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978-0-521-19364-1 - Hurt Feelings: Theory, Research, and Applications in Intimate Relationships

Luciano L'Abate

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## HURT FEELINGS

Hurt feelings are universal and are present in human beings as well as in animals. These feelings are usually avoided by human beings and overlooked by the scientific and professional mental health communities. Yet, if unresolved and not shared with loved ones and professionals, they tend to fester in our bodies and affect our functioning. If not expressed and shared with caring others, anger, sadness, and fear often serve as the foundation of mental illness. Developmentally, each of these feelings, respectively, gives rise to antisocial acts, depression, and severe mental illness. This book suggests that instead of traditional one-on-one, face-to-face, conversation-based interventions, distance writing will allow mental health professionals to assign interactive practice exercises specifically focused on hurt feelings.

Luciano L'Abate, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he developed the first doctoral Family Psychology Program in the world. He is a Diplomate and former Examiner of the American Board of Professional Psychology as well as a Fellow and Approved Supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Author or coauthor of more than 300 papers, chapters, and book reviews in professional and scientific journals, he is also author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of 46 books, with 6 other books at various stages of production. His work has been translated in Argentina, China, Denmark, Finland, French Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Poland. In 2003, he received a Silver Medal from the President of the University of Bari and the Renoir Prize from the University of Lecce in Italy for Outstanding Achievement. In 2009, Dr. L'Abate was the recipient of the Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions in Applied Psychology from the American Psychological Association.

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# Hurt Feelings

THEORY, RESEARCH, AND APPLICATIONS  
IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Luciano L'Abate

*Georgia State University*



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*This book is dedicated to Mario Cusinato who, from the very outset in 1988, when he invited me to be Visiting Professor in the Department of General Psychology at the University of Padova, has tirelessly and critically evaluated empirically some models of the Relational Competence Theory. He devised and developed novel ways and means to validate those models together with a host of enthusiastic collaborators and students, among many: Walter Colesso, Eleonora Maino, and Claudia Scilletta. Without his and their continuous and contagious belief in the provisional validity of the Relational Competence Theory, this theory might have never reached any relevant position in the conceptualization and research of hurt feelings in intimate relationships.*

*I cannot ever forget how, many years ago, Mario and I spent a whole day in Washington, DC, during an annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, arguing about whether to use the term “hurt feelings” or “wounds.” He capitulated on wounds, and I prevailed on hurts because I had already used that term in two earlier publications. In this way, he made sure that my feelings would not be hurt and that I would instead find excitement and pride in the entire enterprise of connecting theory with evidence and evidence with practice, a process that is still occurring during the waning years of my life.*

*Grazie mille, Mario, senza di te non ce l'avrei mai fatta!*

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## Preface

The purpose of this book is to gather and integrate under one cover what is presently known to this writer about hurt feelings scientifically and professionally. What is the relationship of these feelings to relational competence, socialization, mental health, and applied disciplines, such as self-help, health promotion, prevention, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation? These feelings are *approached*, admitted, disclosed, expressed, and shared in *intimate communal* (close, committed, interdependent, and prolonged) relationships but are *avoided* (denied, neglected, repressed, or suppressed) either in agentic, instrumental exchanges or in dysfunctional relationships. These feelings must be considered within a ratio of joys and hurts received throughout a lifetime. One cannot consider hurt feelings separately from joys.

I have argued that hurt feelings are avoided by many people, including also functional ones, and by the scientific and professional communities that use a variety of circumlocutions, analogies, or inconsistent avoidance of these feelings. This avoidance has been found in the scientific and professional literatures, as expanded in this volume and in previous publications (L'Abate, 1997, 1999a, 2009b), using terms that avoid dealing directly with hurt feelings, namely distress, negative emotions, social pain, and emotional disturbances. As far back as thirty years ago (L'Abate, 1977), I argued that hurt feelings are at the bottom of our existence, underlying anger, sadness, fears, and disgust. With two students, showed that functional couples preferred disclosure and sharing of these feelings over rational problem solving (Frey et al., 1979).

Since those early publications, a whole literature has slowly been accumulating to make hurt feelings an important topic of research relevant to intimate relationships, mental health, and personality socialization (Feeney, 2004, 2005; Leary & Leder, 2009; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Vangelisti, 2009b). More recently, my collaborators and I

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(De Giacomo, L'Abate, Pennebaker, & Rumbaugh, 2010) have argued that these feelings may constitute the so-called unconscious, especially in psychopathology, at various levels of awareness.

Instead of paper-and-pencil, self-report questionnaires, which are a major source of information about intimacy and hurt feelings (Cusinato & L'Abate, 1994; Mashek & Aron, 2004; Prager, 1995; Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Stevens & L'Abate, 1989), I have also argued that intimacy must be defined behaviorally rather than just by such questionnaires (L'Abate, 1986, 1994, 1997, 1999a, 2005, 2009b). Consequently, I am admittedly involved in demonstrating the validity of my original definition and formulation above and beyond what my collaborators and I have done empirically thus far (Cusinato & L'Abate, 2012; L'Abate et al., 2010).

By constructing specific and verifiable models for hurt feelings at the subjectively receptive input side, I have been able to put together most of the literature on hurtful feelings, as distinguished from emotions at the expressive output side, into systematic verifiable models. By defining hurt feelings operationally, I have also developed two sets of written interactive practice exercises or workbooks about the causes and nature of these feelings. One series of interactive exercises has been administered on an experimental basis to undergraduates, inmates, and addicts by my collaborator, Prof. Eleonora Maino, and her graduate students at the University of Padua. Results from her research will be published elsewhere (Cusinato & L'Abate, 2012). These two sets of exercises are now part of a larger encyclopedia of interactive practice exercises developed over the last twenty-five years (L'Abate, 2011b). I would have liked to cover joyful feelings as well, but including them in this volume would have subtracted from concentrating solely on hurt feelings. Nonetheless, joyful feelings will be covered in a more joyful publication (L'Abate, 2011c).

By developing an operational definition of hurt feelings and two interactive practice exercises (L'Abate, 2011b) to study them in a laboratory and in a clinic, this verifiable model will allow us to evaluate much more specifically than heretofore possible other existing models – that is, whether the model and its definition are valid. If the combination of two models<sup>1 & 15</sup> of the Relational Competence Theory (RCT) is valid, then it would be responsible in part for the validity of the RCT from which it derives.

There are no other secondary sources about this topic that I know of except for Anita L. Vangelisti's (2009b) distinct contribution. That edited volume, however, does not contain applied contributions about the role of hurt feelings in self-help, health promotion, prevention, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation. Work by David Bakan and other worthwhile pioneers and



researchers, for instance, does not cover clinical and nonclinical application of these feelings.

If we accept the thesis that hurt feelings are at the foundation of our experience and existence, it stands to reason that they need to be dealt with by health promoters, preventers, and psychotherapists, even though until recently these feelings have been avoided by the scientific and professional communities, as discussed throughout various chapters of this volume. Consequently, this work would contribute to the field of feelings and emotion not only by integrating past knowledge, but also by furnishing a specific method of evaluating hurt feelings in the laboratory as well as in clinical applications by various mental health disciplines.

In addition to Dr. Vangelisti's excellent contribution (2009b) and her chapter (Vangelisti & Beck, 2007) where, to my knowledge, there are no clinical applications, this book should provide a thorough background to the theory and practice of hurt feelings in both the scientific and professional literatures.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

When intimacy is defined behaviorally and observationally as the sharing of joys and hurts as well of the fears of being hurt, then *intimacy* is really what this book is about. As argued in Chapter 1, intimacy lies at the bottom of relationships requiring being able to be aware of, accept, express, and share hurt feelings with those we love and who love us. Joys, victories, and triumphs are easily shared. However, hurt feelings are much more difficult to share than joys and triumphs. When intimates are not available communally or otherwise, professional helpers come to the fore. This chapter also introduces an operational definition of hurt feelings as well as two additional visual models: an hourglass model of the nature of emotionality and the experience of feelings in general, and an upside funnel model of how hurtful and joyful feelings are at the bottom of most constructive and destructive feelings and their expression into emotions.

Part One involves possible antecedents of hurt feelings, including Chapter 2 on how hurt feelings are avoided in functional and dysfunctional relationships as well as in the scientific and professional communities. In this chapter, I introduce a tripartite model that serves as the basis for the rest of the volume. Chapter 3 includes all the possible antecedent "causes" or origins of hurt feelings, including abuse in its many forms, abandonment, criticism, neglect, and rejection, among others. Chapter 4 reviews the developmental aspects of hurt feelings from infancy to old age throughout

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various stages of the life cycle. Chapter 5 considers how the family or substitute or alternative intimate relationships contribute to whether or not hurt feelings are expressed and shared.

Part Two reviews the scientific bases of hurt feelings in their historical, conceptual and biological foundations, including their pioneers in Chapter 6, who “discovered” hurt feelings and acknowledged their existence and importance through conceptually relevant and empirical research. Chapter 7 includes a review of the biological foundation of hurt feelings. The incredible growth of neuroscience in the first decade of the twenty-first century made it impossible for me to even try to cover this topic. Through the good auspices of my colleague John Cacioppo, I was fortunate to enlist the contribution of three distinguished neuroscientists, Antoine Bechara, Dana Smith, and Lin Xiao, to write that chapter. Chapter 8 reviews the many gender and individual differences that exist in the experience, processing, expressing, and sharing of hurt feelings. As shown in Chapter 9, these individual and gender differences are the outcome of culture, as mediated, of course, by the family and intimate relationships. The avoidance (denial, repression, suppression) of hurt feelings, as shown in Chapter 10, has significant implications for physical and mental health, including forgiveness.

Consequently, in Part Three, Chapter 11 reviews how sharing hurt feelings in self-help, health promotion, and prevention are necessary to decrease, if at all possible, the deleterious effects of the causes of unexpressed hurt feelings. Chapter 12 starts with a review of how hurt feelings have been avoided in the professional literature and what can be done to help people who need to become aware of, disclose, and share hurt feelings with loved ones or professionals.

In Part Four, Chapter 13, I try to look over all the possible advances that could occur at various levels of functioning, intimate/nonintimate, intra- and interpersonal, that will acknowledge the universal nature of hurt feelings. After that acknowledgment, I try to connect multifarious definitions and models of the antecedent, causes, and correlates of hurt feelings within the confines and requirements of sixteen models in the hierarchical (RCT). This attempts to give a theoretical cover to hurt feelings within a conceptual and empirical framework. Therefore, this volume constitutes the expansion of the RCT model,<sup>15</sup> where *intimacy has been defined behaviorally and observationally as the sharing of joys, hurt feelings, and fears of being hurt*. As shown in the final chapter of this volume, all sixteen models of the RCT help us understand hurt feelings in their multifarious manifestations and interpretations.

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## READERSHIP

The primary audience for this book might consist of advanced graduates in courses and seminars on feelings and emotions. Secondary audiences, where this book could be added as supplementary reading, would consist of courses on personality psychology, abnormal personality, psychopathology, and theories of personality. Tertiary audiences could be found in applied courses on health psychology, prevention, and psychotherapy. Fourthly, given that this volume covers the literature of both scientific and professional sources, it would be of interest to major researchers and professionals in most mental health disciplines: clinical psychology, psychiatry, social work, counseling, school and pastoral counseling, and psychiatric nursing, among others.

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