

SHADOWED SCAR TISSUE:
AN IN-DEPTH LITERATURE REVIEW OF INTERPERSONAL HURT IN ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Abstract

Interpersonal hurt in romantic relationships describes many every day interactions couples have. However, these instances of hurt are difficult to identify, talk about, and react to, making the study of such interactions immensely difficult as well. This in-depth literature review of current scholarly work is compiled in an effort to provide groundwork for understanding what hurt is, how individuals conceptualize the hurt they feel, and the coping strategies used to overcome what some scholars call a communicative and social phenomenon. Further, a discussion of future avenues of research and the implications of an expansion on the current research aims to guide future scholars to better understand what so many scholars are attempting to get a handle on.

Keywords: interpersonal hurt, romantic relationships, coping, attribution

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Interpersonal hurt warrants further study because of the frequency of occurrences and lasting influence hurt has on romantic relationships (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune & Alexander, 2005). Interpersonal hurt is a complex communicative interaction. While very real and often common in relationships, the visibility of such interactions is not widely noted (Vangelisti, 1994a). Further, the effects associated, particularly with feelings of intense or serial hurt are extremely harmful, physically, emotionally and mentally (Olson, 2002). These effects are varying and further discussion on the impact these effects have makes this discussion even more necessary. Although hurt has been studied in a variety of ways, it is necessary to continue research to improve understanding and positively impact romantic relationships. Hurt occurs as a result of accusations or criticisms communicated from one partner to another (Young, 2004). “Sensitive issues may be raised, teasing may get too serious, evaluative statements may be too pointed, and disparaging remarks may be used as verbal weapons” all leading to experiences of interpersonal hurt (Vangelisti & Young, 2000, p. 394). Tokunaga (2008) notes that either partner in a romantic relationship can experience hurt, usually as an outcome of a thoughtless comment, question or joke. Studies suggest that romantic partners encounter some form of hurt during their relationship (i.e. betrayal, deception and infidelity) (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003), reporting feeling some sort of hurt at least once a month and emotional hurt as often as once a week (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009).

In many instances, an individual feels intensely hurt by a partner because they have made themselves vulnerable to the situation (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Vulnerability is often a result of the relational desire for honesty and openness (Zhang & Stafford, 2009). Over time, frequent instances of hurt can be detrimental to a romantic relationship, particularly by undermining the

intimacy felt between partners (Parker-Raley, Beck, Surra & Vangelisti, 2007; Theiss et al., 2009). Consequently, the outcome of intense, and sometimes repeated, hurtful situations is the potential for residual buildup “tug[ging] at the bonds that hold relationships together” (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998, p. 173). This specific kind of enduring hurt has been systematically linked to feelings of depression, relational distancing and feelings of dissatisfaction with one’s self and partner (May & Jones, 2007).

The outcome of hurt can take many forms. For example, partners may experience hurt and be able to overcome the situation. Other times partners may experience hurt with a high degree of intensity and, as a result, decide to terminate the relationship (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Further, some partners respond verbally, physically, or with silence (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). Hurtful instances have been described as being aversive and thus an experience to be avoided (Parker-Raley et al., 2007). At times hurt is also conceptualized as discrete and temporary, occurring as a result of an isolated incident or situation (May & Jones, 2007). The variability of the reactions to hurt and the range of detrimental outcomes of hurt make relational hurt both interesting and difficult to study.

Therefore, the purpose of this review of scholarly work is to discuss the basis of current knowledge on interpersonal hurt in romantic relationships and suggest ways to extend understanding through future research. First, a definition of hurt provides a foundation for understanding the resulting research on this communicative behavior. Then, a review of scholarly research highlights current understanding of individuals’ appraisals and attributions of hurt and the coping processes and response models used as a result. Finally, this paper offers a discussion of future directions to enhance communication scholars’ understanding of relational hurt through the expansion of research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Defining Hurt

Scholars have long been attempting to define what Tokunaga (2008) says is a concept difficult to label as interpersonal hurt. From an emotional response perspective, hurt can be seen through the combination emotions such as sadness and fear: sadness due to being hurt and fear of being vulnerable to further harm (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Beyond emotions, Vangelisti, (1994a, 1994b, 2001) argues that hurtful messages constitute a relational transgression that in turn causes negative expectancy violations. Specifically, expectancy violations occur when an individual has expectations or norms established in relation to their own and others actions and then another person behaves in ways that disregard or violate these norms (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). When expectations are violated, interpersonal hurt describes the feelings of the receiver of harmful communication messages (Feeney, 2004). Along these lines, Bachman & Guerrero (2006) expand on this definition of hurt by including “words or actions that constitute a relational transgression by communicating a devaluation of the partner or the relationship” (p. 945). Finally, Young (2010) characterizes the phenomenon as “a subjective state that occurs in response to frustration, threat or injustice” (p. 49).

From these definitions, several important factors can be used to describe hurt: 1) hurtful messages occur in a subjective state involving strong central emotions, 2) words or actions are perceived to devalue a partner or relationship, 3) the message violates expectancy norms of the romantic relationship. Further, interpersonal hurt must occur between at least two people and result in emotional pain (Hampel, 2011). Interpersonal hurt occurs through verbal and non-verbal interactions and is processed internally without visible physical markers, making the identification and study of hurt very difficult.

Taking these characteristics a step further, the creation of a hurtful message can be understood via an individual's perceived intensity of the message intent (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell & Evans, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). The intensity of a message impacts the degree to which hurt causes emotional pain (Vangelisti, 1994b; Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Whereas, the perceived intent of a message is the alleged degree that an individual feels their partner deliberately meant to hurt them (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Bachman & Guerrero, 2006).

In an effort to condense the concepts established above, researchers identified categories to make the study of interpersonal hurt across many relationship types more systematic (Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2008). For example, six major categories outlining the types of hurt include: criticism, betrayal, active disassociation or rejection, passive disassociation or being ignored, teasing, and feeling unappreciated (Leary et al., 1998). Bachman & Guerrero (2006) later added betrayal, lying, improprieties, teasing, complaining, and arrogance. In response to this general identification of hurt across relationships, Feeney (2004) identified the five major types of hurt that occur in close or romantic relationships: criticism, active disassociation or rejection, passive disassociation or being ignored, infidelity, and deception. These categories further enhance the scope of discussion about interpersonal hurt in romantic relationships.

Specifically, Feeney's (2004) organization of hurt in romantic relationships allows for a focus on one relationship type. In romantic relationships, one must feel as though they warrant a partner's attention, nurturance and care (Murray, 2005). The increased interdependence between relational partners, in conjunction with the voluntary nature of the relationship elicits unique experiences of hurt (Feeney, 2009). Consequently, feelings of hurt can be even more intense if

the hurt individual feels their romantic partner has a decreased perception of the relational value after the hurtful experience (Hampel, 2011). Even though we feel joy in our romantic relationships, they can often be a source of our feelings of hurt (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). In fact, studies on hurt in romantic relationships have found that sexual infidelity occurs at least once in almost half of long-term romantic relationships, lying about something important occurs in 90% of romantic relationships and almost every individual could recall a time they felt deeply hurt by their partner (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). The most intense feelings, positive and negative, that an individual experiences are expressed in romantic relationships (Vangelisti et al., 2005); making hurtful interactions commonplace (Westman & Vinokur, 1998; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Vangelisti, 2005; Hampel, 2011). Further, after an individual has experienced hurt once, they are more vulnerable to instances of hurt in the future (Hampel, 2011).

Inherently, within human nature, there is an intense desire to understand the “dark side” of communication interactions (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). This notion helps to highlight the immense interest in conducting research on interpersonal hurt in relationships. Interpretive scholars posit one’s social world is constantly being constructed as a result of social interactions, thus one’s reality about a situation or experience can be understood through their meaning-making activities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This notion further demonstrates a desire to understand how a person interacts with hurt, the process of conceptualization about hurt and the responses that occur as a result. Research notes, we create, build and define ourselves based on the hurt we experience in relationships (Vangelisti et al., 2005). It cannot go without saying, there are challenges in studying relationships, particularly romantic ones, in that “first, we should resist the normal temptation to perceive the stages of coming together as ‘good’ and those of coming apart as ‘bad’” (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005, p. 152). This notion helps guide this

literature review to understand hurt in a vacuum and not as a predictor of a good or bad outcome in romantic relationships. However, as the next section discusses individual's assessment of the situation and resulting attributions, this research provides a basis to determine the positive or negative value placed on the interaction by relational partners.

Individuals experience hurt as an interaction that occurs as a process involving appraisals, attributions, and coping with the hurtful event. As a result, each individual that encounters hurt interprets his or her instance differently than any other person would. This paper provides a map of the systematic framework enacted as a response to this social phenomenon by exploring current research on the appraisal and attribution processes and the resulting coping strategies which ultimately impact the eventual outcome of the interaction.

Appraisals and Attributions of Hurt

Relationships serve as a canvas for how individuals decode and react to communicative events thus warranting a discussion of the process enacted when an individual experiences hurt in a romantic relationship (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). In particular, hurtful actions within a romantic relationship are perceived as being more hurtful than in other relationship types, including hurt emanating from interactions with family members or friends (Feeney, 2004; Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; McLaren et al., 2011).

How an individual analyzes an event that causes hurt gives the instance meaning, "since causal knowledge carries with it a wide scope of connotations regarding an event and makes possible a more or less stable, predictable and controllable world" (McArthur, 1972, p. 171). The initial description of an event, the evaluation of the influence the event has on personal well-being (Vangelisti et al., 2005), how one ascribes the fault that occurred, and the perception an individual has of the person who "caused the hurt" (Fletcher & Fincham, 1991) influences the

perception of and response to the hurtful experience. In order to better understand these actions scholars are turning to theories to explain the meaning-making process associate with hurt.

Appraisals

Distinctively, emotions play central role in how an individual judges the environmental context of hurt, and the emotions and reactions elicited as a result (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). . Often a person's emotions are elicited as a result of the perception of an event or circumstance (Vangelisti et al., 2005; McLaren & Solomon, 2010). This process of perception is also known as appraisal. Appraisals are separated in to three types: the assessment of an event's impact on one's well-being (primary), an evaluation of the resources available to someone that may aid in coping with the event (secondary), and a response to feedback from the primary and secondary appraisals (reappraisal) (Vangelisti et al., 2005; Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009).

Primary appraisals are an indicator of the extent that an environment provides an opportunity or obstacle in attaining an individual's goal, in this case the desire to feel worthy and valued by their partner (McLaren & Solomon, 2008, 2010). When an individual evaluates or appraises a situation as in line with his/her goals and desires, the emotion elicited is positive. Conversely, negative emotions arise as a result of a threat to an individual's desires and goals (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). These primary appraisals also impact the action tendencies or responses an individual uses to resolve any discrepancy with the primary goal of that situation (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). A further judgment, or secondary appraisal, is needed to help decide the action an individual will take.

Secondary appraisals are an assessment of an individual's options for coping or dealing with the event, in this case, the hurt (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). Secondary appraisals range from an evaluation of an individual's potential to create change in the situation to an

understanding of needing more information about the event (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). The extent to which a person engages in action tendencies is determined by the secondary appraisals (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). As a result of this appraisal step, any feedback received here then prompts a reappraisal or reevaluation of a situation with new information.

Message intentionality and intensity also play a role in the appraisals an individual makes about a situation (Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2008). If an individual perceives a hurtful behavior as unintentional, the potential to excuse the action is higher, thus decreasing the impact on the relationship (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). However, an individual's perception of a message as intentional may cause the individual to make assumptions about their partner that threaten personal goal's and desires, thus increasing the impact on the relationship (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). As a result of this process, instances of hurt can cause individuals to engage in an action tendency like relational distancing, or a noticeable move away from intimacy in order to protect themselves from future hurt. (Vangelisti, 1994a; Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2008). However, not everyone responds with an action tendency, instead using an alternative response such as a critical comment to the instance and perpetrator of the hurt (McLaren & Solomon, 2010).

Partner and Context Attributions

Where appraisal is the evaluation of hurt, attribution is the placement of blame for hurt (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Griffin, 2003; Cupach, Canary & Spitzberg, 2010) and the fundamental process of understanding and ascribing meaning (Taylor, 1983; Weary & Reich, 2000; Holmberg, Orbuch & Veroff, 2004; Cupach et al., 2010). Attribution constitutes a “deliberative attempt to understand the reasons underlying a partner's behavior” (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996, p. 81). When an individual is able to understand the cause of an event, they are

then able to conceptualize the significance of the event to themselves (Taylor, 1983). The attribution process can be understood through an analysis of the dimensions of attribution deemed most important to conflict, or relational hurt. Dimensions currently identified as central to attributions include: global, stable, locus, intent, selfishness, and blameworthiness (Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990).

First, according to some researchers, global refers to how one perceives if the cause of the hurtful event is specific to the situational context the hurt occurs in (Chandler, Lee & Pengilly, 1997; Heene, Buysse & Van Oost, 2005; Cupach et al., 2010). If the event is seen as global, it is not domain-specific (Brown & Siegel, 1988). For example, Mary and Joe have a healthy and fruitful relationship, however, when Joe visits Mary's family, he acts in an aggressive manner. Joe's disposition, in the context of the social environment leads Mary to perceive his actions as local, as they occur only in this specific relational context.

However, some researchers use the term global to refer to what other attribution theorists call the stable dimension of attribution (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). Therefore, there is a great deal of overlap in the terminology associated with these attribution dimensions. For example, what Gottman & Silver (1999) call a global attribution, Cupach et al. (2010) describe as stability. Accordingly, the stability dimension is concerned with the longevity of the cause associated with the hurtful experience. Stable causes last over a long period of time, whereas unstable causes happen intermittently and are temporary (Brown & Siegel, 1988; Mclean, Strongman & Neha, 2007; Tokunaga, 2008; Cupach et al., 2010). For example, if Mary consistently criticizes Joe, then over time he will perceive her critical nature as a personality trait (stable attribution) as opposed to a triggered response (unstable attribution).

Locus refers to whether an individual perceives the behavior of another as a result of an internal or external catalyst (Bemmels, 1991; Tokunaga, 2008; Cupach et al., 2010). Internal locus of control refers to a behavior resulting from something inherent in the person, such as a personality trait. External locus of control is assigned when the behavior is explained as something impacted by the context or precipitating events, rather than to internal characteristics. Excessive use of hurtful messages by a partner may have been brought on by a “tough” upbringing (external factor), or by a lack of motivation (internal factor) to better understand communication in relationships.

The dimension of intent helps illuminate whether the event was a conscious decision by the aggressor to cause hurt (Cupach et al., 2010). For example, a person who makes a comment about their partner’s weight can be helpful or hurtful depending upon how the comment is perceived. Based on the partner’s perception of the message’s intention, they could believe the comment was an indication of concern about their health or as a personal rejection or criticism. The more hurtful a message is perceived to be, the less likely the quality of the relationship will be rated in a positive manner (Feeney, 2004; Zhang & Stafford, 2009; McLaren, Solomon & Priem, 2011).

Selfishness references the nature of the motives of the individual precipitating the hurt (Cupach et al., 2010). If motives are perceived as self-serving they are seen as selfish, compared to motives that are perceived as other-focused or unselfish. An aggressor’s decision to deny instances of hurt displays a self-serving motive; where as an admittance of the problem may be seen as altruistic, or other-centered. Self-concern responses promote a self-interested goal or outcome and are often characterized as assertive and confrontational (Tokunaga, 2008). Other-concern responses take in to account the collective, the relationship and the individual’s involved

in the relationship, and are less focused on the self, thus being categorized as cooperative or avoidant (Tokunaga, 2008).

The final dimension of blameworthiness is a culmination of the dimensions above. Based on the information gathered through the other attributional dimensions an individual can now assign blame by attributing fault to someone or something as being responsible for the hurt (Cupach et al., 2010). The blame assigned as a result of this dimension is placed on one or more of three specific actors: self, relationship, and/or partner (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Most explanations of negative outcomes are attributed to the relationship and partner, and less often as a result of the self (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Additionally, an individual is inherently inclined to attribute relationship problems to both the relationship and the partner, rather than partner alone (Manusov & Koenig, 2001). Further, studies show that when an individual recalls an event, they see themselves in a more positive light, whereas they perceive their partner as ultimately responsible for causing any negative relational outcome (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001).

The dimensions of attribution that most directly affect an individual's perceptions of hurt are not clear, due to an inherent overlap in the dimensions of attribution discussed above (Cupach et al., 2010). Scholars have provided examples of negative and positive compilations of the attributional dimensions to demonstrate potential results. Individuals who perceive the causes of interpersonal conflict or hurt as a combination of global, stable, internal and selfish dimensions, have dissatisfied relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) and are, therefore, more likely to engage in negative behavior dismissing the possibility for positive relational outcomes (Cupach et al., 2010). However, individuals who perceive hurt in a relationship by attributing a partner's behavior to unstable, external and unselfish terms are less likely to respond with negative behavior (Cupach et al., 2010). Similarly, individuals that accept some part of the

responsibility for the conflict or hurt in a relationship have a higher tendency to respond to the hurt in a positive manner (Cupach et al., 2010). In addition to considering how the different attribution dimensions influence perceptions of interpersonal hurt, it is important to consider the influence of message intensity in regards to hurtful exchanges.

Attributions of Message Intensity

As discussed in relation to appraisals, message intensity plays a pivotal role in the attributions of messages an individual makes (Feeney, 2004), ultimately impacting how an individual experiences and conceptualizes hurt. Message intensity as an indicator of hurt is present in every dimension of attribution because “intensity is a salient aspect of hurtful experiences, which both varies as a function of relational and individual qualities and affects how people respond to hurt” (McLaren et al., 2011, p. 547). The degree, mild to extreme, to which a person feels hurt by a message, is a direct identifier of the message’s intensity (McLaren et al., 2011). As stated earlier, the more intense a message is, the more emotional hurt is felt.

Relational History

In addition to message intensity, relational history plays a central role in the way an individual interprets instances of hurt (Vangelisti, 1994b). The longevity of a relationship impacts individual attributions, with partners who share an in-depth history reducing the effect of a single instance of hurt on their relationship. Researchers note the importance of examining the emotional impact of hurt in both established and developing relationships and how each constrains or liberates an individual’s ability to conceptualize hurt (Vangelisti, 1994a). Individuals with a shorter relationship history have been found to associate more harm to the same type of hurtful behavior (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

In addition to relationship length, the quality of and commitment to the relationship determines how attribution occurs (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001). In fact, the attributions an individual makes are often dependent upon the relationship satisfaction felt before the hurt occurs (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). Conflict charged interactions are frequently rooted in the health of the relationship, including how involved each partner is in the relationship and partners' abilities to reconcile differences in personal goals (Bevan, Hale & Williams, 2004).

In distressed relationships, there is a decrease in the happiness felt from a positive action and an increase in the hurt experienced from a negative action (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). For example, in a distressed relationship, if an individual receives a gift from a partner, he/she may dismiss the gift by equating the action to the fact that "all of his/her friends were giving gifts their partners." In this instance, by diminishing the attribution for a potentially positive action and explaining the behavior as normative, the individual reduces the happiness associated with the action (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

For a relationship to be non-distressed, or healthy, Gottman (1994) contends that five positive experiences must take place for every one negative event. By diminishing the value of a potentially positive event, an individual reduces the benefit this event can provide in buffering future negative events. This is seen as a negative recalibration of the positive-to-negative comment ratio, indicating that the negative comments now outweigh the positive (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 2002). As a result, when this individual experiences an instance of hurt in the future, the pain felt is perceived more negatively than an individual in a non-distressed relationship (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

Further, based on the information an individual gathers about their relationship (i.e. perception of distress and the evaluation of the relationships “ratio”), the perceived cause of a partner’s current and future actions may differ. For example, if a partner is late, an individual in a distressed relationship may attribute this behavior as a hurtful act indicating their partner does not want to spend time with them, regardless of the true reason for tardiness. In a non-distressed relationship, the opposite occurs; positive events are enhanced while the impact of negative events is decreased (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). All of these factors impact how an individual conceptualizes hurt, and in turn leads them to assumptions about their partner’s feelings on the relationship and themselves.

Relational Devaluation and the Undermining of Self Concept

As a result of a negative attribution of hurt in a romantic relationship, an individual often perceives a partner’s actions as a reflection of a decrease in the value of the relationship and an attempt to undermine the individual’s self-concept (Vangelisti, 1994a; Leary et al., 1998; Vangelisti et al., 2005; Tokunaga, 2008). Some perceptions of relational devaluation are obvious, an individual feels their partner is causing hurt as a way to avoid them or terminate the relationship; while other individuals emit more subtle signifiers such as spiteful humor or a comment perceived as demonstrating a lack of concern (Vangelisti, et al., 2005). These interactions can lead individuals to feel their relationship is no longer important or valuable to their partner (Vangelisti, et al., 2005) which decreases the intimacy felt in the relationship, in turn impacting how an individual responds to the hurt and to their partner (Vangelisti, 1994a). Those individuals that feel a significant decrease in the intimacy in the relationship are more likely to engage in a negative response strategy, triggering cyclical events of hurt (Vangelisti, 1994a; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

Undermining Self-Concept

Some hurtful interactions individual's experience are cited as causing a decrease in an individual's perceived self-worth associated with the romantic relationship (Vangelisti et al., 2005). For example, if Joe tells Mary that she "looks fat in that dress," Mary will perceive his comment as hurtful because her weight is something about which she is sensitive. If Mary accepts the criticism as true, she in turn will devalue her self-worth in relation to her weight. The experience of hurt in a romantic relationship sometimes causes an individual to perceive a decreased self-worth outside the relationship in their other social interactions (i.e. job or platonic relationships) (Vangelisti et al., 2005).

An individual's perception, negative or positive, of his/her self aids in the conceptualization of, coping with, and responding to hurt in romantic relationships (Vangelisti et al., 2005). Specifically, an individual who perceives his/her self in a negative light often interpret experiences of hurt differently than those who think highly of themselves. For example an individual with low self-esteem who perceives a threat to a romantic relationship in turn is likely to question their partner's affection and acceptance, this leads the individual to question his/her value and reinforces a negative self-concept (Vangelisti et al., 2005). The way an individual perceives partner appraisals plays as much of a role as the individual's perception of his/her self. Ultimately, the way individuals attribute their experiences with hurt indicates positive or negative feelings associated with themselves and their relationship (Vangelisti et al., 2005). This association can also impact the way a person copes with such issues (Vangelisti, 1994a).

Responses and Coping with Relational Hurt

"Coping refers to the thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to manage the internal and external demands of particular situations that they appraise as being personally relevant and

stressful” (Strelan & Wojtysiak, 2009, p. 98). Situations that evoke feelings associated with hurt, including anger, shame or sadness, are linked to interpersonal causes (Vangelisti et al., 2005). As discussed above, many factors can cause variability in the way people interpret actions and respond to hurt (McLaren et al., 2011). “People’s explanations for their hurt feelings can influence how they feel and how they respond to others” (Vangelisti et al., 2005, p. 443). Certain factors, such as an individual’s ability to accommodate change in a romantic relationship impact how an individual chooses to cope with and respond to hurt (Caughlin, 2006). Further, the quality of the relationship prior to the hurtful event, the severity of the emotions felt, and whether hurt has occurred before in the relationship impact how a person responds to relational hurt (Wade & Worthington, 2003). However, once an individual is able to cope with their response to hurt, they can begin to deal with the hurt itself (Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009).

Individuals’ response to hurt and the coping strategies used vary from passively waiting for conditions to improve, to openly discussing problems, to participating in an extra relational involvement, to the termination of the relationship (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). Research has suggested there are various coping strategies including models of response types, immediate coping behaviors (both negative and positive), forgiveness and repair, and termination and dissolution.

Coping Typologies

Generally, strategies used to cope are conceptualized dichotomously as either approach or avoidant responses. Approach responses include problem solving or taking action to bring about positive change in the relationship. Conversely, avoidance responses include attempts to reduce stress by reassigning meaning to the instance to aid in the regulation of the emotions and cognitions an individual is experiencing (Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009). Approach and avoidance

are often used in conjunction with each other, and the effectiveness of either or both is dependent upon their use in a specific situation. However, the predominant use of avoidance strategies immediately preceding instances of hurt makes sense as an individual often experiences an immediate emotional upheaval (Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009). “In short, coping appears to provide a useful framework for beginning to understand the behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities in which people engage” when encountering relational hurt (Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009, p. 99).

Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chavez-Appel, and Rex (2005) argue that the response to interpersonal hurt for individuals in romantic relationships may be explained by biological sex. Research suggests that significantly more women report feeling betrayed by their partner in a close or romantic relationship (Gordon & Baucom, 2003). Also, women are more likely to be passive in their responses, suggesting a preference for avoidance (Harvey, Ickes & Kidd, 1978; Young et al., 2005; Mclean et al., 2007).

In other research, the approach/avoidance dichotomy has been labeled active/passive (Stelan & Wojtysiak, 2009) and an additional dichotomy dimension of constructive/destructive has been added (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982; Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Veette, Whitney, Slovik & Lipkus, 1991). Activity and passivity refer to the impact of a specific response on the problem, not to the character of the behavior itself (Rusbult et al., 1991). Active responses entail an individual is actually doing something about the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1986), whereas passive responses do not. Further, constructiveness/destructiveness refers to the impact a response has on the relationship, not the individual (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991).

With the use of these two dimensions, four categories of behavior can be identified that occur as a response to dissatisfaction, or hurt, in a romantic relationship: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991). The decision to use any of these behaviors is dependent on prior satisfaction in the relationship, investment size, and alternative quality (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). Satisfaction in the relationship is evaluated prior to the hurt occurring; greater prior satisfaction promotes constructive responses as an individual finds it desirable to restore the relationship to its prior state (Rusbult et al., 1986). Investment size refers to the resources an individual would have to employ to achieve a positive outcome (i.e. more time spent together or an increase in emotional involvement); with an increase in investment size, constructive responses should follow (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1998).

While the two prior factors measured the constructive/destructiveness of the behaviors elicited, the factor of alternative quality determines if an individual's response will be active or passive (Rusbult et al., 1986). With the evaluation of good alternatives comes the motivation to do something active (exit or voice) as this serves as a source of power to elicit change and includes a range of behaviors from going to therapy to leaving the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1998). However, if the alternatives perceived are not more attractive than the current relationship, passive behaviors will emerge, as there is no immediate desire to leave what is perceived as the best option (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1998). With an understanding of how an individual determines to use active/passive and deconstructive/constructive behaviors, a further evaluation of each behavior is warranted.

The behavior labeled as exit is described as actively destroying (Rusbult et al., 1991) or ending the relationship (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). For example, if an individual experiences a

partner asking for relational separation, moving out, verbally or physically being abusive or threatening to leave, research indicates the partner is employing an exit behavior (Rusbult et al., 1991). Exit is categorized as destructive to the relationship and a passive interaction as it does not do anything to fix the relationship (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982).

Voice is the expression of dissatisfaction with intent to fix the problem at hand (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). For example, discussing relational problems, suggesting solutions (i.e. therapy), and encouraging change in a partner and personally are all behaviors using voice (Rusbult et al., 1991). Voice is categorized as an active behavior as it promotes actual change, as well as a positively constructive behavior in regards to the future of the relationship (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982).

The next behavioral strategy is loyalty, or remaining stagnantly loyal to a relationship, hoping conditions will improve (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). Although loyalty is seen as a constructive behavior, as it does not promote further hurt, it is a passive strategy as there is no attempt for change in the relationship, just a hope that it will one day happen (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). Loyalty manifests itself in an individual who is waiting, hoping, or praying for improvement in the relationship and being supportive of a hurtful partner because of the label of partner (Rusbult et al., 1991).

Finally, neglect is an individual's decision to let a relationship waste away (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982). Neglect is apparent when partners spend less time together, avoid any discussion about the problem, or let things fall apart (Rusbult et al., 1991). This behavior is categorized as destructive to the relationship and passive in execution (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1982).

Coping as a Process

As discussed, there are many coping responses that individuals engage in once they experience relational hurt. Of these responses, forgiveness and repair are central in maintaining romantic relationships after the occurrence of a hurtful event. Other research offers a different model for understanding relational hurt where responses are developed systematically through three different stages: impact, searching for meaning, and moving on (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Strelan & Wojtysiak, 2009). Stage one, impact, refers to the cognitive, behavioral and affective disruptions that occur immediately after an individual encounters hurt. Stage two, searching for meaning, is an attempt to understand the hurt that occurred and how both the individual and partner respond to it. Finally, stage three, moving on, is the individual's ability to move past the hurtful event and continue on in life, with or without the relationship (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Strelan & Wojtysiak, 2009).

Individuals dealing with hurtful messages immediately following the event (stage one) have a tendency to do so with three general responses: active verbal, invulnerable, or acquiescence. All three responses utilize different approach or avoidance techniques: active verbal responses employ sarcasm, verbal criticism of the person causing the harm, or the demand for an explanation (approach styles); invulnerable responses, refer to a reaction that ignores or laughs off the hurtful message (avoid styles); and acquiescence, is the avoidance of the hurt by conceding to, apologizing for, or crying about causing one's partner to be hurtful (avoid styles) (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

When an individual formulates responses to hurt after the attribution, or meaning-making process has occurred (stage two), the natural tendency is to fight against or flee from the person who has caused the hurt (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003) as an individual feels action needs to be taken to prevent or avoid future hurt. The fight response, heightened by

the perceived intentionality of the hurt, refers to the motivation to seek revenge on a partner who has caused hurt (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). Experiencing an instance of hurt can leave an individual feeling out of control and less able to predict a partner's future behaviors; thus they are more inclined to engage in negative emotional responses to "even the score" (Gordon & Baucom, 2003).

The flight response represents the motivation to avoid any physical or emotional contact with a partner, alleviating the pain felt and decreasing an individual's vulnerability to be hurt again (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). As a result, individuals are likely to withdraw from their partner and the relationship to protect themselves from further hurt (Gordon & Baucom, 2003), however, the realization that the relationship could end can cause the individual to attempt to repair or forgive the hurt (Feeney, 2004). If forgiveness is not granted, a person experiencing hurt is likely to engage in alternating both the fight and flight responses, as they are unable to move on (stage three), resulting in cyclical hurtful responses (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

As a part of the coping process described in the previous section, researchers suggest that forgiveness may be understood as a step (stage three) in the process of coping; after individuals experience hurt they need to find a way to deal with the emotions they experience (Strelan & Wojtysiak, 2009). "Forgiveness has been conceptualized in terms of a person's motivation to communicate in positive rather than negative ways following a hurtful event" (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003, p. 4). Further, "interpersonal forgiving [is a] set of motivational changes whereby one becomes (a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, (b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and (c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's

hurtful actions” (McCullough & Worthington, 1997 p. 321). The ability to forgive is a critical determinant of whether a relationship can be repaired and closeness to a partner achieved (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). When an individual is able to forgive their partner, they are then motivated to pursue a relationship-constructive, rather than relationship-destructive, set of responses and future interactions (McCullough, Worthington & Rachael, 1997; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

However, studies suggest some people are predisposed to forgive, while others may battle with this type of response (Strelan & Wojtysiak, 2009). An individual that indicates they cannot forgive their partner acknowledges feeling a need to punish their partner, cognitive confusion about the instance, and intense mood swings; conversely, those individuals able to forgive their partners feel as though they are searching for balance with their partner and in the relationship (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). This demonstrates, by enacting a response of forgiveness an individual can cause a break in cyclical hurtful interactions (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

The response of an emotional offender is as important as the response of an individual who has been hurt. Studies suggest that the most effective strategy for inducing empathy, a feeling necessary when deciding to forgive someone, in a hurt partner is to offer a sincere apology for the hurt they have caused (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003; Wade & Worthington, 2003). The act of apologizing or showing remorse for a hurtful event results in emotional dissonance for the partner dealing with the hurt, causing what were initially feelings of hatred to shift to feelings of empathy (Wade & Worthington, 2003). If the individual who caused the hurt approaches their partner with sincere regret and remorse about the hurt they have caused, the potential for their partner to respond with forgiveness increases (Wade & Worthington, 2003).

However, if a hurtful event is perceived as severe, an apology may not be enough to prompt the relational repair needed to fix the relationship (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003).

Termination and Dissolution

Not all hurtful messages and instances are equal in creation or outcome (Gottman & Silver, 1999); nor are the responses elicited as a result. “People who are dissatisfied with a romantic relationship are more likely to see their partner as personally responsible for his or her problematic actions” (McLaren et al., 2001, p. 547). When hurtful events occur, some couples are able to repair the relationship and forgive; however, others perceive the damage as too great, leading to an escalation in hurtful events and/or the termination of the relationship altogether (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003; Bachman & Guerrero, 2008). Four behaviors (The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) or hurtful events have been deemed the most damaging to a relationship: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). These behaviors occur as a result of hurt and are referred to as a relational “check engine” light (Fowler & Dillow, 2011). All relational partners at some point engage in three of these four behaviors: criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). However, when contempt is introduced as a response the potential for a negative outcome (i.e. relational dissolution) increases exponentially (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011).

Complaints, also seen as hurtful messages, can be constructive and vital to the health and maintenance of a relationship (Fowler & Dillow, 2011). However, complaining can be contrasted with criticism, where criticism represents a statement implying that a global problem constituting a lasting aspect of an individual’s character exists in the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). Criticism differs from a complaint in terms of the language used and is

apparent when an individual discusses a global problem (i.e. “you never...” or “you always...”) (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Further, criticisms are seen as an attack on an individual’s personality (Gottman & Silver, 1999). “When one’s personality is under attack, the only thing to do is to dig in, entrench, and defend the bones of who you are” (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 44); thus criticism elicits a defensive response.

Defensiveness is any attempt to protect oneself from an interpersonal attack. This response also entails an individual’s refusal to take responsibility for a problem, in turn frequently identifying the partner as the culprit (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Defensiveness can also take the form of excuse making, making and responding to negative assumptions about a partner’s feelings, and whining (Fowler & Dillow, 2011). As previously discussed, defensiveness can be characterized as a “fight” approach to the episode of relational hurt.

Contempt is another destructive behavior, which occurs when a statement or nonverbal behavior is employed to place an individual on a higher plane than their partner (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Contempt is further understood as an individual’s intentional goal to cause a partner emotional pain through expressions of disgust (Fowler, & Dillow, 2011). Contemptuous interactions often utilize mockery, overt correction of a partner’s actions or knowledge, and the use of universal facial expressions of contempt (Gottman & Silver, 1999). These behaviors are a sign of disrespect and lack of admiration for one’s partner (Fowler & Dillow, 2011).

Finally the last Horseman of the Apocalypse, stonewalling, is the result of an individual creating psychological or physical distance from an interaction with a partner (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). This is accompanied by the lack or mirroring or re-affirming non-verbal cues that indicate someone is actively listening in a conversation (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

The four horsemen, while in parts displayed in all relationships, become particularly harmful when combined together. The unpleasantness of each dimension is not what makes these behaviors harmful, but the intense way these dimensions interfere with a couple's ability to communicate effectively (Gottman, 1994). These behaviors create a cyclical pattern of negative communication that is hard to break if a couple cannot gauge what is going on (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Silver, 1999). The result of this pattern is ultimately relationship termination (Gottman & Silver, 1999). While these responses are very intense in nature, scholarship suggests that the potential to react to hurt in such a way is very probable. The coping process is flooded with different strategies and models of coping: response models avoid and approach, response models destructive and constructive, and models of forgiveness and termination in a relationship. Each of these coping models discussed employ different tactics and lead to a multitude of outcomes. However, the models assist in understanding the hurt encountered and the resulting communication patterns possible as a means of dealing with the situation.

Chapter 3 - Future Directions

Considering the literature reviewed in this paper, interpersonal hurt has received considerable scholarly attention in terms of research. Yet, there are still ways to improve understanding of this important topic theoretically that would result in meaningful practical applications. The following discussion provides ideas for areas of expansion in current research from a theoretical, practical and topical standpoint.

Theoretical

Many existing theories on interpersonal hurt can be extended by layering additional theoretic lenses to interpret the data collected. For instance, a look at sense making as a means of understanding the conceptualization of hurt would enhance the current knowledge scholars have on the way an individual attributes and appraises their feelings of hurt. Sense making, established by scholar Karl Weick, is a “retrospective process in which individuals first act and then reflect on their actions to interpret what they mean” (Anderson, 2006, p. 1675). By considering the current research on attribution and appraisal through the lens of sense making, researchers may be able to better explain how when confronted with hurt, an individual’s initial reaction is not to evaluate the situation but to react in the heat of the moment. This real time decision can have very negative impacts on a relationship, making this theoretical connection interesting in a study of relational hurt.

Another theoretical combination that could be fruitful is to consider social exchange theory, or the evaluation to stay or leave a hurtful situation based on an individual’s perceived alternatives that do or do not exist (Lawler & Thye, 1995), in conjunction with the coping strategies discussed previously. Research of this nature could help scholars better understand an individual’s decision to remain in a relationship impacted by severe repeated instances of

interpersonal hurt. Conversely, social exchange theory also is designed to explain why some individual's feel able to leave severely hurtful relationships. Further, the use of social exchange theory can expand on the current coping strategies discussed, for instance, Rusbult & Zembrodt's (1982) discussion of the exit model for coping.

Coupling theories developed through research on interpersonal hurt with other communication theories would allow for a deeper understanding of the conceptualization, execution, and coping that occurs within romantic relationships where individuals experience interpersonal hurt. Further, the use of additional theoretical frameworks provides the ability to study interpersonal hurt in a longitudinal fashion. Many studies focus on a specific instance of hurt, often asking a participant to recall the most hurtful encounter they have experienced with their partner. Although this provides an immense amount of data, collecting data over a longer period of time could teach us more. Specifically, the use of a longitudinal study in relation to these theoretical frameworks enhances a researchers ability to observe how coping strategies and sense making occur at multiple checkpoints in time. The way an individual copes and makes sense of a situation is often reliant on the precursors to that event (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), therefore the observation of many events can be enlightening as to how these processes unfold and compound over time.

Practical

In addition to contributing to theoretical understanding, research on interpersonal hurt can and should assist practitioners such as counselors and psychologists in making recommendations to improve understanding and constructive communication in relationships. Current studies often use a single individual recall method of data collection. While this method provides a wide variety of interactions that are important to study, many scholars admit that using only one half

of the dyad in a recall scenario limits the ability of the research. The results of many of studies differ based on whether the participant was the victim or the aggressor in the hurtful interaction (Carlston & Wyer, 1979; Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). Further, studies often focus on the individual being impacted by the hurt, not the partner acting in a hurtful manner. However, by collecting information simultaneously on both partners' evaluations of hurtful situations, crucial information on the dynamics of the interaction could be gained.

Currently, the use of marital counseling focuses a lot on the communication that occurs in a relationship, as a result of an enhanced study of this nature, psychologists and counselors might apply insight about the relational interaction to assist relational partners in understanding their own communicative decisions. Dyadic collection could also shed light on the way a partner's communication interactions and patterns impact the relationship; thus prompting an understanding of solutions to such hurtful instances.

Further, in relation to the collection of data, the use of a recollection tool (i.e. narratives of a past hurtful experience) can cause potential bias as the meaning making and coping processes enacted can change an individual's perception of the interaction as it occurred in real time (McLaren et al., 2011). For example, if an individual experiences an interaction with hurt and their partner apologizes for the hurtful action, the individual may reevaluate their perception causing the hurtful instance to seem less harmful than initially thought. Not only does this reevaluation impact the data collected, but it can also be linked back to the theoretical implications associated with a study utilizing sense making.

Topical

Interpersonal hurt as an observational field produces an understanding of the day-to-day interactions partner's have in their romantic relationships. While this provides a great

understanding of conflict that can be difficult to identify on the surface and is thus hard to talk about, this basis of study provides a gateway to research that observes more severe forms of hurt such as “common couple violence,” or research aimed at understanding serial and severe instances of hurt in romantic relationships resulting in a physically abusive outcome (Olson, 2002). The coping and responses associated with the hurt discussed above don’t even begin to scratch the surface of severe, serial, and potentially physical instances of hurt. The effects of instances such as these are extremely destructive in relationships, especially when considering the long-term impacts (Feeney, 2004). Ideally, a study of daily constructive and destructive instances of hurt could lead to a better understand of the severe outcomes associated with repetitive hurt. As a result predictors of serial and severe hurt could become more apparent, aiding in the understanding and decrease of such instances.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

“As the cliché goes, ‘love is blind,’ and happy relationships may cause us to view interactions with our partners through rose-colored glasses” (Young, 2004, p. 292). Through this evaluation of prior scholarship on interpersonal hurt, the happiness in relationships is peeled away, showing the “dark side” of interpersonal relationships (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). This concept of interpersonal hurt was described as the creation of a message exchanged between at least two people resulting in strong central emotional pain, using words or actions that devalue a partner and a relationship, and acting in violation of relational expectancy norms. After providing a framework for what hurt is, this literature review proceeded to investigate how individuals explain hurt and ascribe blame for hurtful actions. Finally, scholarship on coping provided a way to understand what individuals do after a hurtful event, whether the coping response is to repair or terminate the relationship. While existing research provides a solid foundation to better understand interpersonal hurt, there remain many directions and opportunities for future research endeavors.

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