen effect of

frequent hurts observed in male friendships and female romantic relationships. In reflecting on these patterns, we wonder if the nature of female friendships renders unpredictable hurts especially problematic. Infrequent and unintentional hurts reflect an element of unpredictability in the friendship and one which is seemingly beyond the friend's control. Females, more than males, rely on their friends for comfort and support (e.g., Fehr, 1996), and female friendships involve intimacy, communication, and emotional vulnerability on par with romantic associations (e.g., Brehm, 1992). Indirect support for our reasoning is provided by Holmstrom, Burlleson, and Jones (2005), which examined perceptions of peers who were unskilled at comforting. Although unskilled comforters are generally evaluated more negatively, the effect was especially pronounced among females evaluating a female peer. Perhaps because women are expected to provide superior comforting, females who violate this expectation are negatively perceived, especially by other females. More generally, our finding suggests that female friendships are uniquely disrupted when one member unexpectedly and unintentionally hurts the other.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of this study's strengths was the replication of previous research designs, allowing us to evaluate the application of appraisal theories of emotion to the hurtful messages. Our reliance on appraisal theories allowed us to integrate various aspects of hurtful episodes examined in previous research within a single coherent theoretical framework. At the same time, our data are cross-sectional, correlational, and from a college-student sample. Thus, conclusions about the causal relationships between these variables and generalizability require further research. Future efforts might manipulate relevant variables to determine the order of the causal process at work. Alternatively, a time-ordered data collection might illuminate the role of primary and secondary appraisals. In addition, a diary study design could capture appraisals of hurt closer to their actual occurrence; this research method would decrease the impact of retrospective biases as people recall hurtful experiences that may have occurred in the more distant past.

Another strength of our research design was that we gathered accounts of both major and minor hurtful episodes, and correspondingly, we observed greater variance in the measure of hurt intensity relative to other studies (e.g., Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). The more limited variance in intensity of hurt observed in previous research may be one explanation for inconsistent findings concerning the impact of intensity of hurt on relational distancing. More specifically, to the extent that other studies have gathered accounts of primarily serious transgressions, they have neglected more minor experiences of hurt where relational distancing was less likely. Although we included two relationship types (an attachment type and a nonattachment type), we were limited by the exclusion of other types of relationships.

Another limitation is that we only considered relational distancing as a primary response to hurt, and we did not measure other reactions that people might have to hurtful messages. Prior research has shown that individuals might respond to hurt by confronting the perpetrator (Miller & Roloff, 2005) and/or offering forgiveness (Fincham, 2000). Furthermore, we did not consider the social context in which the hurtful message occurred. Miller and Roloff (2005) found that women reported being more hurt than males when they imagined being teased or insulted in front of friends. Thus, our study is limited by our exclusion of other potential responses to hurt and social context differences.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine when hurtful messages will and will not cause relational distancing. Although intensity of hurt was positively associated with relational distancing, this association was moderated by perceptions of intentionality and frequency of hurt, depending on the type of relationship and the respondent's sex. Furthermore, our results highlight the importance of relational quality as a buffer against relational distancing. Thus, we are encouraged that future research adopting an appraisal theory framework can shed light on the consequences of hurtful messages in close relationships.

## Notes

1. Data from the first author's master thesis, completed under the direction of Dr. Dennis Gouran, contributed to this article.
2. For the friendship version of the questionnaire, the participants were to write the initials of a particular friend. This was to ensure they had someone specific in mind when responding to the questions.
3. Responses received a coding of "undecided" if the response did not contain information about perceptions of intentionality.
4. Although we take the associations of intentionality and frequency as support in favor of our thinking, we acknowledge that we cannot actually determine whether intentionality and frequency are acting as secondary appraisals.

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