

ABSTRACT

PASSNER, REBECCA LYNNE. Imagined Interactions in Hurtful Communication in Women's Friendship. (Under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Craig).

This research study examined how close friends processed and managed a hurtful communication event using Imagined Interactions, an unexplored tool in hurtful communication research. Findings indicate three things following a hurtful communication event among close friends. Women processed their complex emotions regarding their friend, their relationship, and themselves. Women felt uncertain about their relationship, and about seeing their friend again and worked to manage their uncertainty. Lastly, women experienced personal growth due to the hurtful experience.

Keywords: Imagined Interactions, hurtful communication, friendships, qualitative

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Imagined Interactions in Hurtful Communication in Women's Friendship

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Communication

Raleigh, North Carolina
2022

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BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca (Becky) Passner is a graduate student (MS) in the Department of Communication at North Carolina State University. Becky's communication interests are varied and include various aspects of interpersonal communication, intrapersonal communication, and media studies—specifically how media portrays relationships. Becky's thesis focused on some of those ideas to understand how young women experience and process hurtful communication in friendships using Imagined Interaction Theory as a tool to understand that process.

In her free time, Becky enjoys spending time with her friends, engaging in deep discussions, and enjoying all forms of storytelling—especially theatre and film. Becky works part-time as a theatre director and writer. Four of her plays have been produced, with another slated for production in the summer of 2022.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank God for His faithfulness, for blessing me with the gift of curiosity, and for placing people in my path to help me find answers to my questions, a few of whom are listed below.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Craig, for all her support and encouragement over the last year—she made a difficult process feel easy. She pushes me to be a better student and I am incredibly thankful for her guidance. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Kenneth Zagacki and Dr. Joann Keyton whose feedback was invaluable.

I would like to thank my family for being my biggest cheerleaders, for their constant love and support, and for instilling a love of learning in me from a young age. I would also like to acknowledge my friends who have always been willing to lend an ear or provide a distraction when everything felt impossible.

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CHAPTER 1

Have you ever said something hurtful to a friend? Maybe you got caught up in a moment and said some things you shouldn't have, things you later regretted. Between that encounter and the next time you see them, you will probably be thinking about what might come next. You replay what you said and how they replied—the look on your friend's face after you said that hurtful thing. In your mind, you try to take it back. How would the conversation have gone if you had not said what you did? Next time you meet, what could you say to make it right? You imagine your next conversation, watching your friend's reaction in your head—and you try different combinations of apologies, excuses, and statements of goodwill until you find just the right words. When individuals open themselves to relationships—whether familial, a friendship, or a romantic relationship—they make themselves vulnerable within that relationship, vulnerable to hurtful messages (Vangelisti & Young, 2000).

Friendships are voluntary and being in any relationship means that individuals open themselves up to being hurt. How do individuals process hurtful communication? How do they decide what relationships are worth keeping and which ones to let go of after a hurtful communication event? How do individuals manage their relationships when there are conflicts or hurtful messages? Research about friendships, both scholarly and in pop culture seeks to answer these questions and more. Mayo Foundation for Education and Research posted an article in January of 2022 about how friendships are good for your mental health, as well as how to make and maintain friendships (Mayo Foundation for Education and Research, 2022), and the New York Times posted an article on how to be a better friend, including how to handle conflict with a friend (Parker-Pope, n.d.). Most relational conflict studies are based on romantic relationships

(Parker-Pope, n.d.), but romantic relationships, while voluntary, may not follow the same process when dealing with hurtful messages.

There is a need to examine hurtful messages and conflict within the context of a friendship. This study examines friendships between young women ages eighteen to twenty-five that are experiencing hurtful messages between close friends. Individuals in this age group are experiencing high friendship salience—forming their first friendships in adulthood and managing their older relationships (Oswald & Clark, 2003). One method to understand how young women examine their relationships and process hurtful communication is to use Imagined Interactions (IIs). Imagined Interactions (IIs) are a type of daydreaming where individuals can retroactively review previous communication and proactively anticipate future interactions, creating scripts for future interactions, making them a practical tool to examine how hurtful communication affects young women's close friendships.

This thesis outlines the relevant literature on IIs, friendship communication, and hurtful communication. This is followed by an explanation of the methods used for this study including the recruitment of participants, procedures of the study, and data analysis. Results are presented and theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

CHAPTER 2

Friendship Communication

Muraco (2012) stated that “friendships are one of the most significant, yet socially ignored, relationships” (p. 15). Compared to other relationships like familial ties and romantic partnerships, friendships have some unique features. They are voluntary and can therefore be more vulnerable to dissolution than familial or romantic relationships may be; for example, there are typically fewer institutional ties, with no expectation of only one friend partner at a time (Johnson et al., 2004). Individuals continue in friendships because they want to (Johnson et al., 2009) and friendships rarely require the permission of the other individual to terminate the relationship (Johnson et al., 2004).

Friendships are among the most critical relationships in a woman’s life (Doherty, 2021), however, scholars and relationship scientists have generally idealized or trivialized the friendships of women (Doherty, 2021). Additionally, women tend to value their friendships more than their male counterparts (Doherty, 2021). In comparison to friendships among men, women have been reported to be more likely to self-disclose and rely less on activities to create a bond; they also tend to be better at relating to partners in long-distance relationships than men (Johnson et al., 2009). Women tend to expect more from their friendships, especially regarding communication, reciprocity, and loyalty (Doherty, 2021). Women also report more turning points and relational changes with their female friendships (Johnson et al., 2009). For example, Johnson et al. (2009) found that women were more likely to report conflict with their friend, which could predict relational downturns over time. Finally, research suggests that women also tend to react more severely to violations of trust and other relational transgressions—even

withholding forgiveness or terminating the relationship for particularly severe or recurring violations (Antony & Sheldon, 2019).

Hurtful Communication

According to Vangelisti and Crumley (1998), voluntary relationships, like friendship, are the most susceptible relationships to hurtful messages. Just by being in a relationship, individuals face the possibility of being emotionally vulnerable (Vangelisti & Young, 2000), and hurt is often perpetrated by those within these close relationships (Malachowski & Frisby, 2015). The very nature of non-voluntary relationships like friendship is that they can be more easily terminated if the relationship is not satisfactory; thus, voluntary relationships can be less resilient to hurtful messages (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Individuals can feel hurt when an expectation in their relationship is violated. For example, individuals have expectations for how the “script” of their interactions should go, and if the communication strays from that script they may feel unexpected hurt (Lubarsky et al., 2015).

Research on hurtful communication suggests many factors influence how hurtful messages are received and processed (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). The intention behind a message is a factor in how people will perceive hurtful messages. When individuals believe that those messages were intentionally hurtful, they will be interpreted differently than if the hurt was believed to be accidental—this may be largely determined by previous experiences with the relational partner. An individual will feel the most hurt when a message is judged to be out of the ordinary and intentionally harmful (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). “The quality of people’s relationships (e.g., whether they are satisfied) creates a context within which hurtful messages are interpreted and relational decisions regarding the hurtful episode are made” (Vangelisti &

Young, 2000, p. 399). People who are closer to their relational partner may be more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt and not interpret their behavior negatively (Young, 2004).

McClaren and Solomon (2014) reported that hurt is felt when “a relational partner communicates devaluation of the relationship, through either active or passive means” (p. 323). Devaluation can be deadly to a relationship, especially as hurt may lead to uncertainty—affecting the outcome of the relationship down the road (Malachowski & Frisby, 2015). With hurt may also come anger depending on the perceived damage inflicted (Hareli & Hess, 2008). Individuals might experience a number of responses to hurtful communication including desires to retaliate or avoidance of the partner to prevent future hurt (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Individuals might also experience self, partner, or relational uncertainty as they work to discover how things might have gone wrong in their relationship or how to predict future behavior (Malachowski & Frisby, 2015).

Imagined Interactions

The theory of Imagined Interactions (IIs) explains a type of daydreaming about past and future interactions with specific characteristics and functions that assist in resolving uncertainties related to interpersonal communication (Eldredge et al., 2015; Honeycutt, 2013; 2015). The theory grew out of Symbolic Interactionism and Script Theory (Eldredge et al., 2015). Honeycutt (2015) explained that Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934) informs IIs because of “the internalized conversation of gestures in which individual actors are able consciously to monitor social action by reviewing alternative endings of any given act in which they are involved” (Honeycutt, 2015, p. 76). Additionally, Cognitive Script theory helps explain how the brain stores information and interpretations about the world—the brain uses previous experiences to construct a model to predict how an event will unfold. It builds a plan for those situations (Lubarsky et al., 2015). Scripts are “pre-compiled knowledge” that influence how individuals

interact and respond to interactions (Lubarsky et al., 2015). Subsequently, Imagined Interactions organize thoughts and feelings on previous and upcoming interactions. The word “interaction” was intentionally chosen to explain these phenomena rather than “conversation” or “dialogue” because the word interaction includes factors like non-verbal behaviors or verbal behaviors like tone, and visual information such as the environment of the situation (Honeycutt, 2015; Eldredge et al., 2015). Two important attributes of Imagined Interactions include retroactivity—IIs following an interaction, and proactivity—IIs before an encounter (Eldredge et al., 2015). In the example in the introduction, going over the original hurtful encounter between friends is a retroactive II. Planning how their next meeting might go is a proactive II. Honeycutt et al. (1990) found that participants used IIs more proactively than retroactively; they suggested that the primary use of IIs is to preview their chosen message strategies on their imagined audiences.

Imagined Interactions serve a series of functions in interpersonal communication. First, they can help maintain relationships. Imagined Interactions assist us in planning future messages and rehearsing them until we are satisfied with the results. The rehearsal function is a vital component of turning plans into actions (Honeycutt, 2013). People use rehearsals to anticipate the responses of the relational partner and their communication (Eldredge et al., 2015). We can also use IIs to think through prospective encounters, for example, “How should I say this to him in a tactful manner?” (Morin, 2019, p. 2) and to help avoid foreseen relationship tensions “John misperceived the situation and is upset. I need to set this straight when we’ll meet tomorrow. Here’s what I’ll say...” (Morin, 2019, pp. 2-3). IIs also assist in relationship maintenance through retroactive remembering. Analyzing previous conversations like, “Did I hurt her feelings by having said that?” (Morin, 2019, p. 2) allows us to communicate better in the future.

Imagined Interactions promote self-understanding. By imagining our communication, we clarify our thoughts and feelings, reflecting on past interactions and imagining future ones (Morin, 2019). They allow us to examine our private and public self, which might not be considered during real-world communication (Honeycutt et al., 1990). We also may gain a feeling of catharsis as IIs allow us to vent feelings, whether positive or negative. People may feel anger when reliving a conflict or feel joy when reliving a positive moment (Honeycutt, 2015). This can prompt an emotional release and easing of stress (Eldredge et al., 2015). IIs allow us to compensate for the lack of interaction, especially when it is not possible to interact with that person in reality (Eldredge et al., 2015). Lastly, IIs serve as a conflict management function. For example, in their 1988 study, Edwards and colleagues found that 40% of their participants' recent IIs featured conflict. Research suggests that individuals can fall into a pattern of rumination, which is when they "repetitively focus on themselves and on the nature and implications of their negative feelings" (Lyubomirsky et al., 1999, p. 1041). Although rumination can occur with both retroactive and proactive IIs individuals may use IIs to help resolve a conflict (Wallenfelsz & Hample, 2010).

Hurtful Communication and Imagined Interactions

Imagined Interactions might be a useful framework for understanding hurtful communication and the resulting changes in friendship. With retroactive IIs, individuals can replay past interactions and try to determine the intentions of the message(s) of their relational partner. Research suggests that when a friend communicates a devaluing of the relationship through communication, individuals review their previous relationship and the hurtful communication to determine the consequences of the communication event (McLaren & Solomon, 2014). Depending on the perceived severeness of the transgression, retaliation and/or

avoidance may be initiated (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Having space or time between the hurtful communication event and the next interaction with a friend has been shown to help heal emotional wounds and assist in forgiveness (Young, 2004).

Individuals engaged in sense-making in retroactive IIs may turn to proactive IIs in formulating plans for future communication. When individuals use proactive IIs, they might seek to rid themselves of some of the uncertainty experienced during the hurtful event. As individuals evaluate these interactions, they might rely on processes enacted in IIs, namely, the relationship maintenance, self-understanding, and conflict management functions of IIs. More specifically, proactive IIs, and the development of scripts, function to ease communication apprehension. McCroskey (1997) defined communication apprehension as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 78). Honeycutt and colleagues (2009) point out that a keyword in this definition is “anticipated”—anxieties about a future interaction can be just as compelling as the actual interaction. Thus, proactive IIs can play an important role in the management of communication apprehension. Through self-awareness, individuals can adjust messages and communication patterns after they assess the effects of messages through cognitive editing (Honeycutt et al., 2009). For example, proactive forms of IIs can be beneficial in crafting both the upcoming script and the ideal delivery for the message that an individual wants to convey. This can be especially helpful when conveying the need for forgiveness. Thus, the communication that happens after harmful communication occurs is vital to the state of the relationship. Exploring messages proactively in IIs is a crucial process in relationship maintenance or repair following hurtful communication (Merolla & Zhang, 2010).

In conclusion, because women are more likely to report more conflict in a relationship with a close friend and to engage in relational maintenance when violations of trust have occurred (Antony & Sheldon, 2019), it is vital to understand the processes of hurtful communication in a close friendship (Johnson et al., 2009). Using the retroactive and proactive functions of IIs may enable researchers to explore the hurtful situation between close friendships better, contextualize the hurtful messages, and create scripts that facilitate relational maintenance. The following research questions are proposed.

RQ1: What characteristics emerge in retroactive remembering of hurtful communication in women's friendships?

RQ2: What characteristics emerge in proactive planning after experiencing hurtful communication in women's friendships?

RQ3: How do friends describe imagined interactions as influencing their friendship, post-proactive IIs?

CHAPTER 3¹

Participants

Participants in this study included 16 women between the ages of 18 and 25. Participants self-identified as experiencing or having experienced hurtful communication in a close friendship. The average age of the participants was 21 years old ($SD= 2.27$). A majority of the participants reported identifying as white ($n=14$), American Indian or Alaskan Native ($n=1$), or Asian ($n=1$). Participants reported their friendship as being close with their friend an average of 3.75 years ($SD= 3.13$, range 1-13). Most participants reported living in the same city as their close friend ($n=11$), in the same state ($n=2$), on the same coast ($n=2$), or across the country ($n=1$). The most common form of communication was face-to-face ($n=12$), followed by text ($n=3$), and phonecall ($n=1$).

Procedures

IRB approval was obtained through the researcher's university. Participants in this study were a convenience sample recruited through social media, flyers posted at a large Southeastern University, by instructors and professors, and by word of mouth by participants. When prospective participants contacted the researcher, the researcher would confirm that they fit the inclusion criteria of the study and explained the process of the study and scheduled a time to meet with the participants via Zoom. Before the interview, participants were given an informed consent form to read through, to determine if they wished to continue participating and if they

¹ It is important to note the extenuating circumstances of studying friendships in the Fall of 2021, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased use of mediated communication such as social media and texting that may have influenced participant's responses.

would consent to be audio recorded during the interview. Each participant that gave their consent to be audio recorded was recorded using Zoom. Before the interview, a short demographic questionnaire was distributed to the participants including demographic information and information about their friendship history. At the scheduled time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted an average of 21 minutes.

Interview questions pertaining to the friendship's history (such as the friendship duration and how the friendship began), the initial hurtful communication event (focusing on how the participant processed the hurtful communication), how the participant prepared for seeing their friend again (reoccurring thought patterns and emotions), and their friendship following the hurtful communication (see appendix A). Questions assisted participants in engaging with their stories and exploring their personal history within their friendship. Each interview was transcribed following the interview. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, or when no new themes emerged in interviews (Creswell, 2013; Nascimento et al., 2018). The data collected through the survey was analyzed following the completion of all the interviews. All names mentioned in the analysis are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Once interviews were transcribed the researcher employed a grounded theory approach—the interview transcripts were reviewed, and the data was analyzed using the constant comparative analysis. The researcher employed the method outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) stating that qualitative analysis “involves interacting with data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so, deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p.66). The first step of data analysis was open coding—the

researcher read through the interview transcripts many times to determine initial patterns and categories in the data. Following this preliminary analysis, the researcher defined exemplars of data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). These exemplars were copied into a separate document and analyzed again to see what categories emerged from the data. The researcher went back to the transcripts and grouped the data into categories. The researcher used axial coding to continue to refine the categories. After reviewing the data, the researchers (i.e., author and thesis advisor) talked through categorizations for the data, reexamined the data through the lens of those categories, refined categories, consulted related literature, and reorganized the categories once more until satisfied with the results (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Member checks were completed with participants from the sample; member checks ask participants to confirm the validity of the ideas presented by the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). After gaining confirmation that the themes captured the experiences of the participants, the themes were finalized and presented in the results section.

CHAPTER 4

In general, following hurtful communication, participants spent time processing their emotions and coming to grips with the violation of trust that occurred in the friendship. After they had taken time to think about the situation, their thoughts turned to the next time they would see their friend. Participants described alternating between managing their emotions about the upcoming interaction—often describing anxiety or stress, and managing uncertainty about the relationship or their friend. Participants' descriptions of how their relationship changed included friendship termination, as well as personal growth. The following results outline each of these themes.

Retroactive Remembering: Processing the Hurt

In the time immediately following a hurtful communication event, participants described their thoughts as whirling around in confusion about what had just happened. Most participants were friends with their relationship partner for several years before the hurtful communication started, so participants first had to come to grips with a violation of trust; appearing as a time of processing their emotions, first about their relational partner and then about themselves.

Emotions relating to the partner

Participants described their first emotional response as feeling hurt. Paisley explained, “at first my feelings were definitely really hurt, and I was just trying to understand, like I’m definitely a people pleaser, like I don’t want people to dislike me.” Many participants were completely blindsided by the hurtful communication and had never experienced anything similar in their relationship before—now they were fighting to make sense of this new turn of events. Heidi described her experience as “definitely hurt because I really thought that we were really

good friends. I was just really hurt and really sad that things—I could start seeing things spiraling down at that point.”

As the reality of their situation started to become clearer, a wider variety of emotions started to emerge. Participants described coming to terms with a new relationship dynamic and trying to make sense of the situation, several participants described struggling with resentment in the early moments of the hurtful communication event. Felicity described moving forward in her relationship as “it feels like it’s not enough, like regardless of what I do” and struggling with an ongoing series of hurtful communication events. For example, “I find myself taking on...a lot of responsibility for like, her emotions and her happiness and like, her feeling loved by me.” Katherine found her resentment building as she reflected on the situation between her and a friend: “I felt like she was being really hypocritical, like I was like, I am being a better friend.”

Some participants felt themselves become angry at their relational partner. As the anger deepened, several participants felt their anger turn into small methods of retaliation. Several participants recalled focusing on the amount of effort it appeared their friend was putting into the relationship and matching that level. Maria described her thought process as “they showed no effort to me, like that anger kind of side came back in, like they showed no effort, I’m not going to show any effort or anything.” Other participants found themselves testing their relational partner to see their reaction following a hurtful communication event. Daisy recounted, “I think that there was a bit of, um what would that be called, where I’m withholding information on purpose, just to spite her kind of, I think there was some of that.” Katherine had a similar experience after a period of hurtful communication with a friend, she related that:

I was definitely engaging in a lot of like scorekeeping in my brain, so there were tons of like she would say something and I’m like that’s the third time that she’s

said something like that today, or there were times when I would purposely like bring something up that I knew that she would like volley back, you know, to see how she would react and then that would be like oh, she reacted exactly as I expected her to, which kind of, you know, is continuing to build tension.

Other participants, while still angry, acknowledged that both relational partners had their role to play in how the friendship continued after the hurtful communication. When she was describing how their relationship had moved forward Heidi related that “I would say we both broke a friendship, um but I think she was more the cause of it—but a good mix I would say.”

Emotions related to the self

While grappling with the violation of trust that their relationship had suffered, many participants found themselves looking at their own emotions and trying to process how their relationship had gotten to this point. For some participants, this manifested as feeling guilty about their relationship or the way they felt about their friend. Felicity described the feeling as “I find myself slipping into like rearranging my time kind of out of guilt, not out of a like, a like true desire for friendship.” Katherine reflected that because there were so many factors influencing the status of her friendship, and that many of them were outside of her friends' control she felt like “I would get upset, but then felt like I couldn't confront it because there were bigger things going on” and that it felt like “I wasn't allowed to be like a full person, um because of what was going on with her.”

Other participants grappled with self-doubt and felt lonely as they questioned what they knew about their friendship. Elinor spent much of her time feeling embarrassed and self-conscious after her friend repeatedly made hurtful comments in front of groups of people. Her friend claimed that her comments were light-hearted, but Elinor related “it didn't feel like light-

hearted, like, she was serious about it” and that she felt for a time she was “always like defending myself and like trying to get everyone to stop saying something.” Felicity reflected that the situation made her feel like a bad friend and that “I do find myself like in the mindset of like I have to prove to her that I’m not what she thinks I am.”

Proactive Imagined Interactions: Anticipating Interactions and Managing Uncertainty

In anticipation of seeing their friend again after the hurtful communication event, participants described how they were processing the upcoming meeting, for some participants this was within a few days, for some it was several weeks or even months. The first thing participants described was how they managed their emotions for the anticipated interaction, especially feeling anxiety or dread about the upcoming interaction or the grief and loss that comes with the possibility of ending a friendship. Secondly, participants described how they managed their uncertainty about their relationship and about their partner—through planning and avoidance.

Managing emotions for anticipated interactions

Feelings of anxiety, dread, paranoia, or stress were almost universally acknowledged among participants as they were thinking through seeing their friend again after a hurtful communication event. Participants often did not know what the outcome of the next encounter with their friend would bring—and many wondered if the next meeting would be their last as close friends. Participants handled these anxious feelings differently. Camille decided that what was best for her was to terminate the relationship without seeing her friend again, “I personally plan on not involving myself or like communicating with this friend again...not from like a mean perspective or any malice or like bitterness, but more of a like guarded...I’m not going to invite that in.” On the other hand, Felicity described wanting to see her friend in the midst of the

ongoing hurtful communication, even with the ongoing stress of not knowing how her friend would react, she said:

I kind of like dread a little bit, like I know that we're going to have a good time, but that it might come up again and I kind of like dread having any interaction with her one-on-one because I have a feeling like the conversation will go there and like she'll kind of fixate on it, and like, it—we'll get stuck in the same conversation.

Participants also felt a sense of grief or loss in addition to anxiety before their next encounter with their friend, fixating on the possibility of losing a friend. Katherine reflected on the time before she saw her friend again and thinking that their next meeting might be the end of their friendship. She recognized that she was, “emotionally preparing myself for the end of—for the potential end of something.” After a few weeks of miscommunication and irregular communication with her friend, Jane felt similarly saying, “I think it was definitely emotionally like up and down this—because I feel like when you feel like you're going to lose a friend, or when you're going through a hard time in a friendship, I feel like there's almost some grief that goes with it.”

Many participants described intense, complicated feelings going into seeing their friend again after a hurtful communication event. Specifically, participants recounted feelings of pain, sorrow, and grief, while also experiencing relief the relationship might soon be over. Beth expressed that after several weeks of anxiety she knew the relationship could not continue and described coming to this realization saying:

I was definitely sad too towards the end. I was like I lost a close friend. And I—but another thing at the end that I felt was definitely relief. Because I had

gotten myself out of a situation that had not been in the best shape for a little while at that point, and some of the people around me knew it.

Lily, who was in a similar situation, described a scenario where she kept trying to hold on to the relationship through a series of hurtful conversations that spanned most of the friendship—but she didn't realize how bad things had gotten until they ended. Just before their last conversation, Lily reflected that she realized “they were ignoring me and I used to put effort into trying to get them to pay attention to me and like try to mend what was broken in some way.” In the end, she understood that she had been putting time and energy into a relationship that was not reciprocated and ended with her getting hurt.

Uncertainty about the partner

Participants also experienced uncertainty about their partner and the state of the relationship following a hurtful communication event. As described below, participants spent time discussing how they could manage that uncertainty through both planning and avoidance strategies.

First, participants who experienced relational uncertainty questioned themselves in many instances. Paisley recounted insecurity about her interpretation of the events and ambiguity about the state of her friendship describing that she was “constantly thinking it must have been something I did,” and that she was trying to “think of every possible situation, every interaction, like did I say the wrong thing, that I hurt her feelings somehow?” Isabelle faced a similar situation; her friend had short bursts where she would be mad and not talk to Isabelle. During a particularly long period in which Isabelle's friend refused to talk to her over circumstances that Isabelle felt she did not have control over, she related that the one question that stayed in her

mind was “why did this one little thing cause such a big issue?” Daisy felt like she was fighting an uphill battle trying to reconnect after she felt that connection slipping.

Other participants found themselves reviewing their friendship, seeking out the moment when everything shifted. Felicity indicated that she did not know “what the actual switch was that flipped in the friendship, but something happened.” Katherine found herself thinking about her relationship similarly, saying that:

when I was remembering it though, it wasn't as much like oh wasn't that great, it was like she has not been like this, like what, what changed? Like I did a lot of looking back and would be like when was the first time that this started to shift?

Paisley recalled that “when I saw her, she would act like nothing was wrong, but I can always tell something was.” The feeling of hesitation toward the friendship was heightened in situations where participants did not interact with their friends' close circles and wondered how their friend was talking about them. Ophelia recounted invasive thoughts about her friend, worrying that her friend was, “telling people what had gone on and portraying me as the bad guy” in a situation where she felt they shared equal blame for the way that things happened.

Managing uncertainty through planning and avoidance behaviors

Participants managed their uncertainty through two principal methods: planning and avoidance. Those who used planning strategies thought through every detail of an interaction from what to say in certain situations, anticipating problems that their friend might have a poor reaction to, to trying to manage how their friend would feel about a situation. Amy had a conflict with her friend and roommate. She reported that on days where her roommate seemed to be on the edge of a hurtful interaction, she found herself trying to anticipate problems and decide how her roommate would respond to different situations. She noted:

I was taking on all her frustrations because I was like thinking oh she can probably hear all this and she's probably so annoyed and I was spending the whole night agonizing over how I would respond to her when she woke up mad...I also was trying to put myself in her shoes and figure out how she was going to react to it all.

Katherine reflected that she had planned for multiple scenarios including what to say if her friend brought up the distance in their relationship, or what to say if she continued to say hurtful things to her, "I was kind of like steeling myself to kind of like be prepared to just do the script, do the mental scripts that I had in my head and get through it." Gwen also found herself planning out exactly what she would say, hoping that whatever she chose would keep the friendship intact, "I was trying to figure out, well, how can I word things to make her feel like I'm not going to leave just because she's bothered by something, you know...because both of us are walking on eggshells."

On the other hand, Beth had decided that her relationship with her friend was not able to be saved. She described actively preparing herself in case she ran into her friend in her small town and looking for their car when she went out. Camille also verbalized thinking through how an interaction would look if she ran into her friend, "the world's really big, and like they don't live here now but like, we're from the same town, you know, and it's like if I run into them how would that go?" Camille settled on a strategy of avoidance saying, "to be honest, I think I'd probably turn and walk the other way." At this moment, Camille felt like avoidance was a better strategy for managing the uncertainty surrounding her friend and their relationship. Ophelia used the avoidance strategy for a short time before their next interaction, saying, "I would listen for

her to come out of her room and be very conscious of when she did, just knowing where she was and if she was—if I was going to have to like address it just then how I was going to act.”

Participants also found themselves avoiding smaller moments within a friendship. Isabelle found herself not wanting to go about her normal routine so that she could avoid dealing with her friend’s behavior. Beth found herself avoiding any conversation, afraid that the conversation would turn in a direction she did not want to continue and that after a while, “actively avoiding was my best response to everything.”

After Being Hurt

Following a hurtful communication event, something in the relationship changed. For some participants, they felt that they gained a new perspective on the relationship, a new understanding of themselves, or reported that they grew through the experience. Other participants described the process of deciding whether to continue on with a changed relationship or to let go of the relationship entirely.

Gaining perspective and personal growth

Some participants described their relationship with their friend as going back to normal after working through the hurtful communication event. After reflecting on the situation Jane decided that the circumstances were not as big a deal as it seemed at the time. Following the time they spent apart, she felt that they both figured out who they were separately, and because of that “I think we have grown closer in a way, that we understand—that we understand how we communicate...I think it gave us a better understanding of how we each process things.”

Maria reflected on the situation and wished that she had reached out to resolve the situation sooner. After seeing her friend again, she said it was like nothing ever happened and it felt just like it did when they first became friends.

Participants also referred to how they felt that these hurtful communication events helped them grow, or change their mindset about the situation and their circumstances. Even though her friendship ended, Camille mentioned things she learned about herself in communicating with others, especially not believing what others say about her when it goes against what she knew her character to be. “I can have a reaction to a thing that happened that made me upset, but I don’t necessarily need to respond to it” and that her mindset has changed from “I’m a bad friend to emphasizing with someone’s unfortunate circumstances or like, perspective.” Katherine came to a similar conclusion and stated that she felt like she had grown in understanding the situation and her friend, “at the time, I was very like ‘I’m being hurt’ and that’s all I really cared about, um but now looking back like I feel empathy towards both of us.”

Relationship changes: Letting it be or letting it go

Some of these participants shifted in their understanding of their relationships; that is, participants felt their relationships had regressed, but still offered some connection. When asked about the current state of her friendship, Gwen explained that it felt the same way as when you “have a family member that you are close to, but if you guys have a fight you don’t really talk to each other, but you’re still family...you’ll still be there for each other—that’s how I feel right now.” Gwen believed that even when the friendship was not where it used to be, it was worth preserving. Heidi and her friend didn’t talk to each other for a few months following their hurtful communication, but Heidi felt like they both grew from that time apart and that if they found themselves in a similar situation in the future, they would be able to talk through it easier than before.

Some friendships continued to be sustained but would never be the same. Isabelle felt like her relationship, though repaired, was not as comfortable as it had been. She described it as

feeling like she was “walking on eggshells whenever I’m around her because one tiny thing I could say could make her not talk to me again.” Katherine stated that certain interactions felt more weighted now, and Ophelia said she was just trying to keep herself from being in the same situation. Felicity felt the need to constantly prove to her friend that she cared about her and wanted to be her friend. Considering their relationship now she said, “it doesn’t feel like an equal friendship dynamic as much anymore, it feels more like...I’m the bad guy and she’s the victim, at least in her mind.”

Following a hurtful communication event, several relationships were close to being terminated or had ended. Amy’s relationship with her friend diminished after they graduated, now they keep in touch with an occasional text. She indicated, “I mean, our relationship has changed in that there really isn’t one anymore.” Amy reflected on the way her relationship ended with sadness, wishing that she and her roommate had ended their relationship on better terms “I hope that, you know, she doesn’t resent me because I don’t resent her, but I don’t really want to reopen any wounds so I’m just gonna let it go.” Natasha had a similar experience with her friend, after moving back home they had a hurtful communication event that ended in occasional attempts to connect on social media posts, but not consistent communication that would indicate a future for the friendship. Like Amy, Natasha reflected that the friendship, “fizzled out is a good way to put it, because it wasn’t abrupt” but that it became clear that they had to “let go of the relationship that’s no longer there.”

Paisley felt a lack of closure from her ended friendship for a while since she never found out what caused the relationship to falter the way it did. She tried to clear the air between her and her friend to create some sense of closure but never felt successful. It was only after her friend ghosted a mutual acquaintance in a similar fashion that Paisley realized her friendship ending

probably was not something that she did. Finally, Lily found that once she stopped putting in an effort her friend disappeared. She reflected that looking back “people told me I shouldn’t be friends with this person, there was a reason why and that like I can see like little red flags that was kind of my own fault for staying in communication with this person.” Ultimately, these participants experienced significant relationship changes in their friendship, with significant losses; however, some participants recognized the importance of letting the friendship be what it was going to be or letting the friendship go to bring a sense of closure.

CHAPTER 5

This study sought to explore how women use IIs to better understand a hurtful communication event with a close friend. This study is unique in the field because of its use of Imagined Interaction theory as a tool to help understand hurtful communication. Much of the research using Imagined Interaction Theory has been focused on IIs as intrapersonal communication but does not explore how intrapersonal communication may affect interpersonal communication. This study hopes to bridge that gap.

Participants' insight into their own hurtful communication event demonstrated clear planning and execution after the event in anticipation of seeing their friend again. Participants used IIs to retroactively examine the event and reflect on their feelings about their friendship with many describing anxieties, hurt, frustration, and anger. Subsequently, they turned to using proactive IIs, anticipating their next meeting with their friend, which brought about planning and avoidance behaviors stemming from partner and relational uncertainty. Finally, participants described complex interactions that included changes in mindset, a continuation of the relationship, or termination of the relationship.

First, findings indicate that participants' descriptions of retroactively remembering the hurtful communication event brought about complicated feelings. These women discussed feeling hurt by their friend, oftentimes resentful, and angry. Self-focused feelings included guilt, self-doubt, and loneliness. Participants reported that using retroactive IIs helped them clarify their emotions about the hurtful communication event. Individuals who had experienced a hurtful communication event often had many emotions to sort through about their relational partner and themselves. Participants described how this process influenced their thinking about the next time they would see their friend.

This study replicated findings from other hurtful communication studies. Leary and colleagues (1998) found when an individual communicates a devaluing of the relationship, hurt is felt, and psychological hurt can be as acute as physical pain and may last longer. Individuals may also feel hurt when their expectations of the relationship are violated, or their relationship partners are unpredictable (Bunnett et al., 2020). As research suggests, hurt feelings can fall between other-oriented emotions, such as anger, and self-oriented emotions, such as guilt (Leary et al., 1998). In their 1998 study, Leary and colleagues found that a variety of painful feelings, such as rejection, loneliness, sadness, and feeling self-conscious eventually evolved to anger.

Similar to findings from Honeycutt and colleagues (2009), these women expressed how moments of retroactive IIs assisted them in their practice of self-awareness, clarifying their thoughts and feelings, as well as examining their own and their relational partner's communication objectives. In alignment with previous literature, participants experienced a variety of other-focused and self-focused emotions including hurt, anger, sadness, loneliness, and even guilt. These emotions were deep and, in some cases, were described as long-lasting. Retroactive IIs were an integral part of participants' journeys after experiencing hurtful communication with a close friend and seemed to help participants prepare for future interactions with their friend. These women described being flooded with emotions, ruminating on the hurt, and feeling less certain in moving forward with their friendship.

Processing their emotions was imperative before participants could move forward in evaluating or dealing with the situation. When considering hurtful communication among close friends, processing the violation of expectations had to occur before any other steps could be taken. Thus, although it is often overlooked in hurtful communication literature, internal

processing was an important part of the hurtful communication proceedings that had to happen before any other steps were taken.

Second, the young women interviewed in this study focused on managing their uncertainty. Participants reported that as their thoughts turned to their next encounter with their friend, they battled feelings of anxiety and dread, as well as uncertainty about the next time they would see their friend (i.e., the state of their relationship and their relationship's future). When facing another meeting with their friend, participants managed uncertainty by planning their encounters as thoroughly as possible or avoiding a conflict altogether. Anticipatory behaviors were anticipating things that might frustrate their friend and trying to manage them before they became an issue, or trying to plan out exactly how an encounter would go. Participants planned what they would say, how their friend might respond, etc. Many participants described a period of walking on eggshells—uncertain how their relationship would progress from this period of hurt. Avoidance behaviors manifested as checking the parking lot for their friend's car, not leaving their room if their friend was home, or turning and walking the other way if they saw their friend.

Proactive IIs were used as a form of planning behavior to manage uncertainty and to understand what was probable in the situation and possibilities for the future of the relationship (Maguire, 2007). Participants experienced relational uncertainty, and/or partner uncertainty following a violation of expectations about the relationship, and self-uncertainty when participants did not feel easily able to identify their feelings or how they felt about the relationship given the situation (Malachowski & Frisby, 2015). Participants managed their anxiety by planning for the upcoming meeting with their friend as best as they could. For example, participants described using proactive IIs to role-play scenarios with their friend,

looking for the best solution to their situation, and making contingency plans for if things went wrong. More importantly, uncertainty affected the relational outcomes for participants (Malachowski & Frisby, 2015). For some participants, planning behaviors—especially proactive IIs -- were enough to make them feel secure enough to see their friend again, for some, the hurt was substantial enough that they decided to avoid their friend entirely and cut off the relationship. In accordance with previous literature, managing uncertainty was crucial for participants following the hurtful communication, suggesting that much of the stress of hurtful communication comes from the stress of the unknown factors surrounding the situation.

Third, young women experienced personal growth due to the hurtful communication experience. Participants almost universally took some time after the hurtful communication event to heal, apart from their friend. Participants who experienced personal and relational growth, forgave their friend, and moved forward in their relationship; or they experienced personal growth and decided that their relationship was beyond repair and began following the steps for terminating the relationship. These findings support related communication frameworks such as relational maintenance and forgiveness (Merolla & Zhang, 2010).

Relationships go through cyclical periods of conflict escalation and de-escalation (King & Behnke, 1986). Hurt feelings often result in a distancing of the relationship, and the more frequent the hurtful communication the more negative consequences for the relationship (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). One simple thing to help relationships heal after a hurtful communication event is having space or distance and taking time to heal any emotional wounds (Young, 2004).

Relationship maintenance behaviors like forgiveness can be used to repair the relationship (Merolla & Zhang, 2010). Bachman and Guerreo (2006) found that one of the best

predictors of forgiveness following hurtful communication is to disclose feelings “in an open non-threatening manner to increase understanding and solve problems” (p. 53). Forgiveness plays a significant role in relationship maintenance; Merolla and Zhang (2010) found that relational repair following an episode of hurtful communication is most plausible when forgiveness is transpiring, either through verbal or non-verbal messages.

Some participants were successful in maintaining their relationship, and some decided to terminate the relationship. Participants who terminated their relationship followed the first two steps of Duck’s Dissolution Model (DDM), intrapsychic processes, and dyadic processes (Duck, 1982; 2005). Participants that maintained the relationship benefited from time away from their friend to grow (Young, 2004), and to talk through problems or adjust their perceptions or expectations of the relationship. Participants that terminated the relationship most often experienced a period of repeated hurtful communication before deciding that leaving the friendship was the only way to ensure that they would not be hurt again (McLaren & Solomon, 2010). Regardless of the final outcome for the relationship, participants reported personal growth as a result of the hurtful communication event which suggests that hurtful communication or conflict with a close friend can be beneficial for an individual’s personal growth.

Limitations and Future Research

There were some limitations to this study. First, participants were fairly homogenized, and different themes may emerge with different samples. This study specifically focused on young women between the ages of 18 and 25, women of other ages, or men of any age, may find different themes because they have a different lived experience. Likewise, of the sixteen participants, fourteen of them identified as white. Individuals identifying as other races or ethnicities will have different lived experiences. For example, Goins (2011) studied black female

friendships because of the unique ways black females relate to each other and their shared experiences as people who are doubly marginalized.

The sample size was another limitation, sixteen individuals participated in this study. While participants' experiences followed common themes there is no guarantee that the general population would follow suit. Additionally, although the study focused on the ways participants processed hurtful communication and required a retroactive component, there is always a concern that participants' memories may not be accurate to how things happened or that events may be distorted in their memory.

Future research should continue to examine how Imagined Interactions can help researchers understand how people process hurtful communication. This could include (1) studies focusing on women of different ages, (2) how men use IIs to process hurtful communication, and (3) if differing cultures use IIs differently when processing hurtful communication. Additionally, a diary study could be another tool researchers use to identify how individuals use IIs in the moment, bypassing their reliance on their memories of retrospective processing. Research could also include how the perpetrators of hurtful communication process the situation and the resulting changes in the relationship.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that women who experience hurt in a close friendship due to a hurtful communication event had a unique, yet similar experience. Hurtful communication events prompted individuals to review their relationship and the hurtful event, determine how they felt about their partner, and how they felt in light of what had happened. Subsequently, they turned to thinking about seeing their friend again. As they anticipated their next encounter they focused on managing their emotions about seeing their friend—namely

anxiety, and managing the uncertainty surrounding their friend and their relationship. Ultimately, participants described a sense of growth and change in themselves and their relationship, while some made the choice to let go of their relationship.

This study is unique to hurtful communication literature by examining hurtful communication through the lens of Imagined Interactions. Imagined Interactions have largely been studied as a cognitive process and have not been used as a method of understanding an entire situation—like a hurtful communication event between friends. Framing hurtful communication within Imagined Interactions enhanced the understanding of a hurtful communication event because it allowed the researcher to explore how participants reflected retroactively on the event as a method of processing their thoughts and emotions while thinking proactively about seeing their friend again.

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Appendix

The interview would start with a brief overview of imagined interactions and the context of hurtful communication in friendships:

Imagine your boss sends you an email. They want to meet with you at the end of the day but don't say why. You start to run through all of the different possibilities in your head. Am I getting fired? Am I getting promoted? Is there a problem with my work? You start to play scenarios in your mind; if they say this, I will react this way; if they want to talk to me about this, I might say that. You try different scenarios and ways to respond until you find the perfect words to say. This is an example of an imagined interaction.

In any relationship we have, there is a possibility of being hurt. When we open ourselves to relationships, whether familial, a friendship, or a romantic relationship, we make ourselves vulnerable within that relationship. After a hurtful communication, we judge the history and quality of our relationship to create a context to determine if and how a message is hurtful. One way to review the relationship and determine a way forward is to use imagined interactions. Imagined interactions (IIs) are a type of daydreaming with a purpose used to examine previous communication retroactively and create scripts for future interactions, making them a practical tool to examine how hurtful communication affects friendships.

Following the overview and context for the study:

1. Can you describe your friendship?
 - A. How long have you been friends?
 - B. How did you become friends?
 - a. What was a major turning point at the beginning of your friendship that let you know that this was a good friend?

- b. In general, when you get together with your friend what are some things you typically do?
- c. You described the relationship as your close friend, can you tell me why?

I've asked you a lot about your friend. Can you remember and describe a time recently when they said something hurtful or offensive to you? Something that you found yourself thinking about.

1. Sometimes hurtful things people say can happen spontaneously, or sometimes it's been building a long time with something someone is doing or saying, can you describe a little bit more about the hurtful communication? Was it spontaneous or something more long-term?

A. Has something like this happened before in your relationship?

1. Sometimes when our friends say something hurtful or offensive it causes us to think a lot about that situation. Think back to the time directly after the hurtful communication happened and describe how you processed that.

A. What were some of the thoughts you had about the interaction?

B. While you were processing the interaction could you identify patterns in your thinking, and if so, what were they?

C. Can you tell me about what you were feeling as you reflected back on the interaction?

- a. If you can, take a moment to think about how you felt then, and then assess your feelings about it now. Can you describe any similarities or differences?

Think back to the time directly after the hurtful communication happened, before you saw your friend again. Can you describe whether you thought about your next interaction, or if you planned for what you might say the next time you saw them? What were some of the thoughts you had about the upcoming interaction? How did you feel about seeing that person again?

1. While you were anticipating the next interaction could you identify patterns in your thinking, and if so, what were they?

A. Can you tell me about what you were feeling as you anticipated the next interaction?

a. Did you find yourself reminiscing about the times in your relationship before the hurtful interaction?

B. Has the interaction happened yet?

a. If you can, take a moment to think about how you felt then, and then assess your feelings about it now. Can you describe any similarities or differences?

1. How has your relationship changed following the hurtful communication event?

A. Has there been a change in your relationship? Can you describe it?

Recap of themes discussed

Thank them for their time