

HURT FEELINGS:

THE ROLE OF RECEIVERS' PERSONALITY IN EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO OTHERS' WORDS

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

- Microaggressions are generally defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Over the past decade, awareness of microaggressions has increased and use of the term "microaggression" has spread beyond race into many domains, including gender and sexuality (Lilienfeld, 2017). In some universities, administrators and faculty distribute lists of words and statements that students and staff are asked to refrain from using out of concern for their presumed harmful effects (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).
- Concern in American society about the potential harm of subtle slights and insults introduces the need for systematic data on who feels hurt by what types of statements. Previous research on negative emotionality suggests that some people are more predisposed than others to interpret ambiguous statements as hostile. In an initial study of ambiguous statements, when we primed participants with the idea that other people sometimes unintentionally say harmful things, participants who were higher in negative emotionality perceived ambiguous statements as more harmful (Paulich et al., 2019).
- The primary objective of the current research is to determine how much consensus people show in their perceptions of how harmful others' words are.

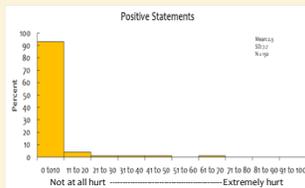
MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

- We began by asking 78 young adults to list things they had said, or heard other people say, that were either *intentionally* or *unintentionally* hurtful.
- Our team members independently categorized the statements into content domains. After comparing domains via discussion, we agreed on 16 content domains, each of which held an *intentionally hurtful* and *unintentionally hurtful* statement. For a baseline point of comparison, we also generated a blatantly *positive* statement for each of the domains.

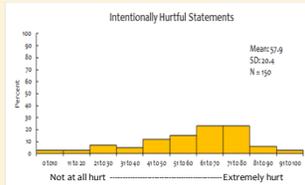
| CONTENT DOMAIN | POSITIVE STATEMENT | INTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENT | UNINTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENT |
|----------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| CLOTHES | "I like the style of clothes you wear." | "I would never wear that." | "That's different from what you usually wear." |
| HYGIENE | "You smell so good." | "You smell." | "You should shower." |
| ATTRACTIVENESS | "You're good-looking." | "You're ugly." | "You're getting to be so pretty." |

- The final list held 16 domains of statements (e.g., Personality, General Neptitude, Intelligence, Hygiene, Attractiveness, etc.), with each domain including an intentionally hurtful, unintentionally hurtful, and positive statement. The table below shows three of the domains with the statements we used for them.
- We then asked three new samples of young adults to read each statement and make one of the following judgments about it: (DV1) How hurt would you feel if someone said this to you? (*Not at all to Extremely*); (DV2) How anxious would you feel if someone said this to you? (*Not at all to Extremely*); (DV3) How likely it is that the deliverer of the comment is trying to be hurtful? (*Not at all to Extremely*).
- Finally, all three samples of participants completed a personality inventory that enabled us to assess their feelings of anxiety (stress reaction) and alienation, and their general belief that words can harm (Bellet et al., 2018).

RESULTS: FEELING HURT

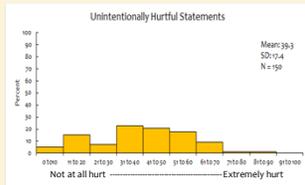


Over 90% of participants rated the **positive statements** as not at all hurtful, suggesting strong consensus that these statements are perceived as not hurtful at all. For these statements, internal consistency was very high ($\alpha=.94$): A participant who felt they would be hurt by one of the statements responded very similarly to the other statements.



Overall, participants rated the **intentionally hurtful statements** as moderately hurtful, but the histogram at left shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how hurt they felt by the statements.

Within-person consistency, however, was again very high ($\alpha=.92$): A participant who felt very hurt (or not at all hurt) by one of these statements was likely to feel very hurt (or not at all hurt) by the other statements, as well.



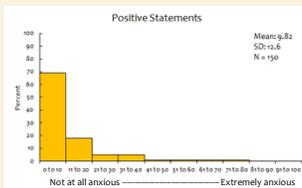
Overall, participants rated the **unintentionally hurtful statements** as somewhat hurtful. The histogram at left shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how hurt they felt by the statements.

Notably, within-person consistency was again very high ($\alpha=.89$): A participant who felt very hurt (or not at all hurt) by one of these statements was likely to feel very hurt (or not at all hurt) by the other statements, as well.

The table below shows correlations between participants' personality traits and how hurt they reported feeling in response to the statements. Individuals who scored higher in stress reaction (anxiety) and belief that words can harm tended to report feeling more hurt by the intentionally and unintentionally hurtful statements. Alienation (feeling ostracized and victimized by others) was related to feeling hurt by positive statements.

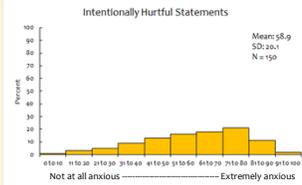
| | POSITIVE STATEMENTS | INTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS | UNINTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| STRESS REACTION | $r = -.01$ 95% CI [.14, .43] | $r = .33^{***}$ 95% CI [.18, .47] | $r = .29^{***}$ 95% CI [.14, .43] |
| ALIENATION | $r = .19^*$ 95% CI [.04, .34] | $r = .05$ 95% CI [-.11, .21] | $r = .14$ 95% CI [-.02, .29] |
| WORDS CAN HARM | $r = .13$ 95% CI [-.30, .05] | $r = .33^{***}$ 95% CI [.18, .47] | $r = .29^{***}$ 95% CI [.14, .43] |

RESULTS: FEELING ANXIOUS



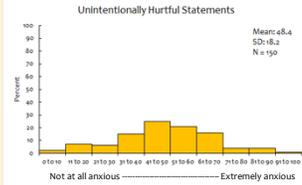
Over 2/3 of participants reported that **positive statements** did not make them feel anxious at all. There was substantial consensus across participants that positive statements do not cause anxiety.

For these statements, internal consistency was very high ($\alpha=.92$): A participant who felt they would feel anxious in response to one of the statements responded very similarly to the other statements.



Overall, participants felt moderately-to-very anxious by the **intentionally hurtful statements**. The histogram at left shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how anxious they felt by the statements.

Within-person consistency, however, was again very high ($\alpha=.93$): A participant who felt very anxious (or not at all anxious) by one of these statements was likely to feel very anxious (or not at all anxious) by the other statements, as well.



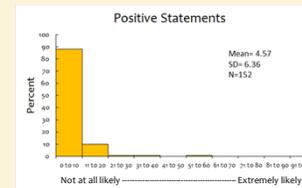
Overall, participants felt moderately anxious by the **unintentionally hurtful statements**. The histogram at left shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how anxious they felt by the statements.

Within-person consistency, however, was again very high ($\alpha=.90$): A participant who felt very anxious (or not at all anxious) by one of these statements was likely to feel very anxious (or not at all anxious) by the other statements, as well.

The table below shows correlations between participants' personality traits and how anxious they reported feeling in response to the statements. Individuals who scored higher in stress reaction (anxiety) and belief that words can harm tended to report feeling more anxious by the intentionally and unintentionally hurtful statements. Alienation was related to feeling more anxious in response to the positive statements.

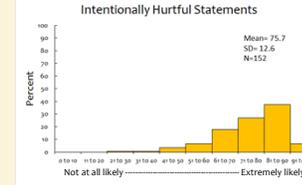
| | POSITIVE STATEMENTS | INTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS | UNINTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| STRESS REACTION | $r = .10$ 95% CI [.06, .26] | $r = .31^{***}$ 95% CI [.16, .45] | $r = .24^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .48] |
| ALIENATION | $r = .37^{***}$ 95% CI [.22, .50] | $r = .11$ 95% CI [-.05, .27] | $r = .23^*$ 95% CI [.07, .38] |
| WORDS CAN HARM | $r = -.03$ 95% CI [-.02, .15] | $r = .23^*$ 95% CI [.06, .39] | $r = .23^*$ 95% CI [.06, .39] |

RESULTS: RATING OF INTENT TO HURT



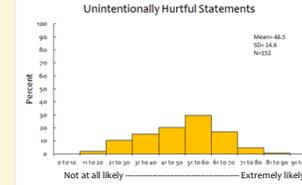
In response to the **positive statements**, nearly 90% felt that they were not at all likely to be delivered with intent to harm, suggesting a general consensus across participants that positive statements do not betray an intent to harm.

For these statements, internal consistency was high ($\alpha=.80$): A participant who felt there was a likely intent to harm in one of the statements responded very similarly to the other statements.



Overall, participants rated the **intentionally hurtful statements** as very likely to be delivered with the intent to be hurtful. The histogram at left shows that there was some consensus among participants in the intent they perceived in the statements.

Within-person consistency was high ($\alpha=.85$): A participant who felt that the intent to harm was extremely likely for one of the statements was likely to feel that the intent to harm was extremely likely for the other statements, as well.



Overall, participants rated the **unintentionally hurtful statements** as moderately likely to be delivered with the intent to be hurtful. The histogram at left shows some consensus (but less than above) among participants in the intent they perceived in the statements.

Within-person consistency was again high ($\alpha=.86$): A participant who felt that the intent to harm was extremely likely for one of the statements was likely to feel that the intent to harm was extremely likely for the other statements, as well.

The table below shows correlations between participants' personality traits and their rating of how likely the deliverer of the statement was **intending to be hurtful**. Individuals who scored higher in belief that words can harm tended to perceive greater likelihood of hurtful intent in response to the intentionally and unintentionally hurtful statements. Alienation was related to perceiving intent to hurt in response to the positive statements.

| | POSITIVE STATEMENTS | INTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS | UNINTENTIONALLY HURTFUL STATEMENTS |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| STRESS REACTION | $r = .11$ 95% CI [-.05, .26] | $r = .11$ 95% CI [-.05, .27] | $r = .08$ 95% CI [-.08, .24] |
| ALIENATION | $r = .20^*$ 95% CI [.04, .35] | $r = .06$ 95% CI [-.10, .22] | $r = .12$ 95% CI [-.04, .28] |
| WORDS CAN HARM | $r = .02$ 95% CI [-.16, .19] | $r = .35^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .49] | $r = .35^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .49] |

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