PART I

INTRODUCTION

1

Hurt Feelings: Distinguishing Features, Functions, and Overview

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Hurt feelings are powerful. They can influence relational partners' behavior, the thoughts that partners have about their relationship, and the attitudes they hold toward each other. Over time, the way people interpret and respond to their hurt feelings can affect the decisions they make about initiating, maintaining, and terminating relationships. Some who have been hurt repeatedly opt to avoid close relationships altogether, whereas others anxiously search for a partner who will shield them from emotional pain. Yet others find ways to cope with their experiences that enable them to initiate and maintain relatively secure, satisfying partnerships.

Given the potential influence of hurt feelings on people's close relationships, it is not surprising that researchers and theorists have begun to turn their attention to understanding the antecedents, processes, and outcomes associated with the emotion. Indeed, the study of hurt feelings has flourished over the past decade. Scholars have examined issues such as the phenomenology of hurt (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998), the perceived causes of hurt feelings (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter, & Alexander, 2005), the influence of intentionality on hurt (Vangelisti & Young, 2000), factors that affect the way people evaluate hurtful communication (Young, 2004), distancing responses to hurt (McLaren & Solomon, 2008), the effects of hurtful events on romantic relationships (Feeney, 2004), individuals' willingness to confront hurtful messages from romantic partners (Miller & Roloff, 2005), parent and child perceptions of hurtful interactions (Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002), and hurtful family environments (Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, & Clark, 2007). The current volume offers a synthesis of extant research on hurt feelings, presents new conceptions of how the emotion operates, and provides directions for future theoretical and conceptual work on hurt.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF HURT

Most researchers and theorists who have studied hurt agree that hurt feelings involve emotional injury or harm (Folkes, 1982; L'Abate, 1977). Hurt occurs

when people believe that the communication or behavior of an individual, or group of individuals, caused them emotional pain. Indeed, one of the first empirical studies to examine hurt supported the notion that emotional injury is linked to hurt feelings. Specifically, a prototype analysis of emotion concepts conducted by Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor (1987) indicated that hurt was associated with emotion terms such as anguish and agony and that hurt was linked to sadness. Shaver and his colleagues argued that the emotion terms that clustered with hurt all involved suffering or, put differently, the endurance of emotional pain.

Although defining hurt in terms of emotional injury provided researchers with a starting point for investigating the possible causes, correlates, and outcomes associated with hurt feelings, it did little to situate hurt – conceptually or theoretically – with regard to other emotions. Specifying the nature of the relationship between hurt and other emotions has been a challenging task for researchers and theorists. Part of the reason this task has been challenging is that hurt feelings are difficult to isolate. They usually occur in concert with other emotions (Feeney, 2005; Leary et al., 1998). In fact, some argue that hurt feelings typically are expressed via emotions such as anger, fear, or even jealousy (see L'Abate, Chapter 22, this volume). The intermingling of hurt with other emotions is one factor that initially led Vangelisti and her colleagues to suggest that hurt is an emotion "blend" (e.g., Vangelisti & Young, 2000). These researchers argued that hurt is the result of combining feelings of sadness (that occur when individuals believe they have been emotionally injured) and fear (that is elicited when people perceive they are vulnerable to harm). The idea put forth was that the blending of sadness and fear creates a separate emotion, "hurt," that often is paired with and defensively masked by emotions characterized by less vulnerability (e.g., anger).

Whereas Vangelisti and her colleagues conceptualized hurt as an emotion blend, others created a case for defining hurt as a unique emotion. Leary and Springer (2001) were among the first to champion this idea. They examined a wide variety of negative emotions and found that those emotions did not account for all of the variance in hurt feelings. Based on these results, they argued that hurt is a distinct emotion in and of itself. Feeney (2005) concurred with Leary and Springer. In addition to conceptualizing hurt as a unique emotion, she offered a way for researchers to predict which emotions are likely to accompany hurt. Feeney suggested that the type of experience or event that evokes individuals' hurt feelings affects the negative emotions that are paired with hurt. She found, for example, that terms related to the loss of hopes or ideals were associated with both hurt and sadness, whereas terms related to exploitation were associated with both hurt and anger. The evidence presented by Leary and Springer and by Feeney suggests that the emotional pain people refer to when they describe their hurt feelings is different from other emotions.

Although often accompanied by other negative emotions, and perhaps even sharing a common source, hurt is distinct and should be treated as such by researchers and theorists.

In addition to characterizing the nature of the relationship between hurt and other emotions, researchers have made substantial strides in identifying factors that differentiate hurt from other emotions. For instance, Fine and Olson (1997) distinguished hurt from anger by suggesting that hurt is elicited when people believe a provocation they experienced is deserved, whereas anger is evoked when a provocation is perceived to be undeserved or unwarranted. By contrast, Leary and his colleagues (1998) argued that the feature that differentiates hurt from other emotions is relational devaluation. Analyzing people's descriptions of hurtful events, they found that those events typically involved "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). Vangelisti and her colleagues (e.g., Vangelisti, 2001; Vangelisti & Young, 2000) similarly examined individuals' accounts of hurtful events and found that hurt feelings typically are a result of a relational transgression. They noted that relational transgressions can elicit a range of negative emotions, but argued that those that evoke hurt are marked by a sense of vulnerability (Kelvin, 1977). Feeney (2005) adopted aspects of Leary et al.'s and Vangelisti's arguments to suggest that hurt feelings are evoked by relational transgressions and that those transgressions usually imply low relational evaluations. She also argued that the sense of personal injury typically associated with hurt feelings is a consequence of damage or threats to individuals' positive mental models of self and others. For Feeney, then, hurt involves a threat to people's attachments to others.

Chapter 6, written by Shaver, Mikulincer, Lavy, and Cassidy, may provide the most useful, elegant description to date of the distinguishing features of hurt. These researchers suggest that:

> A core feature of hurtful events is their capacity to destroy a person's sense of safety and security, which is related to, but not exactly the same as, the person's positive views of self and others . . . deeply hurt feelings are likely to occur only when a partner's actions or words pierce one's deep, visceral, generally unconscious sense of safety and security. (p. 99)

The description put forth by Shaver and his colleagues touches on several features of hurt feelings that have been discussed by other researchers. First, and most broadly, it suggests that the emotional pain people experience when they are hurt is an interpersonal phenomenon. People feel hurt because of something they perceive another individual said or did. Their feelings are elicited and defined by their interpersonal relationship with the person who hurt them. Second, hurt feelings are evoked in part as a consequence of a

relational loss or the threat of a relational loss. This loss may take any one of several forms. It may involve a partner engaging in behavior that devalues the relationship, the willingness of a partner to violate relational norms, one partner's tendency to degrade the other's positive views of him- or herself, or the inability of one or both partners to create a safe, secure relational environment. The third feature underlined by Shaver et al.'s description is a sense of vulnerability. People feel hurt when they believe someone said or did something that caused them harm – "when a partner's actions or words pierce . . . [their] deep, visceral, generally unconscious sense of safety and security" (Shaver et al., p. 99). Individuals can only feel hurt if they are vulnerable to emotional pain. Further, once they have been hurt by a relational partner, they understand that they may be hurt again. Thus, hurt feelings are characterized both by a sense of current vulnerability and by a sense of impending vulnerability.

FUNCTIONS OF HURT

Although researchers' views concerning the features that distinguish hurt from other emotions are beginning to converge, their perspectives on the functions of hurt feelings have yet to be clearly articulated. A review of extant literature as well as some of the more recent thinking reflected in the current volume suggests that hurt serves at least three functions. First, hurt feelings act as a relational indicator – they provide people with information about the quality of their association with the person who evoked their emotional pain. Hurt feelings emerge in part as a consequence of individuals' evaluations of their partner's attitudes toward them as well as their own attitudes toward their partner. When these assessments indicate that their partner does not value their relationship as much as they would like (Leary et al., 1998; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), when they yield threatening information about individuals' mental models of self or others (Feeney, 2005), or when they indicate that the relational context is unsafe (Shaver et al., Chapter 6, this volume), people feel hurt. Hurt, thus, serves an *informative* function.

A second function of hurt is *persuasive*. Hurt feelings may serve as a means of influence or behavioral control. Hurtful influence strategies can be relatively direct and obvious, or they may be more indirect and subtle. Direct strategies are those that involve explicit negative statements about individuals, their behavior, or their attitudes and that are employed with the intent to exert control. For example, when people describe events that hurt their feelings, they often report incidents involving accusations, evaluations, or criticisms (Feeney, 2004; Leary et al., 1998; Vangelisti, 1994). These sorts of communication behaviors can be used as techniques to influence others. By identifying a characteristic, behavior, or attitude as negative or undesirable, they suggest that it should be changed.

Whereas accusations, evaluations, and criticisms are relatively direct, obvious influence strategies, other techniques are more subtle. For instance, as previously suggested, people describing hurtful events often note that they were hurt by statements that are informative. In addition to conveying information, these statements – particularly those that involve active or passive relational devaluation (e.g., "I don't know how I feel about our relationship anymore," "I'm going to apply for jobs out of state") – can be used as strategies to indirectly influence others' behavior. The relational threats inherent in these sorts of statements can make them powerful tools. Such threats can imply that a change in some characteristic, behavior, or attitude is necessary to prevent a negative relational outcome. Partners who are invested in the relationship and who interpret these threats seriously may be willing to change their behavior to eliminate or at least minimize the threats.

A third function of hurt feelings is *supportive*. Although this function may not be as common or as easily recognizable as the other two, it is one that has emerged repeatedly in our research on hurt feelings. In particular, people describe times when an individual they trust – such as a coach, a parent, a teacher, or even a close friend – said something to them that was hurtful but was intended to be, and was interpreted as, supportive. For example, participants sometimes report interactions when a coach or teacher expressed disappointment in their performance (e.g., "That is the worst performance I've ever seen!" or "You should be doing better than that!") or when a friend or family member voiced disapproval of their behavior (e.g., "You're really stupid to start smoking!" or "Boy, you need to quit eating so much!"). Even though participants say they were hurt by these interactions, they also describe the interactions as functioning in supportive ways. They note that the other person's statement was well-intended, describe it as helpful, and often report that it showed how much the other person cared about them. In colloquial terms, these hurtful but supportive statements sometimes are interpreted by recipients as displays of "tough love."

It is important to note that the three functions described herein are not mutually exclusive. While it is certainly possible for hurt feelings to function in only one of these three ways, it is more likely that they serve multiple functions simultaneously. Thus, for example, a person who is hurt by a romantic partner's threat (e.g., "I can't stand your drinking anymore. I'm leaving if you don't stop.") might be simultaneously informed about the status of the relationship and persuaded to change his or her behavior. Similarly, someone who is hurt by a coach's harsh comments ("You're not trying at all – you're just lazy!") might be persuaded to work harder because he or she sees the coach as supportive.

Whether operating separately or together, the functions of hurt feelings illustrate the broad range of circumstances in which hurt is elicited as well as the potential impact of hurt on individuals and their interpersonal relationships. The functions suggest not only that hurt feelings are ubiquitous but also that

they have impact. They can provide people with information about themselves and their relationships, they can persuade individuals to change their attitudes or behaviors, and they can convey caring and support.

OVERVIEW: THE CURRENT VOLUME

The research and theory described in the current volume reflect the range of contexts and relationships that can be affected by hurt feelings. Because scholars who have studied hurt bring different theoretical and disciplinary assumptions to their work, the literature on hurt feelings is quite diverse.

General Description

The purpose of this volume is to advance the study of hurt feelings by synthesizing current research and theory on hurt and offering new ideas about how hurt feelings operate. This book is the first to integrate the various perspectives addressed by researchers, theorists, and practitioners who study the causes of hurt feelings, the interpersonal events associated with hurt, and the ways people respond to hurting and being hurt by others.

In Part II, the following part of the book, various definitions of hurt are examined and both theoretical and methodological issues that influence current conceptions of hurt are described. Chapters explore the phenomenology of hurt feelings, appraisal processes and their associations with hurt, and the influence of politeness or "facework" on hurtful interactions. Individual differences and their role in the elicitation and experience of hurt also are examined. The theoretical and methodological concerns raised in Part II provide a foundation for examining hurt feelings – they set the baseline for the ways researchers observe, explain, and evaluate hurtful behavior and hurtful interactions.

Hurtful acts are described in the third part of the volume. Research conducted over the past decade indicates that a number of different acts or events are deemed by individuals as hurtful (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Leary et al., 1998; Vangelisti, 1994). Chapters in Part III elaborate on several of these acts or events and, in doing so, highlight the cognitive and behavioral processes associated with the way people experience and respond to hurt.

The fourth part focuses on the manifestation of hurt in various relational contexts. Hurt feelings do not occur in a vacuum. They are elicited within interpersonal relationships. The types of hurtful events that individuals are likely to experience and the meanings associated with those events vary from one relationship to another. Chapters in Part IV cover hurt as it occurs in children's peer relationships, family relationships, adult friendships, romantic relationships, and postdivorce relationships.

The fifth and final part of the book demonstrates that hurt feelings both influence and are influenced by social, cultural, physiological, and

psychological variables. Chapters address issues associated with the experience of hurt in the workplace, cultural differences in the experience and expression of hurt, physical and psychological effects of hurt, and the influence of technology on the elicitation of hurt.

To provide consistency across the volume's different parts, contributors were provided with some general guidelines. More specifically, they were instructed to offer integrative reviews of existing theoretical and empirical literature, to comment on relevant approaches to studying hurt, and to critically evaluate methods used to assess hurt and its related constructs. They also were asked to delineate major conflicts in the literature and to discuss directions for future research.

Authors

The authors who contributed to *Feeling Hurt in Close Relationships* are internationally known scholars from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, communication, family studies, and sociology. They approach the study of hurt from a number of different perspectives and focus on topics ranging from the influence of cognition on the experience of hurt to behaviors that elicit hurt feelings in the context of romantic relationships. They were selected as authors for this volume because they are recognized for the theoretical and empirical contributions they have made to the study of emotion and personal relationships.

Audience

Because this book spotlights the recent work of first-rate scholars, many researchers and theorists who study emotion and personal relationships will want to read it. These individuals will be able to use the findings and the ideas that are presented in the volume to further their own work. Graduate students in psychology, communication, family studies, and sociology comprise another group who will want to read *Feeling Hurt in Close Relationships*. Advanced students who study emotions will need to know the material covered in the book. In addition, counselors and therapists who want to keep up with the literature on emotion and personal relationships will find the theory and research included in this volume relevant to their practices.

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