



## Articles

# Using Appraisal Theory to Predict Emotional and Coping Responses to Hurtful Messages

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## Abstract

Based on appraisal theory (Lazarus 1991, 1999), this study examined the degree to which primary and secondary cognitive appraisals of hurtful messages predict the amount of hurt individuals feel, and the coping behaviors they enact. This study presents a significant step forward in its operationalization of both primary and secondary appraisal variables by treating hurt as an outcome, rather than an antecedent, of the appraisal process, and considers an extensive range of coping responses. We surveyed participants ( $N = 217$ ) about hurtful messages they received within an array of relationship types. The results revealed that four types of appraisals predicted the amount of hurt recipients experienced. All coping behaviors except positive reappraisal were significantly predicted by the primary appraisals (categories of risk) and secondary appraisals (perceived intentionality and frequency of hurtful messages). The findings explicate appraisal theory's potential in explaining individuals' responses to hurtful communication.

**Keywords:** appraisal theory, hurtful messages, coping behavior, hurtful communication

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Getting one's feelings hurt is bound to happen at one time or another in interpersonal interactions. At some point, one's conversational partner is likely to say or do something that provokes a feeling of emotional injury (Folkes, 1982; L'Abate, 1977, 1997). Because hurt feelings are unavoidable, how people cope with this inevitable interpersonal emotion is of paramount importance. Coping is central to the process of emotional arousal (Lazarus, 1999, p. 37) and should be considered part and parcel of emotional experience. Much of the scholarship on hurtful communication and coping has focused primarily on the approach-avoidance tendency or degree of relational distancing (e.g., McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chavez-Appel, & Rex, 2005). The present study casts a wider net on the coping process by exploring various ways of coping. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) argued that people cope with stressful encounters in myriad ways. Their conceptualization includes distancing but also takes into account seven other coping strategies people may employ in response to an emotion-evoking experience.

By and large, scholars investigating the coping process with regard to hurt have done so from an appraisal theory framework. Appraisal theory suggests that emotions are elicited as a result of people's assessments of a given event or situation (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Scherer, 1984). This study extends prior research by assessing both the primary and secondary appraisals of recipients of hurtful messages. Furthermore, consistent with appraisal theory, we posit the experience of hurt as an outcome, rather than an antecedent of the

appraisal process and explore the utility of primary and secondary appraisals in predicting the hurt reported by recipients of hurtful messages. Finally, we measure the degree to which these appraisals predict the coping behaviors enacted in response to the hurtful communication.

## Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory is based on the assumption that emotions serve an adaptive function, and that appraisals play a critical role in the generation and differentiation of emotions (Smith & Kirby, 2001). The major premise of appraisal theory is that emotions are prompted by evaluations, or appraisals, of experiences in context (Roseman & Smith, 2001). This implies that emotions do not arise automatically from particular events but rather are based on individuals' cognitive processing of those experiences. "Appraisal is an evaluative process that serves to 'diagnose' whether the situation confronting an individual has adaptation relevance...and [to] produce an appropriate emotional response" (Smith & Kirby, 2001, p. 121). For example, being called a mean name does not necessarily lead to hurt feelings, but is reliant on an assessment of the relational and psychological context to make it hurtful.

Cognitive appraisal, then, is the process by which an individual determines whether an interaction or incident is relevant to his or her well-being (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986, p. 992). The cognitive appraisal process consists of both primary appraisals and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals involve the assessment of whether a particular interaction or event is meaningful to individuals in the sense that it may have implications for their values, goals, or sense of self (Lazarus, 1999); in other words, "Do I have a stake, or are any of my core values engaged or threatened?" (p. 76). A primary appraisal that a situation poses a negligible threat or implication for one's self esteem or values, then, would not elicit an emotional response.

A secondary appraisal focuses on available options for dealing with the situation. Lazarus (1999) proposed three judgments that compose secondary appraisal: blame or credit, coping potential, and future expectations. Blame or credit for a hurtful message would involve appraisal of whether or not the speaker intended to hurt one's feeling and thus is responsible for the harm caused. Coping potential reflects beliefs about one's own ability to enact possible coping strategies; for example, is it actually possible for me to avoid this person in the future, or can I find someone to talk to about this? Finally, future expectations refer to whether the situation will improve or deteriorate; is this an anomalous negative event, or likely to be repeated? Future expectations are informed by participants' past experiences, such that a person who has hurt one repeatedly in the past would set an expectation that it would likely continue in the future.

Lazarus (1999) argued that the terms "primary" and "secondary" imply nothing about the importance or chronology in which these appraisals occur. Scherer (2001) countered that appraisals happen in fixed stages: detection of the stimulus event, assessment of its significance for one's goals, assessment of coping potential, and evaluation against one's internal and external norms or standards. However, Lazarus (1999) maintained that the different forms of appraisal are interdependent parts of the same appraisal process. That is, an individual can move back and forth between primary and secondary appraisals, with each influencing the other "quickly, automatically, and outside of conscious awareness" (Smith & Kirby, 2001, p. 129).

Finally, coping is the process by which a person makes cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Folkman et al. (1986) emphasized the contextual nature of coping, such that it is shaped by individuals' appraisals of a situation and the various available options for coping with it. These as-

assessments may prepare them to confront the source of stress, seek out support, or remove themselves from the path of harm.

Lazarus (1999) proposed that problem-focused coping involves altering the way in which an individual is experiencing their environment, and therefore may focus on either the self or the environment. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, aims at regulating emotions without changing the context that give rise to them. As noted by Baker and Berenbaum (2007), there has been a tendency in the literature to portray emotion-focused coping as maladaptive (e.g., Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Matheson, Skomorovsky, Fiocco, & Anisman, 2007), and problem-focused coping as adaptive (e.g., Kraaij, Garnefski, & Maes, 2002); still others have proposed that an interaction between the two types is most productive (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007). However, Austenfeld and Stanton (2004) argued that the relationship between emotion-focused coping and negative psychology outcomes in the literature may be attributed, at least in part, to inconsistencies in operationalization across coping measures. Moreover, Aldwin and Revenson (1987) suggested that the relationship between coping and mental health is bidirectional; that is, people with poorer mental health tend to have more stress and also deal with that stress in maladaptive ways. Therefore, the context may be pivotal, such that some types of stressors (e.g., interpersonal events) may be better suited to emotion-focused coping than others (e.g., achievement) (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007).

In summary, the appraisal process, consisting of both primary and secondary appraisals, influences individuals' reported intensity of hurt in response to a hurtful message: "Appraisals precede and elicit emotions" (Roseman & Smith, 2001, p. 7). Moreover, individuals' perceptions of the relevance of a hurtful event to their goals (primary appraisals), and their perceptions of the intentionality and frequency of such messages from a speaker (secondary appraisals), should predict their coping responses to hurtful events. Although the appraisal process has been studied extensively relative to a number of other negative emotions, its role in predicting coping in remains largely untested.

## Hurtful Communication and Appraisals

Numerous communication scholars have examined the link between hurt and appraisals by investigating their connection with perceived causes of hurt (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005), cultural relativity (Tokunaga, 2008), distancing responses (McLaren & Solomon, 2010), relational characteristics, such as relational uncertainty and partner interference (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009) or attachment (Feeney, 2005). Although most of the studies examining hurt and appraisals have employed the concept of appraisals broadly, referring to the evaluations or judgments people make about the impact of the emotion-eliciting event (Lazarus, 1991), McLaren and Solomon (2008) differentiated common hurtful communication variables into primary or secondary appraisals. Specifically, they argued that judgments of the intensity or the strength of the emotion evoked shape people's primary appraisals; whereas recipients' perceptions about the intent of the hurt-evoking comment (i.e., whether or not the conversational partner purposefully hurt the recipients' feelings or not) and perceived frequency of hurtful communication from the conversational partner (i.e., how often the conversational partner engages in this type of communication) influence people's secondary appraisals. This categorization blurs the cognitive appraisal component; it appears to put the severity of the emotion as the antecedent without factoring in the individual's assessment of the meaning of the emotion-eliciting event.

We contend that the perceived cause of the hurt itself constitutes the primary appraisal. Implicit in the perceived cause is the relevance to the recipients' well-being. Vangelisti et al. (2005) noted several potential causes of hurt

feelings, including: *Relational Denigration* (portraying the relationship as not valuable or important to the person who hurt them), *Humiliation* (making respondents feel shame or vulnerability; *Verbal/Nonverbal Aggression* (communicating forcefully and hostilely), *Intrinsic Flaw* (focusing on immutable personal defects), *Shock* (seen as surprising), *Ill-Conceived Humor* (employing malicious humor), *Mistaken Intent* (reflecting that the recipient was misunderstood or mischaracterized), and *Discouragement* (denigrating participants' efforts or hopes). As described, these perceptions of the hurtful interaction reflect appraisals about the messages' assessed risk to the recipients' sense of self-worth, values, or goals. Whereas some messages might have the potential to elicit hurt, they would not do so if recipients did not perceive them as falling into one or more of the aforementioned categories of potential harm. For example, my mother may say that my contribution to a family dinner was bland. If I found this to be unexpected or discouraging, I may feel significant hurt. However, I may be a fledgling chef who has asked for and received her candid feedback many times, and so I may appraise this message as helpful. As such, these perceptions represent appraisals of the message's implications for my self-image and personal goals.

In addition to primary appraisal categories for risk of hurtful messages, the intent of the speaker and the frequency with which he or she engages in such behavior toward the recipient are also factors in the secondary appraisal process. Lazarus (1999) explains that a person must evaluate three issues: blame or credit for an outcome, coping potential, and future expectations. Prior research has examined the issue of intentionality in hurtful messages (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Vangelisti, 2007), which reflects the degree to which the person is seen as having set out to hurt the recipient, and has considered the degree to which hurtful messages are typical of the sender and recipients' relationship (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), reflecting an expectation that such hurtful message may recur. Based on appraisal theory, both primary and secondary appraisals should affect individuals' emotional reactions to hurtful messages and the behaviors that they use to cope.

## Outcomes of Appraisals

Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) investigated people's communicative reactions to hurt. Their study uncovered various emotional reactions that people may have when their feelings are hurt, ranging from being silent to seeking clarification to laughing. The results of their study are in line with Parkinson's (1997) contention that reactions to emotion provide "message value" about people's assessment of the emotion-eliciting event itself, as well as the perceived relationship between the interactants. Although people's responses to hurt may offer insight into their initial coping process, the concept of coping is broader than an individual's immediate reactions to an emotion-evoking event. As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain, coping involves, not just responding to, but managing psychological stress.

Some prior research (e.g., McLaren & Solomon, 2008, 2010; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Young et al., 2005) has focused on relational distancing as the primary coping mechanism that individuals enact in responses to hurtful messages, while Vangelisti et al. (2005) assessed immediate behavioral reactions of verbal, invulnerable, and acquiescent responses. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) identified eight cognitive and behavioral strategies that people use to cope with stressful or emotion-evoking encounters. *Being confrontive* involves aggressive efforts to alter the situation. *Distancing* involves detaching oneself from the event. *Focusing on self-control* deals with regulating one's feelings and actions. *Seeking social support* involves efforts at acquiring informational, emotional, or tangible assistance from others. *Accepting responsibility* focuses on one's acknowledgement of his/her culpability in the situation. *Engaging in escape-avoidance* involves general behavioral efforts to escape or avoid one's

feelings. *Problem-Solving* describes deliberate efforts to improve the situation. Finally, *positive reappraising* emphasizes efforts to find positive meaning and personal growth from the encounter.

Folkman and Lazarus' (1985) broader range of coping responses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how people grapple with hurt. However, these coping response categories have yet to be assessed in hurtful communication research. Vangelisti et al. (2005) found that perceived risk categories of relational denigration and mistaken intent were positively associated with, and humiliation was negatively associated with, individuals' self-reported verbal responses to hurtful messages, a category of behavior similar to Folkman and Lazarus' confrontive coping. They found that invulnerable responses, similar to Folkman and Lazarus' categories of distancing and escape-avoidance, were positively associated with ill-conceived humor and negatively predicted by relational denigration. Finally, their category of acquiescent responses, similar to Folkman and Lazarus's accepting responsibility, was negatively associated with both aggression and ill-conceived humor. Folkman and Lazarus' categories of seeking social support, self-controlling, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal were not clearly reflected in Vangelisti et al.'s taxonomy of behavioral responses to hurt.

Furthermore, prior research has produced mixed and limited findings about the role of the secondary appraisals of perceived intentionality and frequency on responses to hurt. Both McLaren and Solomon (2008) and Vangelisti and Young (2000) found perceived intent to significantly predict relational distancing in response to a hurtful message. However, Vangelisti et al. (2005) found that it was not predictive of any behavioral responses. McLaren and Solomon (2008) found that frequency of hurt from the speaker predicted relational distancing, but frequency has not been linked to any other coping behaviors.

In summary, prior research (e.g., Baker & Berenbaum, 2007) has suggested that stressful interpersonal events such as hurtful messages may be more likely to elicit emotion-focused coping behaviors than task-focused events. Lazarus (1999) proposed that the secondary appraisal processes, which gauge the changeability of a situation, are particularly influential in determining individuals' coping responses. The small body of research tying appraisals of hurtful messages to behavioral reactions has assessed limited coping categories and produced mixed results. Therefore, we propose the following research question to probe the degree to which the appraisal process predicts these coping behaviors:

RQ1: To what degree do primary appraisals (categories of risk) and secondary appraisals (perceived intentionality and frequency of hurtful messages) predict hurtful message recipients' enactment of coping behaviors?

Appraisal theory posits that the experience of the emotion itself is the ultimate outcome of the appraisal process (Lazarus, 2001; Smith & Kirby, 2001). However, prior research has tended to portray the intensity of emotion evoked as a precursor to people's perceptions of the intentionality of the hurtful communication (Feeney, 2004; Vangelisti, 2007; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), their reactions to the hurt-evoking encounter (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Young et al., 2005), and secondary appraisals (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). In keeping with appraisal theory, our second research question addresses the degree to which perceptions of the potential risk to their self-image and values, as well as assessment of how intentional and frequent such hurtful message are in the relationship with the sender, predict individuals' reported experience of hurt.

RQ 2: To what degree do primary appraisals (categories of risk) and secondary appraisals (perceived intentionality and frequency of hurtful messages) predict the degree of hurt experienced by message recipients?



## Method

### Participants

A total of 217 individuals (64 males, 153 females) participated in this study. Consistent with most prior studies of hurtful communication (e.g., McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Miller & Roloff, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 2007) participants were recruited from communication courses and were offered extra credit for their time; people who did not wish to participate were provided an alternate means of earning extra credit. The sample included African Americans ( $n = 17$ , 7.8%), Asian Americans ( $n = 29$ , 13.4%), European Americans (Caucasian) ( $n = 99$ , 45.6%), Latino/a Americans or Hispanics ( $n = 43$ , 19.8%), Native Americans ( $n = 1$ , 0.5%), Pacific Islanders ( $n = 10$ , 4.6%), and other ( $n = 17$ , 7.8%) or non-reported ( $n = 1$ , 0.5%), with ages ranging from 18 to 47 ( $M = 22.08$ ,  $SD = 3.33$ ).

### Procedures

Individuals were provided a questionnaire and asked to describe “the most recent situation in which your feelings were hurt by someone else.” Before they completed the closed-ended measurement items, participants were asked to briefly describe the situation in which their feelings were hurt. Respondents reported on hurt evoked by romantic partners ( $n = 79$ , 36.4%), close friends ( $n = 62$ , 28.6%), family members ( $n = 49$ , 22.6%), superiors (e.g., bosses/teachers/coaches) ( $n = 9$ , 4.1%), colleagues (e.g., coworkers/classmates/teammates) ( $n = 9$ , 4.1%), and acquaintances/strangers ( $n = 8$ , 3.7%), with one missing data ( $n = 1$ , .5%).

### Primary Appraisal Measures

To assess recipients' perceptions about the risks posed by the messages, Vangelisti et al.'s (2005) measure was employed. To ensure the stability of Vangelisti et al.'s (2005) proposed eight factor model of recipients' perceived causes of hurt, all 39 items were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using maximum-likelihood solution. The goodness of fit indices (GFIs) were:  $\chi^2$  (702,  $N = 217$ ) = 1919.74,  $p = .001$ ; CFI = .72; NNFI = .71; RMSEA = .09. According to Hatcher (1994), a non-significant  $\chi^2$  test is ideal; however, it is common practice in CFA to use a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio if the  $\chi^2$  test for the model is significant with a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio not more than 2.00. Hatcher (1994) also noted that recommended levels for the CFI and NNFI should be greater than .90. Unfortunately, based on these criteria, the data do not reasonably fit the model. Therefore, based on Suhr's (2006) suggestion to conduct an exploratory factor analysis when a CFA model is not supported, all items on the measure were submitted to a principal axis factor analysis using oblimin rotation and a .50 minimum for the primary loading and .40 maximum for any other loadings. The final model retained the same eight factors as Vangelisti et al.'s (2005) model with some items dropped, and accounted for 66.24% of the variance. *Relational Denigration* (e.g., “It made me feel like our relationship was less important to the other person than it was to me;” 9-item composite  $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ), *Humiliation* (e.g., “It humiliated me;” 5-item composite  $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .94$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ), *Verbal/Nonverbal Aggression* (e.g., “It was said in a mean way;” 4-item composite  $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ), *Intrinsic Flaw* (e.g., “It implied that I was permanently flawed;” 2-item composite  $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $\alpha = .70$ ), *Shock* (e.g., “It was unexpected;” 3-item composite  $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), *Ill-Conceived Humor* (e.g., “It involved teasing that wasn't funny;” 3-item composite  $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ), *Mistaken Intent* (e.g., “It showed the other person misunderstood my intent;” 4-item composite  $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = .96$ ,  $\alpha = .73$ ), and *Discouragement* (e.g., “It implied my positive efforts were all for nothing;” 2-item composite  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ).

## Secondary Appraisal Measures

The extent to which participants felt their conversational partner hurt their feelings on purpose was examined with Young and Bippus's (2001) 3-item measure, which asked respondents to rate on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*) on items such as "He/She intentionally hurt my feelings" (composite  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

The perceived frequency with which the conversational partner hurts the recipients' feelings was assessed with Vangelisti and Young's (2000) measure, which is composed of six 5-point Likert-type items (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*) examining the perceived regularity or commonality of hurtful communication in the relationship via statements like "He/she often hurts my feelings" (Composite  $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = .78$ ,  $\alpha = .75$ ).

## Outcome/Coping Measures

Folkman et al.'s (1986) Ways of Coping Scale was used to measure people's coping responses. Using a 5-point Likert-type format (1 = *Not at All Descriptive of My Response* to 5 = *Completely Descriptive of My Response*), this scale assesses people's use of the 8 coping strategies. All 50 items were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using maximum-likelihood solution. The goodness of fit indices (GFIs) were:  $\chi^2$  (1175,  $N = 217$ ) = 2936.44,  $p = .001$ ; CFI = .69; NNFI = .67; RMSEA = .08. Based on Hatcher's (1994) criteria, the data did not fit the model. Therefore, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the aforementioned criteria. The model accounted for 69.4% of the variance and yielded the same eight factors as Folkman's scale, but with some items dropped: *Confrontive Coping* (e.g., "I stood my ground and fought for what I wanted;" 4-item composite  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = .99$ ,  $\alpha = .75$ ), *Distancing* (e.g., "I didn't let it get to me and refused to think about it too much;" 5-item composite  $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ), *Self-Controlling* (e.g., "I tried to keep my feelings to myself;" 5-item composite  $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ), *Seeking Social Support* (e.g., "I talked to someone about how I was feeling;" 5-item composite  $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ), *Accepting Responsibility* (e.g., "I realized that I brought the problem on myself;" 3-item composite  $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ), *Escape-Avoidance* (e.g., "I tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medication, and so forth;" 5-item composite  $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = .84$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ), *Planful Problem-Solving* (e.g., "I knew what had to be done, so I doubled my efforts to make things work;" 5-item composite  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ), and *Positive Reappraisal* (e.g., "I came out of the experience better than when I went in;" 4-item composite  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

The amount of hurt evoked was measured using Vangelisti and Young's (2000) 2-item instrument, which asked recipients to rate the extent to which the communication was hurtful as well as the extent to which it was considered emotionally painful on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*) composite  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .90$ ,  $\alpha = .72$ ).

## Results

Prior research has shown differences in reactions to hurtful messages based on sex (e.g., McLaren & Solomon, 2010; Young et al., 2005) and the relationship to the speaker (Young & Bippus, 2001). Therefore, we first tested for equivalency across sex and relational types on our appraisal, coping, and amount of hurt variables. A MANOVA revealed no main effects for sex Wilk's  $\lambda = .96$ ,  $F(10, 167) = .97$ ,  $p = .87$  or relationship type Wilk's  $\lambda = .75$ ,  $F(50, 765.00) = .99$ ,  $p = .48$  on the appraisal variables, and no significant interaction Wilk's  $\lambda = .73$ ,  $F(50, 765) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .28$ . A MANOVA revealed no main effects for sex Wilk's  $\lambda = .94$ ,  $F(50, 172) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .18$  or relationship type Wilk's  $\lambda = .74$ ,  $F(40, 752.53) = 1.36$ ,  $p = .07$  and no significant interaction Wilk's  $\lambda = .80$ ,  $F(40, 752.53) =$

.98,  $p = .52$  on the coping variables. Finally, for the amount of hurt reported, there were no main effects for sex  $F(1, 191) = .88$ ,  $p = .35$  or relationship type  $F(5, 193) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .38$ , and no significant interaction  $F(5, 193) = 1.96$ ,  $p = .09$ . As this pattern of findings suggested a negligible effect on our variables of interest in the study, we did not account for sex and relationship type in subsequent analyses.

For the first research question, a canonical analysis indicated that the overall relationship between the set of appraisal variables and the set of coping variable was significant, Wilk's  $\lambda = .33$ ,  $F(80, 966.28) = 2.33$ ,  $p = .000$ . Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that the predictor set accounted for significant variance in all of the coping variables except for positive reappraising (see Table 1).

Table 1

Predictor Betas and Adjusted  $R^2$  for Coping Variables

CV	Primary Appraisals								Secondary Appraisals		Total Adj. $R^2$
	RD	HU	VA	IF	SH	IH	MI	DI	IN	FR	
Being Confrontive	.18 <sup>c</sup>	-.11	-.13	-.01	-.03	.03	.18 <sup>d</sup>	.14	.08	.20 <sup>c</sup>	.16 <sup>a</sup>
Self-Controlling	-.06	.15 <sup>d</sup>	-.19 <sup>d</sup>	.10	.23 <sup>b</sup>	.21 <sup>b</sup>	.02	.11	.13	.02	.15 <sup>a</sup>
Seeking Social Support	.25 <sup>c</sup>	.09	-.20 <sup>d</sup>	-.05	-.07	.06	.12	.17 <sup>d</sup>	-.02	.04	.10 <sup>b</sup>
Accepting Responsibility	-.15	.32 <sup>a</sup>	-.02	.02	-.18 <sup>d</sup>	-.16 <sup>d</sup>	.15	-.03	.11	-.11	.10 <sup>a</sup>
Escape-Avoidance	.12	.18 <sup>d</sup>	-.24 <sup>c</sup>	.15 <sup>d</sup>	-.01	-.03	.00	.19 <sup>d</sup>	.20 <sup>d</sup>	-.06	.14 <sup>a</sup>
Planful Problem-Solving	.04	.24 <sup>b</sup>	.10	-.11	-.13	-.15	.12	.08	.06	-.15	.07 <sup>d</sup>
Distancing	-.15	-.07	-.13	-.05	.11	.36 <sup>a</sup>	-.13	.08	.11	.02	.11 <sup>a</sup>
Positive Reappraisal	-.06	.05	.02	.00	.04	-.05	.04	.03	.09	-.05	-.04

Note. CV = coping variable; RD = relational denigration; HU = humiliation; VA = verbal/nonverbal aggression; IF = intrinsic flaw; SH = shock; IH = ill-conceived humor; MI = mistaken intent; DI = discouragement; IN = intentionality of hurt; FR = frequency of hurt. Primary appraisal variables: Relational denigration, humiliation, verbal/nonverbal aggression, intrinsic flaw, shock, ill-conceived humor, mistaken intent, and discouragement. Secondary appraisal variables: Intentionality of hurt and frequency of hurt.

<sup>a</sup> =  $p < .001$ . <sup>b</sup> =  $p < .005$ . <sup>c</sup> =  $p < .01$ . <sup>d</sup> =  $p < .05$ .

The second research question asked to what degree appraisals would predict the hurt experienced by message recipients. To address this question, the variable reflecting the amount of hurt experienced was regressed on the primary appraisal variables (humiliation, relational denigration, flaw, shock, humor, misunderstanding, and discouragement) and the secondary appraisal variables (intent to hurt and frequency of hurt) using the enter method. We followed the advice of Stevens (1996) and Lewis-Beck (1980) to check for multicollinearity among our predictor sets by looking for correlations above .80 among predictors and regressing each predictor on all other predictors to check for  $R^2$  values close to 1. All of our appraisal variables were acceptable based on these guidelines. The model  $F(10, 170) = 11.36$ ,  $p = .000$ , accounted for 36.5% of the variance in the amount of hurt experienced. The primary appraisal variables of humiliation ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p = .000$ ), relational denigration ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and humor ( $\beta = -.29$ ,  $p = .000$ ), as well as the secondary appraisal of intent to hurt ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .01$ ), emerged as significant predictors in the model (see Table 2).



Table 2

Predictor Betas and Adjusted  $R^2$  for Degree of Hurt

Primary Appraisals								Secondary Appraisals		Total Adj. $R^2$
RD	HU	VA	IF	SH	IH	MI	DI	IN	FR	
.25 <sup>a</sup>	.43 <sup>a</sup>	-.07	.02	-.02	-.29 <sup>a</sup>	.11	-.02	.20 <sup>b</sup>	-.05	.37 <sup>a</sup>

Note. RD = relational denigration; HU = humiliation; VA = verbal/nonverbal aggression; IF = intrinsic flaw; SH = shock; IH = ill-conceived humor; MI = mistaken intent; DI = discouragement; IN = intentionality of hurt; FR = frequency of hurt. Primary appraisal variables: Relational denigration, humiliation, verbal/nonverbal aggression, intrinsic flaw, shock, ill-conceived humor, mistaken intent, and discouragement. Secondary appraisal variables: Intentionality of hurt and frequency of hurt.

<sup>a</sup> =  $p < .001$ . <sup>b</sup> =  $p < .02$ .

## Discussion

Where prior studies have provided partial tests of the appraisal process as applied to hurtful communication, this study presents a significant step forward in its operationalization of both primary and secondary appraisal variables predicting the experience of hurt. We also extended beyond relational distancing (McLaren & Solomon, 2008) and other limited taxonomies of coping options (e. g., Vangelisti et al., 2005) to consider an extensive range of coping responses. All of these coping behaviors except positive reappraisal were significantly predicted by the primary and secondary appraisals. In contrast to previous research (e.g., McLaren & Solomon, 2008) and consistent with appraisal theory (Roseman & Smith, 2001), we proposed the experience of hurt as an outcome of the appraisal process. This variable too was significantly predicted by the primary and secondary appraisal variables.

Problem-focused coping, represented by planful problem solving, accepting responsibility, and confrontive behaviors, has generally been portrayed in the literature as a more adaptive response to stressful events (e.g., Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). In our study, individuals reported that they more likely to engage in planful problem solving and accept responsibility if they appraised hurtful messages as humiliating them, suggesting that the hurtful message identified was based on a valid but embarrassing issue that they were motivated to address.

Having one's conversational partner publicly embarrass or degrade oneself is extremely hurtful (Vangelisti et al., 2005). Vangelisti and Crumley's (1998) work on reactions to hurt may shed some light on this counter-intuitive link between being humiliated and coping via taking responsibility; they found that highly hurtful messages increased people's likelihood to engage in acquiescent responses (crying, conceding, and apologizing). However, in our study, we also discovered that to the extent that individuals had expected the hurtful comment, and did not feel that it was simply poorly-conceived humor, they enacted the coping behavior of taking responsibility for it. Because an anticipated hurtful comment may be less hurtful than one that comes as a shock, these complex findings may illustrate the distinction between immediate reactions to hurt, such as crying, and the coping process, which may be more durative or functional.

An individuals' likelihood of confronting the speaker of the hurtful message was predicted by the perception that the speaker was denigrating his or her relationship with the recipient and hurt the recipient frequently. This finding is consistent with Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, and Evans' (1998) concept of relational devaluation: "the perception that another individual does not regard his or her relationship with the person to be as important, close, or valuable as the person desires" (p. 1225). In their study, they found that assertive reactions, such as showing anger or

defending oneself, were the most common responses by those who had been hurt. As [Leary and Springer \(2001\)](#) noted, "The potential for hurt feelings motivates people to protect their social relationships and....motivates remedial actions" (pp. 167-168). Therefore, when one interactant challenges how the relationship is viewed, this characterization likely represents an intrinsically malleable topic that individuals feel may be productively negotiated through direct confrontation. Though it may seem intuitive that an individual would also confront someone who has hurt them repeatedly, this runs counter to some prior research. [Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, and Clark \(2007\)](#) noted that when individuals believe that someone repeatedly engages in hurtful behavior toward them, they are likely to view this communication as planned, purposeful, and with an awareness of the hurt it will cause; and as a consequence, as [Vangelisti and Young \(2000\)](#) found, people are likely to simply avoid the person who engages in a pattern of hurtful communication, rather than make deliberate efforts to improve the situation or alter their behavior. These discrepant findings suggest that individuals may vacillate between two poles of confrontation and avoidance.

The remaining coping behaviors reflect emotion-focused coping, as they do not center on changing the situation or environment, but only the recipients' thoughts or feelings toward it. Individuals' perceptions that the speaker was teasing them with ill-conceived humor predicted the coping responses of self-control and distancing. This finding reflects the well-established tendency for individuals' perceptions of speakers' intent to make the difference between an assessment of good-natured teasing and mean-spirited ridicule ([Bippus, 2003, 2007](#)). That is, they did not want to lose face by letting the speaker know that they had been hurt by a remark that was meant as a joke, and so they detached themselves from the situation and did not allow their feelings to show.

Individuals reported being more likely to seek out social support from others outside the relationship when they perceived the speaker as denigrating their relationship. In line with the work of [Leary et al. \(1998\)](#), this finding suggests that an appraisal of risk to one's conception of the relationship with the speaker and/or one's value as a relational partner tends to elicit more active, emotion-focused attempts to cope. Finally, escape-avoidance coping behavior was predicted by perceptions that the recipient was humiliated or discouraged by the speaker, and that the speaker intentionally hurt them. Clearly, as previous research (e.g., [Vangelisti et al., 2005](#)) has established, being embarrassed or disgraced is highly emotionally painful; it is not surprising then these actions would lead to recipients of these hurtful behaviors to avoid the speaker or wish the interaction to be over.

On a practical level, our findings provide some tentative insights into the reactions we might expect from those who we may hurt with our words. If we say something that makes someone feel as if we do not value our relationship with him, we might expect him to react confrontationally or complain to a third party. If we make a comment that humiliates someone, we might expect her to avoid us, yet take responsibility upon herself for the behavior or trait we identified and plan how to resolve it. If we point out some intrinsic flaw that someone has, or seem to be trying to hurt him intentionally, it is perhaps not surprising that he would simply avoid us. If we hurt someone in a way that makes her think we are just trying to shock her, she may deflect any responsibility for the issue and would simply try to control herself during the interaction. Likewise, if we hurt someone with what he perceives to be ill-conceived humor, he may show self-control in the moment, and distance himself from us without accepting responsibility for it. The more we make hurtful comments to an individual, the more likely she may be to confront us. Individual who feel compelled to deliver sensitive information to friends, family and romantic partners may bear in mind the different ways in which their delivery is likely to be perceived, and the typical reactions that flow these perceptions.

Overall, the primary and secondary appraisals modestly predicted the coping behaviors that individuals reported in responses to hurtful messages, accounting for a less than 17% of the variance in each of these variables. However, appraisals were much stronger predictors of the emotion outcome, accounting for 37% of the variance in amount of hurt reported. Respondents tended to be more hurt when they saw the message as humiliating, denigrating their relationship, and intentional, and less so when they saw it as reflecting ill-conceived humor. These findings echo those of [Vangelisti et al. \(2005\)](#) who noted that humiliation, relational denigration, and ill-conceived humor (inversely) predicted the amount of hurt reported. [Young and Bippus \(2001\)](#) also found that messages were perceived as less hurtful when they were perceived to have humorous intent.

Our findings provide consistent support for appraisal theory. As operationalized, our primary and secondary appraisal variables predicted the emotional reaction of individuals who received a hurtful message and, to a lesser extent, their coping tendencies. Taken together, relational denigration, humiliation, and ill-conceived humor emerged as the most frequent and strongest predictors of coping behaviors and hurt. There are several possible reasons as to why the link between appraisals and coping was not more robust. First, though our variables representing primary appraisals were drawn from prior hurtful message research and, consistent with appraisal theory, reflected situational risks to self-image and goals, they may not have represented a range of considerations that individual take into account when responding to a stressful for emotional event. For example, [Lazarus \(1999\)](#) cited three primary appraisal components: goal relevance, goal congruence, and type of ego involvement. While the topics of hurtful messages clearly represent risks to individuals' goals and egos, a direct assessment of these three primary appraisal components may provide a clearer picture of their predictive ability. Furthermore, [Lazarus \(1999\)](#) cited coping potential as one of three aspects of secondary appraisal, only two of which we measured in this study. While some coping behaviors, such as self-control or distancing, may be available in virtually any situation, others depend upon circumstances. For example, confidants may not be readily available to provide social support, or it may not be possible to confront the source of the hurtful message. Certainly it is likely that the perception of various coping options being available would largely predict one's likelihood of enacting them. In addition, directly assessing future expectations of hurtful messages directly, rather than by looking at prior frequency of hurt, may better capture this secondary appraisal and its ability to predict outcome of hurtful interactions.

A large body of scholarship has relied on undergraduate student samples to examine hurtful communication, including studies investigating hurt from mothers ([Kennedy-Lightsey & Dillow, 2011](#)), in families ([Vangelisti et al., 2007](#)), in pre-marital romantic relationships ([McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011](#)). Research exploring honest but hurtful messages ([Zhang & Stafford, 2008](#)), willingness to confront hurt feelings ([Miller & Roloff, 2007](#)), and the biological stress reactions to hurtful messages ([Priem, McLaren, & Solomon, 2010](#)) has utilized college-based samples. Even scholarship directly exploring appraisals and hurt (e.g., [McLaren & Solomon, 2008, 2010](#); [Theiss et al., 2009](#); [Tokunaga, 2008](#)) is derived from undergraduate student participants. The current project also follows in this tradition. College samples provide important information about how hurtful communication is interpreted and responded to, and as [Greenberg \(1987\)](#) noted, the similarities between student and non-student samples are greater than the differences; nonetheless, we acknowledge this sample as a potential limitation to our study. Future scholarship may wish to recruit participants from a more diverse population to further unpack the complexity of this phenomenon.

Future research may also explore factors outside of the appraisal model that may influence the coping behaviors that hurtful message recipients enact. For instance, individuals who are more aware of their emotions may reap fewer benefits from emotion-focused coping than people who tend to lack such clarity (i.e., alexithymics) ([Baker](#)

& Berenbaum, 2007). Moreover, prior research has found sex differences in coping tendencies, with women more likely to use emotion-focused coping and men more likely to use problem-focused coping (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000). Enacted coping behaviors may also translate to differential outcomes for recipients of hurtful messages, such as physical symptoms (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007) and mental health (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

In summary, this project makes several meaningful contributions to the literature on appraisals and hurtful communication. First, this study examined coping using a broader lens, looking not only at relational distancing or immediate reactions to hurt, but rather the coping process delineated by Folkman and Lazarus (1985). In a similar vein, based on Lazarus's (1991) appraisal theory, this investigation deviated from prior hurtful communication scholarship in its categorization of the hurtful communication variables associated with primary and secondary appraisals; specifically, this study treated the perceived causes of the hurt itself as a primary appraisal and the amount of hurt elicited as an outcome. Our findings support the basic premises of appraisal theory and provide a heuristic framework of appraisal process for recipients of hurtful messages.

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