

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS AND SCIENCES

**THE EFFECT OF THE PASSAGE OF TIME ON THE PERCEPTION OF HURTFUL  
MESSAGES WITHIN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

CAROLINA A. BETTER ROMERO  
Spring 2010

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for baccalaureate degrees  
in Communication Arts and Sciences and Economics  
with honors in Communication Arts and Sciences

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Denise Solomon  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences  
Thesis Supervisor

Lori Bedell  
Lecturer in Communication Arts and Sciences  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper was to find out whether the perception of hurtful messages varies as time passes. Because hurt is subjective, perceptions of hurt can change through the course of time; however, I know of no research that has explored how subjective experiences of hurt vary with the passage of time. Since hurtful messages appear constantly in romantic relationships and can negatively affect both individuals and relationships, knowing the effect that time has on perceptions of these messages is very important.

I predicted that time has an inverse relationship with the intensity of hurt perceived by a victim of a hurtful message within a romantic relationship (H1). Because satisfaction with a relationship can bias how people perceive past relationship events, I further hypothesized that the association in H1 is greater when relational quality is high than when the quality is low (H2). In a third hypothesis I predicted that as a result of gender scripts, men will minimize feelings of hurt over time; they will not want to appear as victims that hold on to feelings of hurt. Consequently, I predicted that the association in H1 is greater for males than for females (H3).

Data was collected both through daily diaries, which were completed by the participating dyads for a fourteen-day period, and in the lab, where the couple reported on one of the hurtful events they wrote about in their diaries. Results showed that the passage of time does not have a direct effect on perceptions of hurt. Also, relational quality did not affect the association between time and an individual's perception of hurt; however, there were differences in the correlations between hurt and intentionality and time as a function of relational quality. Finally, gender was not related to the effect that the passage of time has on hurtful messages. Yet, there are also differences in correlations of changes in perceptions of hurt through time according to the gender.

This thesis provides ideas for future areas of study, important to the development of communication research. It demonstrates that perceptions of hurt and intentionality in hurtful messages do not change within a period of two weeks. This discovery shows the importance of initial evaluations of intensity of hurt and intentionality of a message. It also serves as a time range guideline for future research studies that use the retrospective method. Scholars will now know that there is no change in the perception of intensity of hurt and intentionality of a message within a two-week period.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
Chapter 1 Rationale.....	1
Triggering Events that Cause Hurt.....	2
Hurtful Messages.....	2
Aggression and Hurt.....	5
Infidelity and Hurt.....	6
Factors that Affect the Intensity of Hurt.....	8
Relational Closeness.....	9
Honesty.....	10
Intentionality.....	12
The Effect of Time on Perceptions of Hurtful Interactions.....	14
Chapter 2 Study.....	15
Method.....	15
Sample.....	15
Diary Procedures.....	16
Lab Procedures.....	16
Measures.....	17
Results.....	18
Preliminary Analyses.....	18
Substantive Analyses.....	19
Discussion.....	21
References.....	24

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to start by thanking my dear professor and thesis supervisor Dr. Denise Solomon for guiding me through this process. She not only taught me about academics, but about the importance of getting to know myself and challenging my capabilities. I am extremely grateful for her patience, critiques, and help.

This experience would not have been the same without the presence of my honors adviser Lori Bedell. She always managed to make me feel understood and well instructed. I really value her judgment and appreciate her dedication and commitment.

I would also like to acknowledge Rachel McLaren for letting me assist in her research study and obtain the results for my thesis. It was undoubtedly an enriching experience.

Thanks to my parents for their unconditional love, support, and guidance. Their thoughts and opinions push me to defy my limits and become a better person. They are my role models and the source of my inspiration.

Finally, I have to thank my brothers for always making me feel special and safe. I would not be the same person without them.

## **RATIONALE**

As sensitive human beings, one of the feelings that is constantly present in our lives is hurt. Previous research shows that hurt is present in almost every romantic relationship (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). Hurt arises as a response to feeling emotionally injured by someone important or cared for. Hurt is located somewhere between the feelings of anger and guilt, because, even though it involves internal feelings of self, the feelings are caused by an external cause or individual (Vangelisti 1994). Hurt is usually seen as a result of actions or words that cause negative feelings or violate a person's expectations (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006).

Research studies have found that hurt has many documented negative effects on individuals. One of these effects is deterioration of the victim's self acceptance (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). The message sent by the perpetrator can manage to destroy an individual's perception of him or herself due to its strength and rejection level. Additionally, fear is considered to be another long term effect of hurt (Vangelisti, 1994). After such hurtful events, relational quality is more likely to decrease in romantic relationships (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Hurt has long term effects, even though individuals experience a unique reaction to hurt according to a particular situation.

Communication is subjective and experiences are affected by time. The fact that human beings communicate allows individuals to be able to relate with one another. We communicate with ourselves, family, romantic partners, friends, acquaintances and strangers. Romantic partners, specifically, are exposed to different perceptions of communication that are constantly altered by time. Subjectivity in the perception of events many times causes conflict within relationships. Managing interpersonal conflict is defined and molded by the couple's perception of the severity of the problem (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009). Time

affects the perception of communication, and therefore the perception of a conflict and feelings of hurt that arise as a consequence. However, how perceptions of hurt change over time remains unknown.

The goal of this thesis is to show how perceptions of communication are affected by time. The effects of time will be studied in the context of hurt due to the fact that hurt is consequential. This chapter advances this goal by examining the triggering events that cause hurt and the factors that affect the intensity of hurt in romantic relationships.

### Triggering Events that Cause Hurt

Hurt can be caused by a series of events, actions, attitudes, or even comments. Romantic partners engage in multiple types of interpersonal communication on a daily basis. Couples also spend a great amount of time together. As a consequence they experience a strong level of interdependence with one another. Many opportunities for hurt exist within romantic couples due to a combination of these two aspects: the great amount of time spent between romantic partners and the high level of interdependence between one another. Three of the main triggering events that cause hurt, ordered from specific to general, are hurtful messages, experiences of aggression, and infidelity.

#### *Hurtful Messages*

A hurtful message is the information that a sender discloses, either verbally or nonverbally, which, purposely or by accident, results in making the recipient feel and experience hurt. These messages can be very direct or ambiguous; what determines their degree of hurtfulness is the recipient's interpretation. There are a variety of degrees of hurtfulness a message can have, depending on a number of variables. Intentionality, for example, increases the degree of hurtfulness of a message (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). If an individual delivers a

message with the intention to hurt his or her partner, the victim will experience a high degree of hurt. The content of the message is an extremely important variable of hurtful messages. When the victim considers a message to be face threatening, attacking, or insulting, it is likely for the message to result as very hurtful. As reviewed in the paragraphs that follow, different scholars have created typologies of hurtful messages and studied their effects on romantic partners.

Anita Vangelisti studied the social interactions that people define as hurtful. She identified different categories of messages that cause hurt, including accusation, evaluation, directive, advice, express desire, inform, question, threat, joke, and lie. Messages are more hurtful when they are informative and transmitted within a romantic relationship (Vangelisti, 1994). This can be explained by the fact that informative messages can go against an individual's expectations and might be difficult to repair, causing a greater amount of hurt. Relational issues are more likely to create greater feelings of hurt due to the interdependence between the victim and the perpetrator. Finally, it was found that negative messages ("I don't love you anymore") tend to be more hurtful than accusations ("You are a spoiled brat") made by a romantic partner.

Leary studied the effects that hurtful events have on individuals. He, together with a team of researchers, proposed six categories of hurtful events: active disassociation, passive disassociation, betrayal, teasing, criticism, and feeling unappreciated (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). These categories are based on the ideology that the perception of relational devaluation is the key aspect that is present in every hurtful event. Indeed, through his study he found that "the magnitude of victims' hurt feelings correlated highly with the degree to which they felt that the perpetrator accepted versus rejected them" (Leary et. al., 1998, p.1233). Even though these six categories of hurtful events create similar effects within a relationship,

criticism was the category most mentioned as a cause of hurtful feelings. Serious consequences for the relationship were found, leaving aside the category for which the hurtful message belonged.

Feeney, Hill, and Manusov (2006) argued that hurt is often created as a result of “events in which one partner disregards the other’s needs” (Feeney et al., 2006, p. 588). They agreed with the typology made by Leary, with two exceptions. First, they believed that teasing is not necessarily a type of hurtful event. Many relationships use teasing as a way of increasing relational closeness and intimacy (Feeney, 2004). Second, they argued that feeling unappreciated should not be included as a category due to the fact that this involves “the victim’s thoughts and feelings rather than the offender’s behavior” (Feeney, 2004, p.489). According to Feeney there are five type of hurt: active disassociation, passive disassociation, criticism, deception, and infidelity. Through her study she found that infidelity is considered the most hurtful event by most individuals. Similar to Leary’s findings, Feeney found that hurtful events damaged the relationship regardless of the type event that caused hurt.

A number of events can cause individuals to feel hurt. Even though many people do not realize it, words can be one of the most powerful instruments when it comes to hurting another individual. The amount of hurt created in a situation varies according to the context and type of relationship. Romantic couples tend to feel higher degrees of hurt due to the fact that they have certain expectations for their partner’s behaviors. Even though there are different types of messages that cause hurt, it is evident that this feeling is created as a result of rejection coming from a person an individual cares for. It is important to be aware that there are different typologies of hurt and that, even though they create different intensities of hurt, they all have a negative consequence within the relationship.

### *Aggression and Hurt*

Aggression is an offensive action or message used in order to dominate through force. As communicative individuals, people are constantly exposed to aggressive behaviors or messages from other members of society. Interpersonal relationships are also characterized by the potential for aggression. Indeed, aggression marks one of the most common aspects of human communication, even though it is not always taken as seriously as it should be (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). Aggression is considered one of the most harmful ways to hurt a person (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). Aggression can be expressed either verbally or physically, both of which can produce permanent damage in personal relationships.

Verbal aggression has to do with the act of transmitting aggressive messages through the channel of words rather than actions. It is defined as a “message behavior that attacks an individual’s self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain” (Myers & Bryant, 2008). Verbal aggression does not always have to occur in a face to face interaction between individuals, it can take place through indirect channels, as in the case of gossip and rumors (Coyne et al., 2006). Verbal relational aggression has to do with breaking up with a romantic partner through insults and aggressive language. Finally, humiliating an individual in public, by calling names or being rude, can result in verbal social aggression. There is some overlap between these categories, and their effect on the victims’ emotions is equally strong.

In a study of physical aggression it was found that “almost 50% of the women surveyed reported at least one experience of physical aggression in intimate relationships during adolescence” (White & Smith, 2009, p.25). Physical aggression occurs when an individual attacks another person using force through their body. Physical aggression can also be indirect, relational, and social; and, as is the case of verbal aggression, not many differences are found

between these categories. Destroying property behind an individual's back, hitting or punching a romantic partner, and destroying property in front of the victim, are examples of each type of physical aggression respectively.

It is a fact that aggression is one of the main causes of hurt. Individuals do not like to be victims of aggression, and therefore feel threatened or insulted when people who are close to them act aggressively. Many people believe that physical aggression can result more hurtful than emotional aggression; however, this generalization cannot be made. As is the case of many interpersonal communication encounters, the degree of hurt caused by physical and verbal aggression depends on different variables such as the context of the situation, intentionality, relational closeness, and so on (White & Smith, 2009). Not only can verbal and physical aggression hurt an individual, it can cause a permanent damage in the relationship.

### *Infidelity and Hurt*

Infidelity has been defined as “a partner's violation of norms regulating the level of emotional or physical intimacy with people outside the relationship” (Drigotas, & Barta, 2001, p.177). Being unfaithful is one of the most controversial actions that can occur within a romantic relationship. It is also a common occurrence within romances and marriages. In a study done by Kinsey, according to Drigotas and Barta, 36% of the male participants and 25% of the female participants reported to have been unfaithful to their partner throughout their marriage (Drigotas, & Barta, 2001). An increasing amount of research is being conducted on this topic due to its complexity and controversy. Scholars have found that there are two types of infidelity: sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity.

Sexual infidelity has to do with engaging in unfaithful behavior through sexual actions. This type of infidelity extends from actions ranging from kissing to engaging in sexual

intercourse with an individual who is not the perpetrator's romantic partner. Previous studies have proven that men are more likely to engage in sexual rather than emotional infidelity. This is manifested in the finding that "a male's infidelity is more likely than a female's to be a 'one night stand', to involve someone of limited acquaintance" (Drigotas, & Barta, 2001, p.177). In addition, males take sexual infidelity much more seriously than emotional infidelity, and are willing to take stronger measures, such as divorce, when their partner's unfaithfulness is within the sexual category. Even though findings reflect that men are more likely to engage in sexual infidelity, and are likely to react with higher negativity, sexual infidelity is one of the strongest causes of hurt in a romantic relationship, no matter the gender of the individuals (Kimeldorf, 2009).

Emotional infidelity occurs when a person develops affection for, or feels emotionally attached to another individual. Behaviors within this type of infidelity range from fantasizing with a person, other than the current romantic partner, to actually falling in love. In contrast to the case of sexual infidelity, women, compared to men, are more likely to experience a more negative reaction as a response to emotional infidelity. One of the reasons why women are more likely to consider an act as emotional infidelity is that they "have broader criteria for their definition of infidelity" (Drigotas, & Barta, 2001, p.177). Therefore, females might consider flirting as an act of emotional unfaithfulness, whereas males might believe they have not done anything wrong. Even though emotional infidelity does not include sexual activities, it can cause great damage to a romantic relationship.

As mentioned previously, infidelity is found to be one of the greatest sources of hurt within a romantic relationship. Being unfaithful, in most cases, does not only create hurt within the victim, but also within the perpetrator. While the victim feels betrayed, the perpetrator

develops a feeling of guilt, which eventually becomes hurtful for the individual. Infidelity is also likely to create permanent damage to the relationship. It is interesting to analyze the gender differences in reactions to the different categories of infidelity. Males, in general, tend to take more seriously the sexual aspect of the relationship, whereas women care more about the emotions. Nevertheless, both sexual and emotional infidelity create a great amount of hurt in both males and females.

Hurt is an emotion that frequently appears in romantic relationships. As previously analyzed, the main triggering events that create hurt within relationships are hurtful messages, aggression, and infidelity. Even though these events might have different consequences within the relationship, they are all considered important causes of hurt. It is interesting to see how even though each individual differs with the way in which he reacts to a variety of situations, the final consequence of acts such as sending hurtful messages, being aggressive, or being unfaithful, have a common consequence, which is creating hurt among individuals.

#### Factors that Affect the Intensity of Hurt

Hurt is an emotion that can be caused by a number of situations. As mentioned previously, different individuals might react in distinct manners to numerous situations; some might experience hurt, while others might develop different reactions. Within the individuals who react by feeling hurt, disparities in the intensity of hurt felt arise. These distinctions of intensity occur as a result of a number of factors. The three main factors that affect the intensity of hurt, ordered from external social context to the message specifics, are relational closeness, honesty, and intentionality.

### *Relational Closeness*

In general, relational closeness can be defined as the degree to which two or more individuals feel proximity towards one another according to their level of familiarity, intimacy, understanding, or confidence. A number of scholars have developed scales that measure closeness in order to operationalize this variable and compare results obtained from different participants (Agnew, Loving, Le, & Goodfriend, 2004). Additionally, scholars have identified two types of relational closeness, emotional closeness and geographic closeness. Relational closeness is also measured according to the relationship type of individuals, such that people typically feel closest to family members and romantic partners, followed by friends, and ending with acquaintances. Previous research has found that hurtful messages differ in intensity according to the type of relationship between or among the individuals involved in the interaction (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

The intensity of hurt that a hurtful message can create varies according to the context and type of the relationship. More specifically, hurtful messages that come from individuals to whom the victim feels close provoke greater hurt than those that are delivered by individuals who are just acquaintances (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Participants of research studies have identified romantic partners and family members to be the individuals they feel closest to. Therefore, it should be expected that hurtful messages coming from these individuals have the greatest degree of intensity (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). People care about what people to whom they feel close to think or have to say. It makes complete sense for individuals to feel a higher intensity of hurt if a hurtful message comes from a romantic partner, than if it comes from a stranger or someone considered an acquaintance. Intensity of hurt is at its highest when the message is delivered by a romantic partner. This intensity decreases when the hurtful message is

delivered by a family member but is still higher than if the message is delivered by an individual who is not considered family or a romantic partner (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

A link between relational closeness and experiences of hurt is also implied by work on relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty is the degree of confidence individuals have about the involvement within an interpersonal relationship (Theiss et al., 2009). A study by Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, and Magsamen-Conrad (2009) found that relational uncertainty was associated with more negative emotions, including a higher degree of hurt. Through this study, it was found that relational uncertainty is positively related to intensity of hurt (Theiss et al., 2009), such that individuals who reported a high degree of relational uncertainty also reported a high level of intensity of hurt. These findings show how relational uncertainty affects the severity of hurt perceived within a couple as a result of a hurtful message.

Summing up, relational closeness is identified as one of the factors that affect the intensity of hurt. Relational closeness varies according to the type of relationship that two individuals have. Research has shown that individuals consider their romantic partners their closest relationship, followed by family members, and ending with friends and acquaintances (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). The intensity of a hurtful message varies according to who the sender of the message was and within what category of relationship type he or she fits in. In particular, a message will have the greatest level of intensity if it is sent by an individual to whom the victim feels close.

### *Honesty*

Honesty is a value that most individuals hope for in their important, if not all, relationships. What does it really mean to be honest? Honesty is accompanied by truthfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness. Being honest in a romantic relationship means saying, thinking

and doing what one truly feels, without varying or disguising any emotion or idea. Studies have focused on the way in which individuals react to honest but hurtful evaluative messages. The intensity of hurt created by these messages varies according to the amount of face threat that these messages evoke, and the level of the victim's self-esteem (Zhang, 2005).

One of the main reasons why honest but hurtful evaluative messages cause hurt in a relationship is the fact that they can be considered a threat to face. When an individual shares an evaluative message that is hurtful for the victim, his self-image is threatened. There is a direct relationship between the amount of face-threat created by the message and the intensity of hurt that is formed within the individual (Zhang, 2005). Individuals who believe that their partners are being completely honest and truthful through their messages experience a greater amount of face threat, leading to a higher intensity of hurt.

An important aspect that can have an impact in the intensity of hurt that these types of messages can create is the victim's level of self-esteem. Hurt arises as a reaction of an individual when he feels rejected or not valued by his partner. Also, the fact that not all individuals react explicitly to hurtful messages creates internal conflict within the victims, causing a deterioration of their self acceptance (Zhang, 2005). The intensity of hurt of an honest but hurtful evaluative message is inversely related to the level of the victim's self-esteem. When an individual has a high self-esteem, these honest but hurtful evaluative messages do not have as much of an effect as they do when the individual experiences a low level of self-esteem. This makes individuals who have a low self-esteem level experience greater intensity of hurt as a result of honest but hurtful evaluative messages.

Individuals like to have honest relationships. However, when this honesty involves hurtful messages that threaten the individual's face and alter their level of self-esteem, victims

might prefer to elude the truth in order to avoid feeling hurt. The intensity of hurt of honest but hurtful evaluative messages has a positive relationship with the face-threat they create.

However, these messages have an inverse relationship with the level of self-esteem that the victim possesses. Even though individuals expect their partners to be honest, they do not like to be criticized, especially when this threatens their face or will damage their self-esteem.

Therefore, the intensity of hurt varies with the level of honesty of these messages according to the amount of face threat they create and the level of the victim's self-esteem.

### *Intentionality*

Whether the hurtful messages are perceived as intentional or not is another key factor that can influence their degree of hurt experienced (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Intentionality has to do with actions or words that individuals purposely create in order to send a message.

“Judgments of intentionality encompass evaluations of a person's responsibility for a certain action or behavior” (McLaren & Solomon, 2008, p.343). Human beings make mistakes, which can lead their romantic partners to feeling hurt. However, when the causes for these hurtful feelings are intentional, the degree of hurt experienced by the victim is a lot greater. It is assumed that when an individual sends a hurtful message intentionally, the final aim is to hurt the receiver of this message. If these behaviors come from a romantic partner, who is a person from whom an individual does not expect these types of attitudes, a great amount of hurt is created.

A number of studies have focused on intentionality and its effects on the distancing from a romantic partner who causes hurt, and the degree of hurt created within the victim of the message (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). It was found that perceived intentionality of a hurtful message was positively related to relational distancing. Also, intentionality was positively

related with destructive communication responses. Additionally, intentionality was found to be negatively related to forgiveness (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). When an individual who is a victim of a hurtful message sent by his or her romantic partner perceives that this message was sent intentionally, he or she reacts by distancing from the partner due to the amount of hurt experienced. Perceived intentionality has also been found to be positively related to the degree of hurt experienced by the victim. What creates hurt in these situations is not only the hurtful message itself, but the fact that the romantic partner sent this message purposely. This results in the victim feeling a great amount of hurt and deciding to take distance from the perpetrator.

It is clear that the perceived intentionality of a hurtful message has a direct effect on the amount of hurt that this message creates. Individuals in romantic relationships do not expect their partners to intentionally send hurtful messages in order to harm or hurt them. When these persons perceive that this has been their situation, they experience a great amount of hurt, which leads to relational distancing. It is also harder for a victim of a hurtful message to forgive his romantic partner, if this hurt was created intentionally. When there is intentionality involved in hurting a romantic partner, there is no incentive for the victim to forgive his partner; it actually results in the victim reacting through destructive communication responses (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). Generally, human beings do not want to be hurt by their romantic partners, therefore, when this happens, and when on top of everything it was intentional, a great amount of hurt is created.

Hurt is an emotion that is commonly present in romantic relationships and can be created by a variety of factors. Moreover, such factors also influence the intensity of hurt experienced by the victim of the hurtful messages. Some of the variables that have the greatest influence on the intensity of hurt as a result of a hurtful message are relational closeness, honesty, and

intentionality. The closer individuals feel to their partners, the higher the degree of hurt created after receiving a hurtful message. Furthermore, hurtful messages perceived to be honest create more hurt. Finally, the perceived intentionality of the hurtful message is positively related to the degree of hurt experienced by the victim.

#### The Effect of Time on Perceptions of Hurtful Interactions

Thus far, I have examined what causes hurt and factors that affect the subjective experience of hurt. Because hurt is subjective, perceptions of hurt can change as time passes; however, I know of no research that has explored how subjective experiences of hurt change throughout time. It is important to study the effect that time has on perceptions of hurt for two main reasons. First of all, the majority of communication studies that use the retrospective method mention that one of the main limitations of the study was the fact that they do not know the effect that time had in the participants' responses. Knowing the effect of time on perceptions of hurt will inform future studies that use the retrospective method. Most importantly, however, is the fact that perceptions of hurtful messages are very important within romantic relationships. Knowing the effect that time has on these messages provides couples with important views of their future. Summing up, the purpose of this study will not only serve for future research, but also to understand behaviors of our everyday life.

The passage of time after a hurtful message is likely to decrease an individual's perception of hurt. The passage of time allows people to resolve a hurtful message. With time, individuals can address misunderstandings, apologize, or give a more thorough account of the hurtful event and their reaction towards it (May & Jones, 2007). Therefore, I expect that the passage of time decreases the perception of hurt of a victim of a hurtful message.

As the emotional state that results from a hurtful message fades, attitudes about the views and perceptions in close high quality relationships exert a greater effect on perceptions.

Research show that the quality of a romantic relationship colors people's perceptions of a relationship partner's behavior (Priem, Solomon, & Steuber, 2009). In particular, people who value their relationship see events in a less negative and more positive light. Even though their partner might have said something hurtful, as time passes, a victim who values the relationship will see that event less negatively, which ends up decreasing hurt.

As time passes, gender scripts may also influence reports of hurt. In society, men are not expected to talk about their feelings, about how hurt they felt in a particular situation, and therefore, their reports of hurt will be fewer and less strong than in the case of women. Men are also not expected to hold on to their feelings; therefore, it is expected for hurt to decrease with time when it comes to male reports (Mosher, 1991).

This reasoning leads me to the following three hypotheses:

H1: Time has an inverse relationship with the intensity of hurt perceived by a victim of a hurtful message within a romantic relationship.

H2: The association in H1 is greater when relational quality is high, rather than low.

H3: The association in H1 is greater for males than females.

## **METHOD**

### *Sample*

Individuals from communication classes at a large eastern university were asked to sign up for the study. Participants had to be at least 18 years old and were required to have a dating partner they could bring to the laboratory for the study. Both, participants and their partners

were required to complete daily diaries for 14 consecutive days before coming to the laboratory. In order to make sure participants would complete their diaries they were paid \$20 each.

### *Diary Procedures*

To confirm the participation of the couple in the study, each individual was sent a link to an online survey that asked for information about the relationship. After the completion of this questionnaire, participants received a link to a new survey for the following 14 days. These questionnaires asked individuals to recall any events in which their partner had said something that hurt them that day.

The first part of the daily survey asked participants to report any time in which their partner had said something that hurt their feelings that day. If they reported an event, they were then asked to answer follow up questions regarding the occurrence they mentioned. If they did not have a hurtful incident to report for that day, they did not have to answer the follow up questions. From the entire sample, 18 individuals did not report any event in which they were victims of hurtful messages. The remaining participants reported a total of 98 accounts in which they were the victims of a hurtful message during the previous 14 days. The number of victim accounts of hurt reported per person ranged from 1 – 6 ( $M = 2$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ,  $Mode = 1$ ).

On the fourteenth day, after filling their daily diaries, participants were asked to respond to the initial survey that asked them about their relationship characteristics.

### *Lab Procedures*

When the participating couple arrived at the lab they were separated into two different rooms. The researcher explained that two of the events they wrote in their diaries were going to be chosen as topics for them to respond additional survey questions (one from each member of the dyad). The researcher provided each participant with five or six entries that were randomly

chosen from their diaries and were asked to set aside any entry they did not feel comfortable discussing with their partner. The researcher then randomly chose one of the entries for each participant, which would be the topics for the questions of the following survey. The survey asked about the event chosen in which the participant was the victim of a hurtful event.

### *Measures*

The measures relevant to this study are assessments of events that were reported in both the diary and lab portions of the study. These include relational quality, intensity of hurt, and intentionality.

*Relational quality.* This measure focused on the participants' perceptions of the quality of their relationship. Eight items that focused in relational quality were averaged (pre-diary:  $M = 5.96$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ; post-diary:  $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

*Intensity of hurt.* Participants responded to items about the intensity of hurt experienced (1 = *not at all hurtful*, 7 = *extremely hurtful*), how much emotional pain the event caused (1 = *no emotional pain*, 7 = *intense emotional pain*), how hurt the event made them feel overall (1 = *not at all hurt*, 7 = *extremely hurt*), and the extent to which they agreed the event made them feel hurt (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The first three items were converted to their corresponding number on a 5-point scale. Then, the four items were averaged. The mean rating for the victim's intensity of hurt obtained from the daily diaries was 3.83 ( $SD = 1.74$ ). The average of the four items formed a scale of the intensity of hurt for the victims' perspective ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = 0.89$ ) during the lab portion of the study. The items regarded the individual's experience as a victim of hurt.

*Intentionality.* Participants responded to items indicating their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with three statements about the intentionality of their

partner's message. Additionally, they indicated the extent to which they believed their partner was intentionally hurtful (1 = *not intentional*, 5 = *extremely intentional*). The mean rating for the victim's intentionality obtained from the daily diaries was 2.60 (SD = 1.82). Four items were averaged to form a scale for the victims' perceptions of the perpetrator's intentionality ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ) during the lab portion of the study.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Before testing my hypotheses, I carried out a number of preliminary analyses to examine connections between the descriptive variables and to test for gender differences. Individuals reporting on experiences as victims of hurt were the unit of analysis. The results of these preliminary analyses show general patterns found in the dataset.

First, I assessed gender differences in the association between the levels of hurt the victims felt in the lab, and hurt reported in their diaries. Males had a correlation of  $r = 0.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and for females,  $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Both correlations are statistically significant.

I then analyzed gender differences in the correlations between intentionality of the hurtful message reported by the victim in the lab, and intentionality reported in the daily diaries. In this case, males had a correlation of  $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and for females,  $r = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . As in the case of hurt, the difference between these correlations is not substantial, but both correlations are statistically significant.

I continued by comparing correlations between the intentionality of the hurtful message and the level of hurt reported by the victims in their daily diaries for males and females. Results showed that neither correlation was statistically significant (males:  $r = 0.44$ , *ns*; females:  $r = 0.44$ , *ns*).

Finally, I examined gender differences in the correlations between the intentionality of the hurtful message and the level of hurt reported by the victims in the lab. Results showed that there is a lower correlation for males ( $r = 0.27, ns$ ) than for females ( $r = 0.41, p < 0.05$ ). In this case, the correlation was statistically significant for females but not for males.

I then gathered information about the relational quality measure ( $M = 5.91, SD = 1.10$ ). Following this, I divided the sample into people with relationship quality scores above and below the mean value (to reflect high vs. low relational quality). I continued by testing the differences between high and low relational quality groups on the four dependent variables.

I analyzed the correlation between the degree of hurt reflected in the diaries and the degree reflected during the lab, according to the relational quality. Individuals with low relational quality showed a lower correlation ( $r = 0.53, p < 0.05$ ) than individuals with high relational quality ( $r = 0.70, p < 0.001$ ). Both correlations are statistically significant.

When analyzing the correlation between the level of intentionality perceived in the diaries compared to the level perceived in the lab, individuals with low relational quality had a higher correlation ( $r = 0.63, p < 0.05$ ), than individuals with high relational quality ( $r = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ).

### *Substantive Analyses*

Recall that H1 predicted that time had an inverse relationship with a victim's intensity of hurt as a result of a hurtful message sent by his or her romantic partner. I ran a paired sample t-test that compared the differences in the amount of perceived hurt expressed in the diaries ( $M = 2.87, SD = 1.12$ ) and in the lab ( $M = 2.87, SD = 0.88$ ). These results did not show statistical significance. I then compared the differences in the perceptions of intentionality

expressed in the diaries ( $M = 1.92, SD = 1.28$ ) and in the lab ( $M = 1.83, SD = 0.91$ ). These results did not show statistical significance as well; therefore H1 is not supported.

I tested H2 by running a paired t-test on the dependent variables for each relational quality group. I then ran a paired t-test that tested H1 for low and high relational quality groups. For perceptions of hurt by individuals that reported low relational quality, there was no significant difference between hurt reported in the lab ( $M = 3.20, SD = 0.79$ ) and the diaries ( $M = 3.38, SD = 0.83$ ),  $t = -0.90, p > 0.05$ . For individuals with high relational quality, there were also no differences between hurt reported in the lab ( $M = 2.7, SD = 0.89$ ) and in the diaries ( $M = 2.60, SD = 1.17$ ),  $t = 0.58, p > 0.05$ . I repeated this analysis comparing the differences in perceptions of intentionality. Individuals with low relational quality did not differ in their perceptions of intentionality reported in the lab ( $M = 2.00, SD = 0.76$ ) and in their diaries ( $M = 2.1, SD = 1.34$ ),  $t = -0.35, p > 0.05$ . Individuals with high relational quality also did not differ in perceptions of intentionality reported in the lab ( $M = 1.74, SD = 0.97$ ) and diaries ( $M = 1.83, SD = 1.27$ ),  $t = -0.48, p > 0.05$ . Based on these results H2 is not supported.

Finally, I tested H3 by doing a paired t-test comparing the dependent variables for males and females. I compared the degree of hurt that males expressed during the diaries ( $M = 2.5, SD = 1.16$ ) with what was expressed during the lab ( $M = 2.52, SD = 0.77$ ),  $t = 0.13, p > 0.05$ . I did the same comparison for females, comparing the degree of hurt expressed in the diaries ( $M = 3.13, SD = 0.1.03$ ) compared to the lab ( $M = 3.11, SD = 0.89$ ),  $t = -0.14, p > 0.05$ . Similarly, I analyzed the perception of intentionality of the message as the dependent variable. Males did not differ significantly in their reported perceived intentionality during the diaries ( $M = 2.22, SD = 1.30$ ) and in the lab ( $M = 2.21, SD = 1.06$ ),  $t = -0.03, p > 0.05$ . Similarly, females did not differ in the perceived intentionality reported in the diaries ( $M = 1.70, SD = 1.25$ ) compared to what

they expressed in the lab ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),  $t = -0.79$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Since in both cases, when comparing the degree of hurt and the perceptions of intentionality expressed in the lab and in the diaries, the results were not statistically significant, H3 is not supported.

### Discussion

My goal was to see how perceptions of hurt are affected by the passage of time, if affected at all, in romantic relationships. Specifically, I predicted that the passage of time would decrease the amount of hurt felt by an individual in a romantic relationship (H1), since it would allow the couple to talk things over and find forgiveness. However, this hypothesis was not supported in that there was no statistical significance found in any of the tests. Therefore, the passage of time is not necessarily an opportunity for a couple to work through their issues.

I also predicted that the association in H1 would be greater in couples with a high relational quality, rather than low (H2). I felt that since individuals are in a relationship voluntarily, it means that they want to be in the relationship and fight for it to develop. I expected that for couples that value their relationship, the passage of time would serve as an opportunity to solve their difficulties more than it would to couples with low relational quality. H2 was also unsupported. In fact, I found that individuals with low relational quality had a lower correlation between the degrees of hurt expressed in the diaries than in the lab, compared to individuals with high relational quality. This means that there was a greater change in the responses made by individuals with low relational quality, rather than individuals with high relational quality. However, individuals with high relational quality showed a lower correlation between the levels of intentionality perceived in the diaries compared to the lab, than individuals with low relational quality. Therefore, individuals with high relational quality showed a greater variation in their perceptions of how intentional the hurtful message was.

Finally, I hypothesized that the association in H1 would be greater for males than for females (H3), due to gender scripts and the fact that males are not expected to talk about their feelings and hold on to hurtful feelings developed in the past. However, this hypothesis was not supported. I found, through correlation analyses, that males showed a greater correlation between degrees of hurt expressed in the lab and reported in the diaries, than females. Yet the correlation between the perceived intentionality in the lab compared to the diaries was almost the same for males and females. It is interesting to see how males' responses towards the degree of hurtfulness of a message varied less with the passage of time than females' responses.

These results can be related to the initial idea that individuals are subjective. Different people might require varying amounts of time to solve an argument. Also, the fact that each individual has a different perception of how hurtful a message is influences the results obtained. Time could have a great effect in some couples, whereas no effect whatsoever in other couples. The fact that we are subjective human beings means that the degree of hurt experienced after a hurtful message from a romantic partner can vary according to each situation, to the place, the individual's state of mind at the moment of the event, and so on. Although this study did not find either relational quality or gender to explain changes in perceptions over time, other research may identify relational, contextual, or personal qualities that shed light on the subjective experience of hurt.

Through this thesis I have proven that perceptions of hurt and intentionality of a message between romantic partners do not vary within a two-week period. Participants showed that their initial perception of the hurtful message stayed somewhat constant from the day of the hurtful message until the day they came to the lab. Therefore, initial evaluations of intensity of hurt and intentionality would seem to be really important.

An important limitation of this study is the fact that I analyzed changes on perceptions of hurt within two weeks. This could be considered a short period of time for an individual's perception of hurt to change. Within two weeks of being a victim of a hurtful message, feelings of hurt may still be fresh and unresolved. Consequently, there is a possibility that the effects predicted might require more time to occur.

These findings are useful for future studies that use the retrospective method in the sense that I have proven that perceptions of hurt and intentionality of a message do not vary within two weeks. Therefore, researchers interested in hurtful messages will now know that within a two-week range period the perception of a message will be the same. Since many communication studies rely on the retrospective method, knowing this finding will be very helpful.

Even though none of my hypotheses were supported through this study, interesting findings were discovered that could serve as milestones for further research investigating how relational quality and gender differences influence how an individual's perception of hurt differs when the event is addressed verbally or through a written medium.

## References

- Agnew, C. R., Loving, T. J., Le, B., & Goodfriend, W. (2004). Thinking close: Measuring relational closeness as perceived self-other inclusion. *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, 103-115.
- Bachman, G. F., & Guerrero, L. K. (2006). Relational quality and communicative responses following hurtful events in dating relationships: An expectancy violations analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23, 943-963.
- Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). "We're not friends anymore! Unless...": The frequency and harmfulness of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32, 294-307.
- Drigotas, S. M., & Barta, W. (2001). The cheating heart: Scientific exploration of infidelity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 10, 177-180.
- Feeney, J. A. (2004). Hurt feelings in couple relationships: Towards integrative models of the negative effects of hurtful events. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 487-508.
- Feeney, J. A., Hill, A., & Manusov, V. (2006). Victim-perpetrator differences in reports of hurtful events. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23, 587-608.
- Infante, D. A., Myers, S. A., & Buerkel, R. A. (1994). Argument and verbal aggression in constructive and destructive family and organizational disagreements. *Western Journal of Communication*, 58, 73-84.
- Kimeldorf, M. (2009). Reactions to infidelity: Individual, gender, and situational predictors of relationship outcome and forgiveness. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 69, 4427.

- Leary, M. R., Springer, C., Negel, L., Ansell, E. & Evans, K. (1998). The causes, phenomenology, and consequences of hurt feelings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1225-1237.
- May, L. N., & Jones, W. H. (2007). Does hurt linger? Exploring the nature of hurt feelings over time. *Current Psychology*, 25, 245-256.
- McLaren, R. M., & Solomon, D. H. (2008). Appraisals and distancing responses to hurtful messages. *Communication Research*, 35, 339-357.
- Mosher, D. L. (1991). Macho men, machismo, and sexuality. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 2, 199-247.
- Myers, S. A. & Bryant, L. E. (2008). The use of behavioral indicators of sibling commitment among emerging adults. *Journal of Family Communication*, 8, 121-125.
- Priem, J. S., Solomon, D. H., & Steuber, K. R. (2009). Accuracy and bias in perceptions of emotionally supportive communication in marriage. *Personal Relationships*, 16, 531-552.
- Theiss, J., Knobloch, L., Checton, M., & Magsamen-Conrad, K. (2009). Relationship characteristics associated with the experience of hurt in romantic relationships: A test of the relational turbulence model. *Human Communication Research*, 35, 588-615.
- Vangelisti, A. L. (1994). Messages that hurt. *The dark side of interpersonal communication*. 53-82.
- Vangelisti, A. L. & Crumley, L. P. (1998). Reactions to messages that hurt: The influence of relational contexts. *Communication Monographs*, 65, 173-196.

- Vangelisti, A. L. & Young, S. L. (2000). When words hurt: The effect of perceived intentionality on interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17, 393-424.
- White, J. W. & Smith, P. H. (2009). Covariation in the use of physical and sexual intimate partner aggression among adolescent and college-age men. *Violence Against Women*, 15, 24-43.
- Zhang, S. (2005). Is honesty the best policy? Honest but hurtful evaluative messages in romantic relationships. *Humanities and Social Sciences*, 66.
- Zhang, S. & Stafford, L. (2008). Perceived face threat of honest but hurtful evaluative messages in romantic relationships. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 72, 19-39.

## ACADEMIC VITA

---

### CAROLINA A. BETTER ROMERO

---

501 Vairo Blvd. Apt. 1621  
 State College, PA 16803  
 Cell Phone – (814)441-0831  
 E-mail - cab5178@psu.edu

#### EDUCATION:

##### **The Pennsylvania State University**

Bachelor of Arts, Communication Arts and Sciences

Bachelor of Arts, Economics

Scholar of the Schreyer Honors College

**University Park**

Class of May. 2010

#### RELEVANT EXPERIENCE:

##### **The Pennsylvania State University**

Research Assistant

- Worked in a team lead by Dr. Denise Solomon in a research that focused on hurtful communication in romantic relationships
- Gathered data about hurtful messages from different romantic partners
- Contributed on coding the different results based on different hurtful levels

**University Park**

Fall 2007-Spring 2008

#### ACADEMIC RECOGNITIONS

- Dean's list (Fall 2006, Spring 2007, Fall 2007, Spring 2008, Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Fall 2009)
- Scholar of Penn State's Schreyer Honors College
- Member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars

#### LANGUAGE SKILLS

- Fluent in English and Spanish; proficient in Hebrew