

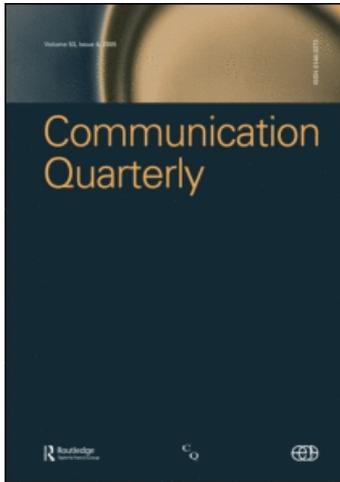
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Communication Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713721778>

Repairing Hurtful Messages in Marital Relationships

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2009

To cite this Article Dunleavy, Katie Neary, Goodboy, Alan K., Booth-Butterfield, Melanie, Sidelinger, Robert J. and Banfield, Sara(2009)'Repairing Hurtful Messages in Marital Relationships',Communication Quarterly,57:1,67 — 84

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01463370802664701

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01463370802664701>

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Repairing Hurtful Messages in Marital Relationships

Katie Neary Dunleavy, Alan K. Goodboy,
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Sara Banfield

The effects of hurtful messages and accompanying repair strategies in interpersonal relationships have been noted individually; however, research has not investigated the relation of these two constructs in tandem. This study uses an attributional framework to examine use and the effectiveness of repair strategies with varying hurtful messages. Responses from 237 married adults indicated the justification repair strategy was used most often. The repair strategy of silence was perceived as the least effective. Informative messages were perceived as the most hurtful. Sources' intent and relational satisfaction were not significantly related to specific hurtful messages or subsequent repair strategies.

Keywords: Hurtful Messages; Relational Satisfaction; Repair Strategies

Romantic partners have the potential both to build and destroy their relationship via communication. Although intuitively many partners understand the importance of prosocial communication in marital relationships (Ragsdale, 1996), some partners may engage in intentional episodes of verbal battery (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Previous research has examined messages that hurt (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005; Young &

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Bippus, 2001), but less attention has been directed at strategies used to effectively repair such messages. The purpose of this study is to understand how marital partners attempt to repair relationships after hurtful messages occur. Using an attributional framework, we assess encoding of hurtful messages, perceived effectiveness of repair strategies relative to each message, and consider the impact of relational satisfaction and conflict style. We begin with a description of what is a “hurtful message.”

Hurtful Messages

Hurtful messages commonly occur in romantic relationships; however, few research studies have focused on this destructive form of communication or the means to remediation. Considering the relational damage that may result from odious speech acts (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992) and the negative perceptions that are formed (Myers & Johnson, 2003), such episodes should be avoided when possible. The destructiveness of hurtful messages is evident in the verbal aggression literature (Wigley, 1998), as well as noted physical, emotional, and relational detriments (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newson, 2001; Newson, Mahan, Rook, & Krause, 2008).

Hurtful messages represent a wide array of speech acts that hurt receivers' feelings. Vangelisti (1994) proposed a typology of hurtful messages in which over 96% were codable within the categories of *accusation*, *evaluation*, *directive*, *advise*, *express desire*, *inform*, *question*, *threat*, *joke*, and *lie*.¹ Using that typology, Vangelisti (1994, p. 61) discovered that the most common types of hurtful messages include accusations, evaluations, and informative messages, with the latter, straightforward declarations of fact, perceived as the most hurtful (e.g., “Well, I’m really attracted to someone else,” and “You aren’t a priority in my life”).

More recent research has addressed receivers' reactions to hurtful messages. Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) conducted two studies that assessed both (a) the range and dimensions of responses to hurtful messages and (b) the relation between reactions to hurtful messages and relationship quality across types of relationships. Results suggested that individuals react to hurtful messages in three primary ways: active verbal (e.g., attacking back or defending oneself), acquiescent (e.g., crying or apologizing), and invulnerable responses (e.g., silence or ignoring). Individuals who were extremely hurt tended to react more by acquiescing, whereas individuals who perceived less hurt reacted with invulnerability. Other researchers (Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chavez-Appel, & Rex, 2005) found that familial hurtful messages were also painful, with some similarities in response type, although Vangelisti and Crumley indicated that romantic partners cause the most intense hurt.

Attributional Processes

Even working with inevitably imperfect knowledge about interactions, we evaluate reasons for communication acts, and those resulting attributions that impact perceptions of partners and relational satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham &

Bradbury, 1993). As Noller (2006) pointed out, "it is not enough to observe a couple's behavior, we need also to understand the meaning of that behavior for the partners engaging in the interaction" (p. 773). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980) focuses on how individuals make sense of and interpret the causes of their own and others' behavior. A consistent finding is that external and benign attributions for negative partner behavior are associated with more satisfaction, whereas internal and negative attributions for misbehavior are linked with lower satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Indeed, in a longitudinal study of married couples, data pointed to a causal link between negative attributions and subsequent declines in satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993).

In addition, in interpreting our own behavior, we frequently exhibit a self-serving bias or defensive attributions (Kruglanski, 1996). We minimize or externalize our own shortcomings while making internal and intentional attributions for another's behavior. Thus, if we are the source of hurt for our partners, we might make an external attribution (i.e., we did not mean to make them cry). However, if we are the target of the hurtful message, we may be more likely to view it as intentional, making a more internal attribution of their behavior.

Further, when we attribute a communication behavior as "intentional" rather than unintended or accidental, it seems to have more power to hurt. For example, Young and Bippus (2001) found humorous hurtful messages were perceived as less intentional than non-humorous messages. Hurt feelings were less intense when the message was accompanied by humor. Hence, the specific form of hurtful messages can affect receivers' attributions and reactions.

Most recently, Vangelisti et al. (2005) examined the causes of hurt feelings, finding that relational satisfaction and self-esteem were primary predictors of feeling hurt (see also Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). More satisfied partners attributed messages differently, and reported less relational denigration. Similar results were revealed for self-esteem. Individuals with higher self-esteem viewed the hurtful message as more unexpected and less attributable to denigration. Thus, hurtful messages may be attributed differently and not as threatening to the person or relationship. Some of this response may be due to repair communication. There is scant research concerning the repair process transpiring after hurtful messages are communicated in marriages. Specifically, how do partners who are the source of the hurt seek to remediate what they have done?

Background on Repair Strategies

Repair in relationships has been conceptualized to occur when something goes awry, which requires correcting (Dindia & Baxter, 1987, p. 144). Davis (1973) first discussed repair strategies, and later empirical research found that repair depends on several factors, including the perceived seriousness of the damage (Benoit & Drew, 1997; Guerrero, Jones, & Burgoon, 2000) and the type of damage perceived (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Meyer & Rothenberg, 2004). The categories of repair-related strategies are numerous.

Relational repair and maintenance strategies were not examined as separate constructs in an early study, but did result in a general typology of 12 repair and maintenance strategies (e.g., meta-communication and antisocial messages; Dindia & Baxter, 1987), a typology closely resembling categories hypothesized by Davis (1973). For example, categories such as changing external environment, avoiding communication, and adhering to ceremonies were very similar to the seminal writing. Categories new to repair strategy research were communication strategies, prosocial categories, togetherness, and seeking autonomy.

Repair strategies may be unique, but communication acts have not typically been distinguished on their ability to maintain versus repair relationships. Dindia and Baxter (1987) suggested that partners may be less skilled at “repair” and fall back on their maintenance strategies instead.

Relationship reconciliation strategies have also been investigated for their association with repair tactics (Patterson & O’Hair, 1992). This research suggested that repair, maintenance, and reconciliation strategies may overlap, such that the same behaviors could be enacted to attain each of these goals. However, reconciliation strategies were found to be distinct in their structure. In addition, although there may be similar strategies for repairing and maintaining relationships, this does not suggest that all strategies will be equally effective for a particular goal. The relation between hurtful messages (a type of communication that could lead to the need for repair in a relationship) and the strategies used to minimize the effects of that specific hurtful message is important to the understanding of how repair strategies may function in marriages.

Repair may also be specific to certain aspects of the relationship such as image repair (Benoit & Drew, 1997), repair after a regrettable message (Meyer & Rothenberg, 2004), or verbal versus nonverbal repair (Guerrero et al., 2000). However, these research efforts have focused on restoration of positive face for one partner and less on the concern for the hurt partner, or the relationship.

Meyer and Rothenberg (2004) focused on a concept similar to hurt: regrettable messages. Eight categories of repair strategies compose this typology: *apology, excuse, justification, silence, offset harm, nonverbal reaction, change subject, and deny the offense*.² This final typology most closely resembles the repair strategies necessary to resolve the problems resulting from hurtful messages. Hurtful messages are one type of regrettable message; the difference being that a person could regret communicating a message without causing hurt, and thus regret may be less affectively involved.

Meyer and Rothenberg (2004) did examine repair strategies following regrettable messages linked to some emotions elicited from the message. For example, messages that evoked sadness were the most difficult to repair, and apologies and excuses were the most common repair strategies utilized with highly intimate partners. More important, the type of strategy employed to repair could also be tailored to, and dependent on, the type of hurtful message enacted. In addition, attributions of intentionality could influence whether the repair was perceived as effective. This study focuses on the relation between hurtful messages and how resulting damage may be repaired.

Three research questions are posited:

RQ1: Which repair strategies are used most frequently after hurtful messages are sent?

RQ2: To what extent are the repair strategies reported in RQ1 perceived as effective?

RQ3: Are repair strategies differential in their effectiveness when the hurtful message was intentionally sent?

Vangelisti (1994) found that informative messages tend to cause the most severe hurt, without having an avenue for remediation. "When informed of something, there are few arguments available for repair" (p. 64). Thus, one can defend against evaluations or accusations (e.g., "You are self-absorbed") because they offer instances for counterexamples, but factual, informative statements offer few opportunities for counterexamples (e.g., "I cheated on you"). The following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Informative messages will be perceived as the most hurtful.

Two additional variables appear to be significant predictors of message attributions: relationship satisfaction and conflict.

Relationship Satisfaction Linkage to Message and Response

Relationship satisfaction involves general happiness and contentment with the relationship's ongoing interactions. Thus, high satisfaction may act as a deterrent to hurtful relational messages or serve as a buffer if such messages do occur. Conversely, relational satisfaction could be diminished if hurtful messages are present (e.g., partners in happy relationships attribute hurtful messages as less stable and more situational).

Relational satisfaction has been examined from a variety of perspectives (Broman, 2002; Burleson & Denton, 1997; Norton, 1983; Spanier, 1976), but is most often conceived as a generalized atmosphere of contentment with the relationship, rather than discrete individual interactions (Fincham & Beach, 2006). Whether from specifics or more global orientations, it seems clear that the patterns of communicative enactments, including message choices, should be related to feelings of satisfaction in marital relationships.

Some researchers have examined communication components that can heighten satisfaction (e.g., Burleson & Denton, 1997; Honeycutt, 1999; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). One of these aspects is communication skill. Skills have been found to increase satisfaction in marriage among non-distressed couples (Burleson & Denton, 1997), and effective communication (potentially in repair) should help increase satisfaction. For instance, decoding skills are associated with both encoders' and decoders' relationship satisfaction (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), having potential impact by recognizing trouble cues early.

However, expressiveness skill is also related to marital satisfaction. Husbands' and wives' problems with expressive communication were negatively linked to both partners' marital satisfaction (Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). In a related vein, responsiveness

impacts relational satisfaction. Honeycutt (1999) found husbands' satisfaction was predicted by their partner's responsiveness. From a slightly different perspective, Xu and Burluson (2004) noted that active spousal emotional support predicts the strongest reports of marital satisfaction. In other words, if spouses are able to understand or relate to their partners' emotions, satisfaction is higher and hurt, no doubt, can be minimized.

Each of the aforementioned communication skills has been found to relate with marital satisfaction in predictable ways. More skilled partners have greater relationship satisfaction, and repairing transgressions may be a part of that skill set. Individuals who report more relationship satisfaction should also report using more effective repair messages.

A final area is how negative aspects, such as conflict, could influence both relational satisfaction and use of repair messages. Greeff and Bruyne (2000) found that collaborative conflict management style was associated with highest satisfaction, and competitive conflict management was associated with lowest marital satisfaction. Thus, if an individual does not assuage or repair the hurtful message, then relationship satisfaction may be reduced.

Conflict Patterns

Conflict, defined as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals" (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2001, p. 5), is important to view as a natural occurrence in any relationship (Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001). Nevertheless, although common, it can vary in severity, frequency, and outcome (Buss, 1989).

Conflict has the potential to enhance relationships. Well-managed conflict can promote the development of healthy relationships (Siegert & Stamp, 1994), offer positive relational growth (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996), and can lead to new forms of sharing, involvement, and problem resolution. When a conflict threatens a relationship, partners have an opportunity to learn how solid their connection is (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). All of these outcomes are less likely if partners engage in hurtful message exchanges during times of conflict.

Clearly, conflict can also harm a relationship when poorly handled. Fincham and Beach (1999) noted that conflict is negatively related to marital satisfaction, and has significant implications for individuals' mental well-being, physical health, and family outcomes. Husbands and wives are more likely to experience depression in distressing marriages than non-distressing marriages (Weissman, 1987); and, although conflict itself is not necessarily negative, how partners in conflict communicate makes it a potentially destructive experience (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002). Thus, conflict style should be examined here with hurt.

Destructive conflict can lead to less direct interaction, partner avoidance, feelings of resentment, and psychological pain (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Particularly harmful strategies include verbal hostility, defensiveness, withdrawal, insults, and greater displays of negative affect (Du Rocher-Schudlich, Papp, & Cummings, 2004), all

likely to be examples of hurtful interactions. Destructive conflict may spiral out of control, with one negative message eliciting a negative counter-response from the partner (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996). Yet, people who avoid conflict often disregard their own and their partners' needs (Kabanoff, 1987), with conflict festering and becoming more significant over time (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001). Other individuals may approach a conflict as a "win or lose" battle (Kabanoff, 1987), and when negative affect and actions spiral out of control, relational problems escalate (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Kline, Pleasant, Whitton, & Markman, 2006).

When considering outcomes of conflict, hurtful messages, and satisfaction, several attributional patterns could occur. Vangelisti et al. (2005) discovered that romantic partners reporting more relationship satisfaction felt secure and that their partner still cared for them, despite receiving a hurtful message (see also Young et al., 2005). However, it is also possible that partners who are very *dissatisfied* are less distressed by hurtful messages because of their very frequency (i.e., hurtful messages are not surprising or unexpected; Kruglanski, 1996). Desensitization effects occur. In contrast, partners who are extremely satisfied in their relationship may be more upset because they rarely experience negative conflict, and hurtful messages represent a violation of expectations. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ4: How is relationship satisfaction related to the severity of perceived hurt?

RQ5: How are conflict tactics related to the severity of perceived hurt?

Finally, it is important to examine such variables among adults in intact marriages. Although hurtfulness and repair of such messages are serious issues among undergraduate students, the group from which the previous research samples is overwhelmingly drawn, commitment levels, obligations, and stability of marital relationships make them imperative to examine. Thus, this research on hurtful messages and their repair focuses on married adults' responses.

Method

Participants

Participants were 237 currently married individuals. Fifty-two of the participants were men (22%), 181 of the participants were women (76%), and 4 participants did not report gender (2%). Participants were recruited by college students in communication classes via a network sampling procedure. Each student recruited only one participant, and only one partner in each married couple completed the measures to prevent non-independence of data. The consent letter informed participants about the nature of the study, and it indicated the participant was free to withdraw from the study at any point. Participants who were willing to participate signed the consent form and returned that form to the student. These students received minimal course credit for their assistance. Students who were unable to readily find a married person to complete the questionnaire participated in a separate study. The participants then submitted the completed measures in a sealed envelope, separate from the consent form, to ensure anonymity. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 72 years ($M = 42.87$, $SD = 10.98$).

The length of marriages ranged from 1 to 54 years ($M = 17.97$, $SD = 11.66$). Thus, the sample was fairly mature and in long-term marriages.

Procedures

On their own time, participants completed a survey assessing types of hurtful messages, repair strategies employed, relational satisfaction, and conflict tactics in their marital relationships. Each participant was given a description of 10 hurtful messages using Vangelisti's (1994) typology (i.e., accusation, evaluation, directive, advise, express desire, inform, question, threat, joke, and lie). The participants were asked to reference a time when they communicated each of the hurtful messages assigned. Participants then described the hurtful message in an open-ended format to ensure they cognitively recalled a specific incident in their marriage. The intentionality of the message was assessed with the following item: "Did you intend to hurt your marital partner?" with a forced-choice response format (i.e., yes or no). The severity of the hurtful message was assessed with the following item: "To what degree do you believe this message was hurtful to your marital partner?" This item used a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*not at all hurtful*) to 7 (*extremely hurtful*). The descriptives for the perceived hurt of these messages are as follows: informative ($n = 85$, $M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.66$), accusation ($n = 130$, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.81$), evaluation ($n = 83$, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.73$), directive ($n = 155$, $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.84$), threat ($n = 105$, $M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.87$), question ($n = 133$, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.78$), advise ($n = 83$, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.07$), expression of desire ($n = 149$, $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.52$), lie ($n = 77$, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.07$), and joke ($n = 142$, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.93$).

Participants were then provided a definition of each of the repair strategies described by Meyer and Rothenberg (2004) and (i.e., apology, excuse, justification, silence, offset harm, nonverbal reaction, change subject, and deny the offense). They were asked to check the response that most closely resembled the repair strategy they employed. Although it is recognized that repair may include multiple communication strategies, participants were instructed to focus on only their primary enactment. For verification, participants then described the repair strategy in an open-ended format. The information from this open-ended question was used in a separate study. The effectiveness of the repair strategy was assessed with the following item: "To what degree do you believe this message was effective in repairing the damage caused by your hurtful message?" This item used a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*not at all effective*) to 7 (*extremely effective*).

Participants' relationship satisfaction was measured using the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). This measure was conceptualized as the "goodness of the relationship gestalt" (p. 143), and is composed of six items. The first five items use a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*very strong disagreement*) to 7 (*very strong agreement*). The sixth item on the scale ranged from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*perfectly happy*). Previous reliability coefficients ranged from .88 to .96 (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Perse, Pavitt, & Burggraf, 1990; VanLear, 1991). The obtained Cronbach alpha for this study was .96 ($M = 38.30$, $SD = 8.22$).

Relational conflict was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Strauss & Gelles, 1990). The CTS is a widely used scale for assessing relationship conflictual interaction and aggression (Heyman, Feldbau-Kohn, Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & O'Leary, 2001). The CTS measures three levels of behaviors used in response to a conflict or anger situation (Strauss & Gelles, 1990). There are three subscales included in the CTS: reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence. Eight items assess reasoning, four items assess verbal aggression, and two items assess violence in the relationship. Scale items range from most constructive, "discussed issues calmly," to most abusive, "threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something," using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The CTS requires respondents to recall the times in the past 12 months when they and their partner disagreed on major decisions, got annoyed about something the other person did, or just had spats or fights because they were in a bad mood or tired for some other reason. Previous reliability coefficients of .50 (reasoning), .80 (verbal aggression), and .83 (violence) have been reported (Strauss & Gellas, 1990). The obtained Cronbach alphas for this study were reasoning, $\alpha = .48$, $M = 31.17$, $SD = 3.6$; verbal aggression, $\alpha = .67$, $M = 7.71$, $SD = 2.39$; and violence, $\alpha = .73$, $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.2$. Due to the low reliability, reasoning was not retained for use in the analyses.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Due to potential effects of gender on primary variables, analyses were undertaken to examine male–female differences. Some effects have been noted on similar variables with undergraduate respondents (e.g., Miller & Roloff, 2005; Young et al., 2005). There were no significant differences for the hurtful messages or repair attributable to gender in this study.

A scree test to ascertain potential response bias due to order effects or respondent fatigue demonstrated differences in patterns of responding (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003). However, there were no differences in response patterns due to location of items and topics in the survey.

Analysis of Hypotheses and Research Questions

Primary analyses focused on how hurtful messages were crossed with the type of repair enacted. The first research question inquired which repair strategies would be used with the highest frequency. Justification was the most frequently used repair strategy for the following hurtful messages: express desire (19.4% of responses), question (14.8%), accuse (11.4%), inform (10.1%), evaluate (8.9%), and advise (8.4%). Denial was the most frequently used strategy for repairing jokes (18.6%). Silence was the most frequently used strategy for repairing lies (9.3%). Apologies were the most frequently used strategies for repairing directives (15.6%). For a complete listing of all frequencies and percentages of use, see Table 1.

Table 1 Percentage of Repair Strategies Reported for Type of Hurtful Message

Hurtful message type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Expression of desire	11.4	3.4	19.4	2.5	7.6	0.0	0.8	10.5	4.6
Informative	7.6	5.9	10.1	3.0	1.3	0.0	1.3	3.4	3.0
Question	12.7	9.3	14.8	1.3	5.9	1.3	2.1	3.0	5.5
Threat	3.8	7.6	9.7	1.7	9.3	1.7	0.8	2.1	6.8
Joke	11.0	2.1	6.3	18.6	5.9	0.8	2.1	6.3	5.9
Lie	7.6	3.0	3.0	0.8	9.3	0.4	2.5	1.7	3.8
Accusation	9.7	6.8	11.4	0.8	9.7	1.7	3.0	2.1	8.4
Evaluation	6.8	5.9	8.9	0.8	5.5	0.4	2.1	1.3	2.1
Directive	15.6	13.9	7.6	0.4	14.3	2.1	3.4	2.5	6.3
Advise	5.9	4.2	8.4	2.1	3.0	0.4	3.0	1.3	6.3

Note. 1 = apology; 2 = excuse; 3 = justification; 4 = offset harm; 5 = silence; 6 = nonverbal reaction; 7 = change subject; 8 = denial; 9 = other.

The second research question examined whether these repair strategies were perceived to be effective. A series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted, with the type of repair strategy (for each hurtful message) serving as the independent variable and the perceived effectiveness as the dependent variable. Significant effects were found for 6 of the 10 analyses, but comparisons were sometimes hindered by low cell frequencies in some combinations.

The first ANOVA examined the repair strategies implemented after the questioning hurtful message. Significant differences were found among repair strategies and their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 114) = 4.41, p < .001$. A *post hoc* Scheffe test found that apologies ($M = 5.25$) were perceived as significantly more effective than silence strategies ($M = 1.82$). The second ANOVA examined the repair strategies implemented after the threatening hurtful message. Again, significant differences were found across repair strategies on their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 87) = 3.62, p < .001$. A *post hoc* Scheffe test found that excuses ($M = 5.56$) were perceived as significantly more effective than silence strategies ($M = 2.47$). The third ANOVA examined the repair strategies implemented after the joking hurtful message. Significant differences were found among the repair strategies with their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 124) = 2.51, p < .01$. Although the overall model reached significance, a *post hoc* Scheffe test failed to find any group differences. The fourth ANOVA examined the repair strategies implemented after the lying hurtful message. Significant differences were found among the repair strategies and their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 59) = 3.26, p < .01$, but *post hoc* tests were unable to be performed due to inadequate n sizes in at least one cell. The fifth ANOVA examined the repair strategies implemented after the accusatory hurtful message. Significant differences were found between the repair strategies and their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 113) = 4.06, p < .001$. A *post hoc* Scheffe test found that apologies ($M = 5.39$) were perceived as significantly more effective than silence strategies ($M = 2.67$). The sixth ANOVA

examined the repair strategies implemented after the directive hurtful message. Significant differences were found among repair strategies and their perceived effectiveness, $F(8, 144) = 3.02, p < .01$; but, again, post hoc tests were not performed due to inadequate n sizes in at least one cell. The final four ANOVAs revealed no significant relations: expressing desire, $F(7, 126) = 1.75, p > .05$; informing, $F(7, 74) = 0.99, p > .05$; evaluative messages, $F(8, 67) = 1.5, p > .05$; and advise, $F(8, 69) = 1.6, p > .05$. Thus, repair strategies can be differentiated when the hurtful messages they address involve questioning, threats, joking, lying, accusations, and directives. However, if expressed desire, informative, advising, or evaluative types of hurtful messages are encoded, repair strategies are not distinguishable.

The third research question examined whether the repair strategies were perceived as more effective when the hurtful message was intentionally sent. A series of two-way ANOVAs were conducted, with perceived effectiveness and intentionality as the independent variables and the repair message as the dependent variable. Results were not significant, exhibited no clear pattern, and the few comparisons that were significant (i.e., 3 of the effectiveness ratings) could be attributed to chance.³

H1 predicted that informative messages would be perceived as the most hurtful. This hypothesis was partially supported. Informative messages possessed the highest mean score of perceived hurt ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.66$). Results of paired t tests revealed that informative messages were significantly more hurtful than expressing desire, $t(54) = 3.27, p < .01$; and jokes, $t(58) = 2.78, p < .01$; but not necessarily worse than other types.

The fourth research question inquired about the association between relationship satisfaction and perceptions of hurt from the different types of hurtful messages. Results of Pearson correlations yielded no statistically significant relations. Relational satisfaction was not associated with how much the source gauged hurt.

The fifth research question inquired about the relations between conflict tactics and perceptions of hurt from the different types of hurtful messages. Verbal aggression was positively correlated with perceptions of hurt from questioning ($r = .21, p < .05$), accusations ($r = .22, p < .05$), and advising ($r = .32, p < .01$). Physical violence showed no significant correlations with perceptions of the severity of hurt after communicating such messages.

Fincham and Beach (1999) indicated that conflict tends to decrease relational satisfaction; therefore, post hoc analyses were conducted to discern whether marital satisfaction in this sample was related to *type* of conflict tactics used. It was for both verbal aggression ($r = -.42; p < .001$) and reasoning ($r = .32; p < .01$), although not for physically violent tactics ($r = .08, ns$), probably due to the small number of respondents in that category. Thus, our data suggest that types of conflict tactics and satisfaction with the marriage are linked in a predictable pattern.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how marital partners repair their relationship in response to hurtful messages. In addition, the role of relational

satisfaction and conflict tactics was examined in relation to hurtful messages. Five general conclusions can be made from this study: (a) repair strategies are used with varying frequency depending on the hurtful message, (b) silence is perceived as the least effective repair strategy, (c) the informative message was perceived as the most hurtful, (d) the intention of delivering a hurtful message does not influence the repair strategy or its perceived effectiveness, (e) relational satisfaction was not related to hurtful messages, and (f) verbally aggressive conflict tactics are related to the perceived hurtfulness of messages.

The first research question examined the frequency with which repair strategies were used. Married partners reported that justification was the most preferred strategy for relational repair after communicating a hurtful message. Justifications are a form of defensive communication characterized by attempts to rationalize a transgression. This result is not surprising given the assumptions of attribution theory. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980) focuses on how individuals attribute causes of their own behavior and behaviors of others, and people frequently exhibit a self-serving bias, externalizing their failures and shortcomings. Hurting a spouse's feelings is one such failure that might cause a partner to make an external attribution. Justification repair strategies are essentially attempts at externalizing the cause of a hurtful message (e.g., "You made me this way") instead of accepting the blame and guilt (i.e., internalizing). Other repair strategies involving more internal attributions (e.g., apologies) were not employed as frequently as justifications. Moreover, justifications may be common repair strategies because they are perceived as socially appropriate by partners. For instance, Benoit and Drew (1997) discovered that justifications were preferred strategies for image repair. It is interesting to note that these strategies also proved to be the preferred communicative response for repairing *hurt* in married couples.

It was also found that the use of apologies was the most common repair strategy in response to directives, which are hurtful messages that order or command the partner to do something. An example of a directive is making a statement like, "Just leave me the hell alone" (Meyer & Rothenberg, 2004). Directives are very explicit and straightforward statements that do not require much interpretation; thus, apologies are most appropriate. Individuals cannot claim the hurtful message was misinterpreted (i.e., offset harm), nor can they easily take the message back (i.e., denials). Instead, the harm must be acknowledged and the blame accepted by the individual who made the hurtful statement.

The second research question concerned the effectiveness of the repair strategies. As a whole, few differences existed in the perceived effectiveness of these strategies. Only repair strategies in response to informing, questioning, and threatening hurtful messages were significant. For each of these repair strategies, silence was perceived as significantly less effective at repairing the relationship. Silence is a passive strategy, and its perceived ineffectiveness can be explained by the fact that conflict resolution is often more important to relational satisfaction than the type of conflict itself. In several studies, avoidance, distancing, and disengagement strategies have been found to be negative in managing conflict (see also Kline et al., 2006). Evidently, using

methods to repair relationships that are passive and do not directly address issues in the relationship are similarly perceived as ineffective in marriages.

The attribution of intentionality produced little information here, as none of the interaction effects between intent and perceived effectiveness were significant. In addition, the main effects found were minimal in size. A major limitation of this study was the lack of participant responses in each cell (10 Hurtful Messages 9 Repair Strategies)—that is, all people did not have an example for each strategy. Although the scree test found no order effects, some post hoc analyses could not be conducted because there were fewer than two responses per cell. Although the overall number of participants in the study was still large enough to produce results for other research questions and the hypothesis, more data would be necessary to fully explore this particular research question.

H1 predicted that informative hurtful messages would be the most difficult to repair. Results indicated that spouses believed their informative statements caused the most damage in their marriage. As Vangelisti (1994) noted, these types of messages do not foster communication and understanding. Considering they offer few opportunities for counterexamples, they may be particularly face threatening and damaging to the marriage. If informative messages offer no opportunity for explanations and productive argument while other hurtful messages do, it is not surprising that spouses perceived these statements to hurt the most.

The final two research questions concerned the relation of the perceived severity of the hurtful message with relational satisfaction and conflict tactics. Although the verbal aggression dimension of conflict tactics was significantly correlated with three hurtful messages, relational satisfaction was not associated with type of hurtful message. Although it was thought that some hurtful messages could be so harmful as to be associated with low satisfaction in the relationship, this was not the case. Perhaps the measure of satisfaction was generalized and global while the hurtful messages were too focused on a specific incident to be associated with one another (see also Fincham & Beach, 2006). It should also be noted that the overall relational satisfaction mean was quite high (38.3 with a maximum scale value of 45), indicating possible ceiling effects. In addition, because it was the source of the message who assessed the “hurtfulness” rather than the person who was targeted, there may have been a suppression of the estimated impact (i.e., defensive attributions).

The frequency at which each of these hurtful messages was delivered over the years was not assessed in this study; instead, participants cognitively referenced one specific incident. That one incident may not have been indicative of present satisfaction in the marriage. Satisfaction in marriage was not implicated in any of the repair messages used.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study involves the quantity of statistical analyses conducted. To answer the second research question, 10 ANOVAs were used. Although many of the significance levels were below .05, we encounter the risk of Type 1 error due to the

number of analyses. In addition, the number of paired *t* tests used to analyze the first hypothesis also runs the risk of Type 1 error. Again, the significance levels were below .05, and the importance of the subject matter should not be overlooked.

Given the paucity of research on this topic, several future directions can be taken with hurtful messages and repair strategies. One potential area is the possibility that spouses employ the same repair strategies repeatedly in a marriage, as opposed to an array of diverse strategies. As Berger (1997) suggested, individuals have limited capacity to process information and rely on minimal scripts that have been successful in interpersonal influence in the past. A spouse may use the same repair strategy, regardless of the hurtful message, based on what messages were previously effective.

Future research should also examine how these repair strategies work in accordance with one another. Berger (1997) also suggested that individuals have contingency plans for the messages they deliver. If one message fails, the individual has another strategy to implement. In addition, several repair strategies may be used at the same time. The extent to which married couples combine strategies to repair the relationship could be examined in future studies.

Implications and Conclusions

Married individuals (average length of marriage almost 18 years; range 1–54) responded to this questionnaire. Therefore, the perspectives offered are those of mature adults in actual relationships. More important, these responses from adult marital partners increase the external validity, making them more useful to other married couples. Thus, one advantage to such analyses is that marital partners may benefit from knowing about hurtful messages and their repair, especially what to avoid.

As previously mentioned, there is a need to assess the hurtfulness and the impact of the repair effort from the perspective of the person who was hurt. Our findings with the attributions suggest a self-serving bias, or at least lack of awareness about the extent of the hurt.

We can draw several conclusions from these data. First, repair strategies are differentially employed depending on the type of hurtful message. Justification and questioning are the most frequently used, and silence is viewed as the least effective of all repair strategies. Consistent with other studies, we found that informative messages are perceived to be the most hurtful. Marital satisfaction was not related to types of hurtful messages and, not surprisingly, verbally aggressive conflict tactics are associated with higher perceived hurt.

Notes

- [1] An *accusation* refers to accusing someone of fault or blame. An *evaluation* is a description of value or worth. A *directive* statement involves an order or command. An *advising* message calls for a course of action. An *expression of desire* message refers to a statement of preference.

An *informative* statement involves disclosing information. A *question* is an inquiry or interrogation. A *threat* reveals the intention to inflict punishment. A *joke* refers to a prank or witticism. A *lie* is a deceptive speech act (Vangelisti, 1994).

- [2] The *apology* strategy is marked by accepting blame and expressing regret for the regrettable message. The *excuse* strategy offers a reason for why the message was delivered, such as being tired or stressed. The *justification* strategy is marked by attempts to explain and defend the reason behind the message. The *silence* strategy includes any attempt to minimize communication about the regrettable message. The *offset harm* strategy is marked by comments that attempt to downplay the severity of the message, such as saying, "just kidding." The *nonverbal reaction* strategy is marked by nonverbal behaviors that express regret for the message, including covering one's mouth or shutting one's eyes. The *change subject* strategy includes any topic shift that moves the conversation away from the regrettable message. Finally, the *deny the offense* strategy is marked by attempts to reverse the potential damage with compliments and praise (Dindia & Baxter, 1987).
- [3] The two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted on the repair strategies following an *expressing desire* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(5, 121) = 1.56, p > .05$; main effect for intent, $F(1, 121) = 0.01, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 121) = 0.06, p > .05$. Results of the ANOVA on the repair strategies following an *informing* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 68) = 1.23, p > .05$; main effect for intent, $F(1, 68) = 0.94, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 68) = 1.09, p > .05$. The ANOVA on repair strategies for a *questioning* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 108) = 1.70, p > .05$; or main effect for intent, $F(1, 108) = 1.9, p > .05$. However, there was a significant main effect for perceived effectiveness, $F(6, 108) = 2.44, p < .05$.

Results of the ANOVA on repair strategies following a *threatening* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(5, 83) = 0.73, p > .05$; main effect for intent, $F(1, 83) = 0.05, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 83) = 1.07, p > .05$. Results of the ANOVA on repair following a *joking* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 119) = 0.50, p > .05$; main effect for intent, $F(1, 119) = 0.06, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 119) = 1.13, p > .05$. The ANOVA on repair following a *lying* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(3, 53) = 0.19, p > .05$; main effect for intent, $F(1, 53) = 0.11, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 53) = 0.88, p > .05$. An ANOVA on the repair strategies following an *accusatory* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 108) = 1.90, p > .05$; or main effect of intent, $F(1, 108) = .00, p > .05$. However, there was a significant effect for perceived effectiveness, $F(6, 108) = 2.45, p < .05$.

Results of an ANOVA on repair following an *evaluative* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 60) = 0.81, p > .05$; or main effect of perceived effectiveness in the repair strategy, $F(6, 60) = 1.41, p > .05$; but the main effect of intention in delivering the hurtful message was significant, $F(2, 60) = 3.15, p < .05$. An ANOVA on repair following a *directive* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(6, 134) = 1.22, p > .05$; main effects for intent, $F(1, 134) = 0.91, p > .05$; or effectiveness, $F(6, 134) = 1.47, p > .05$. Finally, the ANOVA on repair strategies following an *advise* hurtful message revealed no interaction effect, $F(4, 66) = 1.32, p > .05$; or main effect for intent, $F(1, 66) = 0.18, p > .05$. However, there was a significant main effect for the perceived effectiveness of that repair strategy, $F(6, 66) = 2.48, p < .05$.

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