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What Counts as Effective Emotional Support?

Explorations of Individual
and Situational Differences

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When feeling hurt, disappointed, or upset, virtually everyone would like to receive sensitive emotional support from caring others. But is what counts as sensitive emotional support like beauty—that is, in the eye of the beholder? Do people differ substantially in their views about the type of emotional support that makes them feel better, or do most people have similar ideas about what counts as helpful (and unhelpful) emotional support? This chapter contributes to answering this question by summarizing the results of three studies that explore how certain psychological and situational factors influence people's responses to various emotional support strategies.

Emotional Support: Its Nature and Significance

Emotional support is viewed by both theorists and laypeople as a basic provision of close personal relationships (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000) and is an important determinant of satisfaction within these relationships. People value the emotional support skills of their relationship partners, and perceptions of emotional supportiveness have been found to play a critical role in the development and maintenance of friendships, romances, families, and work relationships (see review by Burleson, 2003a). When emotional

support is provided skillfully (i.e., addresses a distressed other's feelings in a sensitive and effective way), it can yield numerous benefits for the recipient, including improvements in emotional states (Burlleson & Goldsmith, 1998), coping (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996), and even health (Wills & Fegan, 2001). Unfortunately, research indicates, many attempts to provide emotional support are *not* experienced as sensitive and effective by recipients. There is a burgeoning literature concerned with "support attempts that fail," "miscarried helping," and "cold comfort" (see Holmstrom, Burlleson, & Jones, 2005) showing that well-meaning but insensitive attempts to provide emotional support are all too common and can be quite harmful to recipients, intensifying their emotional hurt, undermining their coping, and even damaging their health.

Providing effective, sensitive support thus requires more than good intentions; those who provide truly helpful support must know what to say (as well as what not to say). So what properties of messages are generally perceived as providing helpful, sensitive support? One useful approach to characterizing the features of more and less effective supportive messages makes use of the concept known as *person centeredness*.

In comforting contexts, person centeredness reflects the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other's feelings and perspective (Burlleson, 1994). Thus messages low in person centeredness (LPC) deny the other's feelings and perspective by criticizing his or her feelings, challenging the legitimacy of those feelings, or telling the other how he or she should act and feel. Messages that exhibit a moderate degree of person centeredness (MPC) afford an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by distracting attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting non-feeling-centered explanations of the situation intended to reduce the distress (e.g., citing mitigating circumstances). In contrast, highly person-centered (HPC) comforting messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings, help the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assist the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context. Examples of comforting messages that vary in level of person centeredness are presented in Table 10.1. Numerous studies have found that HPC messages are evaluated as more sensitive, effective, helpful, and appropriate than MPC and especially LPC messages (see review by Burlleson, Samter, et al., 2005).

Differences in Responses to Person-Centered Comforting

Important as these findings are, they do not mean that all people necessarily find HPC comforting messages superior to MPC or LPC messages in all

Table 10.1 Comforting Messages That Exhibit Low, Moderate, and High Levels of Person Centeredness

Set 1: Messages that might be used to comfort a college student friend who is somewhat irritated about not doing well on a quiz that counts 1% of the class grade (mild problem severity and emotional upset)

Low Person-Centered Message (*Deny receiver's feelings by criticizing and challenging him or her, telling receiver how to feel or act*)

Well, that's too bad, but maybe you're just not trying hard enough. Maybe that's why you didn't do so well on the quiz. You're probably just gonna have to study harder. You know, you shouldn't be so upset about it if you didn't study as hard as you could have. I'm sure that you'll get better grades when you study harder. But right now, can you just try to forget about the quiz? I mean, remember that there are more important things in the world than stupid quizzes over class readings. Anyway, it's a pretty dumb class; it's really not worth worrying about. So just try to forget about it. Just think about something else.

Moderately Person-Centered Message (*Expressions of sympathy and condolence, presenting non-feeling-centered explanations of the situation*)

Well, I'm really sorry you didn't do better on the quiz. I wish you'd done better on it too. But I can see how this happened. College is really tough sometimes. It's really too bad that you didn't do as well on this one. I've heard a lot of people don't do well on those quizzes. You did better on all the other ones and will probably do well on the rest of them. And hey, I heard you aced that biology midterm last week—that was great! I know! Those guys that live over on Sylvia Street are having a party tonight. Do you want to go get some dinner and then go to the party?

Highly Person-Centered Message (*Explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings, help the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assist the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context*)

Well, I understand why you're feeling bummed out about the quiz. I can appreciate why you're feeling down right now. I mean, not doing as well as you want on an assignment is always hard. It's just so frustrating sometimes to work really hard in a class and still not do as well as you want. The same thing happened to me earlier this year, so I can guess how disappointed you must feel about this. It's probably hard to look at it this way, but maybe you've learned something from this that will help you do better on the next quiz. I'd be happy to talk to you more about this, if you want.

Set 2: Messages that might be used to comfort a college student friend who is moderately upset about having his or her car booted in a university garage for parking in a reserved space and having to pay \$350 in fines and fees to have the boot removed (moderate problem severity and emotional upset)

(Continued)

Table 10.1 (Continued)

Low Person-Centered Message

Well, you'll have to pay those fines and tickets, but it could be worse—they could have towed and impounded your car. They can do that when you park in a reserved space during the day. So, you got off comparatively easy—you should remember that and be grateful. And try not to make such a big thing out of it, because you'll only upset yourself. This is one of those things that is not really worth worrying about; just pay the fine so you can move on and forget about it. I guess next time you should be more careful about parking in the garage overnight.

Moderately Person-Centered Message

Well, I'm really sorry that your car got booted. I wish this hadn't happened, but it seems like one of those things that can just happen sometimes. This university is out to take students for every dollar it can. I see parking boots on people's cars all the time around campus. I guess they really mean it when they say they'll ticket at 7 a.m. Hey, I know! There's a party over on Waldron Street tonight. It might be just the thing to cheer you up. I can pick you up later so you don't have to drive.

Highly Person-Centered Message

Of course, you're really mad right now! This is so outrageous! I mean, you were only 5 minutes late moving your car; you'd figure they'd give you a break. But not here, I guess; sounds like you got hit by one of those ticket Nazis. It's no fun having to pay those fines and tickets, and it's not like you don't have better things to do with the money! I'd be angry too. I mean, I totally understand, especially since you might be short on cash right now. I'm happy to help you blow off some steam about this; just wish I could do more!

circumstances. In recognition of this, a growing number of studies have sought to determine whether people differ in the types of comforting messages they view as helpful and prefer to receive when they need support.

Knowing whether and why people differ in their responses to various comforting messages is important for several practical and theoretical reasons. From a pragmatic point of view, it is of obvious importance to determine whether groups of individuals systematically differ in their responses to distinct comforting approaches: clearly, helpers will want to know whether some groups of people respond more favorably to certain comforting strategies than do others; if so, types of support strategies can be matched with types of people to achieve the most desirable outcomes.

From a theoretical point of view, knowing whether and why people differ in their response to comforting approaches should help us to better understand the mechanisms through which comforting messages work to bring improvements in affect and coping behavior. For example, some theorists (e.g., Tannen,

1990; Wood, 2000) maintain that certain comforting strategies effectively reduce emotional distress in some groups of people but not in other groups; these theorists hold that comforting strategies are effective within certain groups because they are the conventionally recognized and accepted devices in those groups for conveying care and concern. In contrast, other theorists (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) maintain that certain comforting strategies (such as HPC messages) should work effectively with virtually all people because of how these strategies impact the psychological functioning of their recipients. Thus by examining the extent to which distinct groups of people respond similarly or differently to various comforting strategies, we not only can determine what comforting messages should work best with an intended recipient but also can gain insight into why these messages produce certain cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes.

The Current Focus: Psychological and Situational Factors That Influence Responses to Person-Centered Comforting

In recent years, studies have examined whether people who belong to distinct *demographic groups* respond differently to various comforting messages. Demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, nationality) are an obvious place to begin looking for similarities and differences in responses to comforting messages, since considerable research indicates that people who belong to different demographic groups communicate in distinct ways (see Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). And in fact, numerous studies have detected statistically significant differences in responses to comforting messages exhibiting different degrees of person centeredness as a function of recipient demographic characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, and nationality (see review by Burleson, 2003b). However, most of these demographic differences have been small in magnitude, usually accounting for only 1% to 3% of the variability in responses to these messages and never accounting for more than 10% of the variability.

More important, recent theory and research suggest that responses to comforting messages may differ more as a function of recipient psychological characteristics (e.g., personality traits and cognitive abilities) than as a function of demographic variables. Of course, demographic factors do not themselves directly influence responses to messages. Rather, certain demographic factors are generally associated with particular patterns of socialization and social experience, which, in turn, shape the personality traits and cognitive orientations of the people in these groups. Theoretically, then, responses to comforting messages should be influenced most directly by underlying psychological factors that mediate the effects of demographic differences on responses to messages.

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Indeed, a limited number of studies (e.g., Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Kunkel, 2002) have found that certain psychological variables (e.g., values, goal orientations) explain more variability than demographic variables in support message responses and also mediate the effects of demographic variables.

It is also possible that recipient responses to comforting messages may vary as a function of certain situational factors, such as the severity of the problem confronted by the recipient. To date, almost all research assessing responses to comforting messages has examined these in the context of moderate or severe problems that generally create intense, negative emotional upset. The question posed here is whether people who experience comparatively mild upsets are best comforted by the same support strategies found to be effective at helping people cope with moderate to severe upsets. When coping with mild upsets, support recipients may not give much attention to the content of highly sophisticated comforting strategies (such as HPC messages), and if they do, these strategies may be viewed as having undesirable implications (e.g., suggesting that the situation is more serious than the recipient thought; implying that the helper thinks the recipient is incapable of managing the situation). Thus it is possible that less person-centered comforting strategies may actually be more effective than more person-centered strategies when seeking to support someone experiencing a relatively mild upset.

Do different types of people prefer different types of comforting messages when coping with different degrees of upset? This chapter seeks answers to this question by reporting three studies that examine how certain psychological and situational factors affect responses to comforting messages that exhibit different levels of person centeredness. Two studies examined how the psychological factors of *communication values* and *self-concept* influenced responses to comforting strategies, while a third study assessed whether evaluations of comforting strategies varied as a function of *problem severity* and other situational factors.

Study 1

Communication values are aspects of personality that reflect the importance people place on various communication skills; hence supportive communication value is the importance (i.e., value) that people place on the skill of providing support, especially emotional support. Studies have found that the value people place on the skill of comforting is associated with several important outcomes, including their degree of peer acceptance, their level of loneliness, and their development of mutually satisfying friendships and romances (Burleson, 2003a, 2003b). It seems reasonable to assume that people who place comparatively high value on the emotional support skills of relationship partners will respond more positively to HPC comforting messages and more negatively to LPC comforting

messages. In contrast, people who place little value on comforting skill may differentiate little, if at all, among comforting messages that differ in person centeredness. To date, only one study (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003) has examined how the value placed on support skill influences responses to comforting messages that vary in person centeredness, and the results of that study were inconclusive. Thus Study 1 was designed to assess whether, and to what extent, responses to comforting messages of differing levels of person centeredness vary as a function of the value people place on emotional support skill.

METHOD

Participants in Study 1 were 184 college students (89 men and 95 women) attending a large midwestern university. To assess value placed on supportive communication skills, participants responded to three items pertaining to comforting skill taken from Burlison and Samter's (1990) Communication Functions Questionnaire (CFQ). Participants rated (on 5-point scales) how important it was for a close, same-sex friend to be able to skillfully comfort them when upset (e.g., "Helps make me feel better when I'm hurt or depressed about something," "Can help me work through my emotions when I'm feeling upset or depressed"). Cronbach's alpha for the three comforting items was .80. A median split was conducted to create a group ($n = 91$) that placed relatively low value on comforting skill ($M = 3.30$) and a group ($n = 93$) that placed relatively high value on comforting skill ($M = 4.66$).

To obtain participants' evaluations of comforting messages that differed in level of person centeredness, participants read two randomly ordered situations in which a "good friend" was portrayed as experiencing moderate emotional distress. The situations depicted the friend as (a) coping with a recently announced parental divorce and (b) not receiving an anticipated academic scholarship. A list of nine randomly ordered messages followed each of the hypothetical scenarios, with three messages exhibiting a low level of person centeredness, three messages exhibiting a moderate level of person centeredness, and three exhibiting a high level of person centeredness. Participants were instructed to rate the quality of each strategy—that is, its sensitivity and effectiveness—on 5-point scales; acceptable reliabilities (.70–.82) were obtained.

RESULTS

The effects of support value and message person centeredness on evaluations of the comforting messages were assessed by a 2×3 mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor. The between-groups factor was support value (low vs. high), the repeated factor was message person centeredness (low, moderate, and high), and the dependent variable was

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rated message quality (i.e., averaged sensitivity and effectiveness ratings). Means for this analysis are plotted in Figure 10.1. The main effect for support value was not significant, $F(1, 182) = 1.18, p > .25$. However, there was a strong main effect for message person centeredness, $F(2, 364) = 376.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .67$, with HPC messages ($M = 3.53$) rated as better ($p < .001$) than MPC messages ($M = 2.79$), and MPC messages rated as better ($p < .001$) than LPC messages ($M = 2.16$). More important, there was a significant interaction between the factors of support value and message person centeredness, $F(2, 364) = 7.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Decomposition of this interaction (utilizing polynomial trend analysis) revealed that, as anticipated, the linear effect for message person centeredness explained significantly more variance in message ratings among those with high support values ($\eta^2 = .75$) than among those with low support values ($\eta^2 = .58$), $F(1, 182) = 11.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$. Participants high in support value rated HPC messages as significantly better than did those in low support value, $t(182) = 3.15, p < .002$ (see Figure 10.1). There was a near significant trend for participants low in support value to rate LPC messages as better than did those high in support value, $t(182) = 1.84, p < .10$. The two groups did not differ in their evaluation of MPC messages, $t(192) = 0.40, ns$.

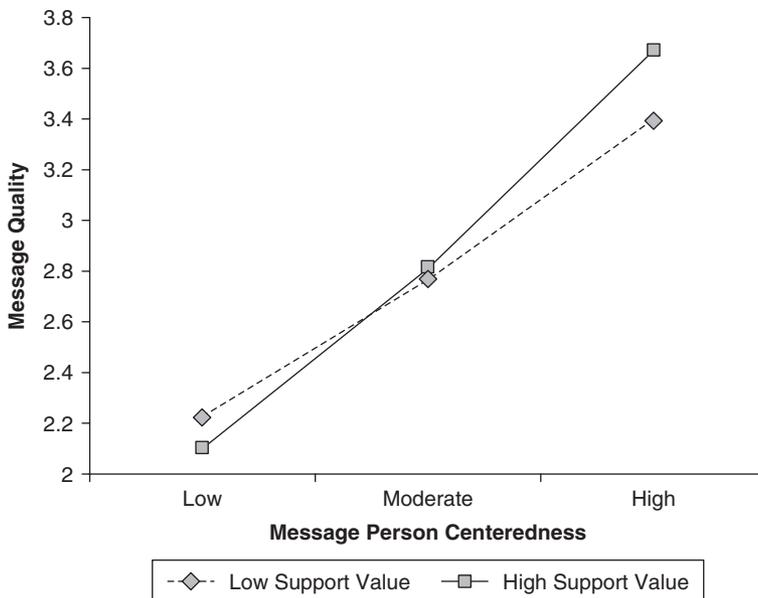


Figure 10.1 Effects of Person Centeredness and Support Values on Message Evaluations in Study 1

DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 indicate that people who highly value support skills rate HPC comforting messages more positively, and LPC messages less positively, than do people who place comparatively low value on support skills. However, the differences in message evaluations attributable to support value were relatively small, especially in comparison to the very large effect observed for message person centeredness. All participants—regardless of their support values—rated HPC messages as substantially better than MPC messages and rated MPC messages as substantially better than LPC messages (see Figure 10.1). The theoretical implications of these findings are intriguing; they suggest that people who highly value support skills pay more attention to the details of the comforting messages they receive than do those who place comparatively low value on support skills. The practical implication of the present findings is rather different, however: the present results strongly suggest that HPC messages will do the best job of providing comfort to all recipients, regardless of their support values.

Study 2

Numerous scholars (e.g., Cushman, Valentinsen, & Dietrich, 1982) have suggested that self-concept—the way we think about ourselves—is a powerful influence on our communicative behavior. To date, however, little research has examined whether self-concept influences recipient responses to comforting messages that differ in degree of person centeredness. Two independent aspects of self-concept that appear relevant to how people respond to comforting messages are self-definitions as expressive and instrumental. People who see themselves as highly expressive believe themselves to be emotional, kind, warm, gentle, and sensitive to the feelings of others. People who see themselves as highly instrumental believe themselves to be independent, active, decisive, confident, and persistent (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). In contemporary American society, an expressive orientation is often associated with femininity, whereas an instrumental orientation is often associated with masculinity (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), though men and women vary widely in their self-perceived degrees of both expressiveness and instrumentality. Given the centrality of affect in their self-definitions, high expressives might be expected to evaluate HPC comforting messages more positively, and LPC messages less positively, than low expressives. In contrast, given their focus on solving practical problems, high instrumentals might be expected to evaluate MPC and, perhaps, even LPC messages more favorably than low instrumentals. To date, only one study (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004) has examined the

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influence of expressive and instrumental orientations on evaluations of comforting messages that differ in person centeredness; this study found that instrumentality was positively associated with evaluations of MPC comforting messages, whereas expressivity was positively associated with evaluations of HPC messages and negatively associated with evaluations of LPC messages. Study 2 sought to replicate and extend those results by providing a more detailed examination of how instrumental versus expressive orientations jointly influence responses to comforting messages with different degrees of person centeredness.

METHOD

Participants were 387 college students (190 men and 197 women) enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at a large midwestern university. Participants completed the short form of Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), which provides assessments of both expressivity and instrumentality. Eight 5-point semantic differential scales were used to assess expressiveness (e.g., *not at all emotional* to *very emotional*; *not at all kind* to *very kind*), and another eight 5-point scales were used to assess instrumentality (e.g., *very passive* to *very active*; *not at all independent* to *very independent*), with participants indicating the point on the scales that best described themselves. In the current study, internal consistencies were .76 for expressivity and .78 for instrumentality. A median split was conducted to create a group ($n = 194$) relatively low in expressivity ($M = 3.51$) and a group ($n = 193$) relatively high in expressivity ($M = 4.29$). A second median split was conducted to create a group ($n = 196$) relatively low in instrumentality ($M = 3.18$) and a group ($n = 191$) relatively high in instrumentality ($M = 4.13$).

To obtain participants' evaluations of comforting messages that differed in level of person centeredness, participants read 1 of 18 different transcribed conversations ostensibly taking place between two college students (in fact, these were constructed by the researcher). In all versions of the conversations, a helper seeks to comfort a distressed same-sex friend (see Samter, Burleson, & Murphy, 1987, for a detailed description of this protocol). In 6 of the conversations, the helper used comforting messages exhibiting LPC; in 6 other conversations, the helper used messages exhibiting MPC; and in the remaining 6 conversations, the helper used messages exhibiting HPC. After reading the conversation, participants rated the message and helper for several qualities, including the perceived helpfulness of the messages (tapped by four items assessing message effectiveness [e.g., *very ineffective* to *very effective*] and five items assessing message supportiveness [e.g., *very insensitive* to *very sensitive*]). Internal consistency for this measure of perceived message helpfulness was quite good, $\alpha = .93$.

RESULTS

A 2 (expressivity: low vs. high) \times 2 (instrumentality: low vs. high) \times 3 (message person centeredness: low vs. moderate vs. high) ANOVA was conducted to assess the effects of the independent variables on evaluations of message helpfulness. A strong, significant main effect was observed for message person centeredness, $F(2, 370) = 177.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .49$, with HPC messages ($M = 3.85$) rated as more helpful ($p < .05$) than MPC messages ($M = 3.67$), and MPC messages rated as much more helpful ($p < .001$) than LPC messages ($M = 2.40$). The main effect for expressivity was not significant, $F(1, 370) = 0.29, ns$; nor was the main effect for instrumentality, $F(1, 370) = 0.78, ns$.

As anticipated, however, there was a significant interaction between expressivity and message person centeredness, $F(2, 370) = 4.06, p < .02, \eta^2 = .02$ (see Figure 10.2). Decomposition of this interaction indicated that, as predicted, high expressives viewed HPC comforting messages as more helpful ($M = 3.95$) than did low expressives ($M = 3.75$), $t(114) = 1.84, p < .05$ (one-tailed test), and LPC messages as less helpful ($M = 2.25$) than did low expressives ($M = 2.52$), $t(136) = 1.96, p < .05$; low and high expressives did not differ in their evaluation of MPC messages. Also as predicted, there was a significant interaction between instrumentality and message person centeredness, $F(2, 370) = 3.48, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ (see Figure 10.3). Decomposition of this interaction indicated that high instrumentals viewed MPC comforting messages as significantly more helpful ($M = 3.82$) than did low instrumentals ($M = 3.51$), $t(126) = 2.80, p < .01$; high and low instrumentals did not differ in their evaluations of LPC or HPC messages. The three-way interaction was not significant, $F(2, 370) = 1.06, ns$.

DISCUSSION

The results of Study 2 indicate that people who see themselves as high in the trait of expressivity view HPC comforting messages as more helpful, and LPC messages as less helpful, than do people who see themselves as low in expressivity. In addition, people who see themselves as high in the trait of instrumentality view MPC comforting messages as more helpful than do those who see themselves as low in instrumentality. As in Study 1, however, the differences in message evaluations attributable to personality characteristics were relatively small, especially in comparison to the large effect observed for message person centeredness. All participants in Study 2—regardless of their expressive and instrumental orientations—rated HPC messages as more helpful than MPC messages and rated MPC messages as substantially more helpful than LPC messages.

These results are noteworthy for several reasons. First, they closely replicate the results reported by MacGeorge et al. (2004, Study 3) for the effects of expressivity and instrumentality on evaluations of comforting messages having

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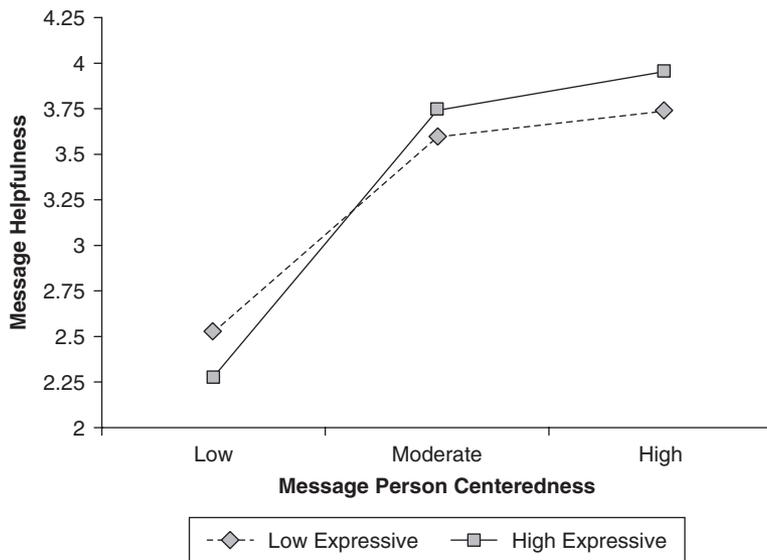


Figure 10.2 Effects of Person Centeredness and Expressive Orientation on Message Evaluations in Study 2

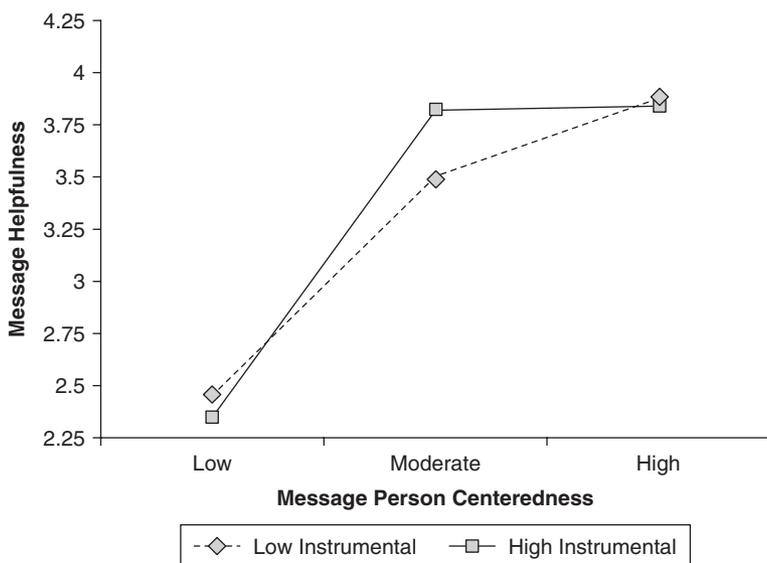


Figure 10.3 Effects of Person Centeredness and Instrumental Orientation on Message Evaluations in Study 2

different levels of person centeredness. Thus the present results emphasize the stable effects of these dimensions of personality on responses to comforting messages. Second, the present results underscore that distinct aspects of personality differentially affect responses to various comforting approaches; expressivity influenced evaluations of LPC and HPC messages, whereas instrumentality influenced evaluations of MPC messages. There appear to be good theoretical reasons for this pattern of results. MPC comforting messages are, in many ways, the most problem-focused support strategies; thus it seems reasonable that these would be more appealing to those having a high instrumental orientation. High expressives are particularly sensitive to the affective component of human experience (see Belansky & Boggiano, 1994), so it makes sense that they would especially appreciate HPC messages (which acknowledge, legitimate, and explore feelings) and that they might be put off by LPC messages (which deny or ignore feelings). Put differently, high expressives appear particularly motivated to attend to the details of the comforting messages to which they are exposed. Finally, although the two aspects of personality examined in this study had some effect on responses to diverse comforting messages, the present results also clearly indicate that HPC messages should do the best job of providing comfort to *all* recipients, regardless of their expressive and instrumental orientations.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 focused on how responses to comforting messages varied as a function of the personality characteristics of their recipients. In contrast, Study 3 examines how aspects of the communicative situation influence responses to comforting messages that differ in person centeredness. Two aspects of the communicative situation receive scrutiny in Study 3: the severity of the problem experienced by the message recipient and the sex of the helper.

Considerable research on persuasion indicates that people process messages systematically (i.e., give the greatest attention to and are most influenced by message content) when the matter addressed by the message is personally relevant to them (see Petty, Rucker, Bizer, & Cacioppo, 2004). These findings suggest that, in the context of supportive communication, people will be particularly motivated to systematically process comforting messages when they experience a moderate to severe emotional upset (see Bodie & Burlison, 2008). Thus features of comforting message content, such as degree of person centeredness, should have a greater effect when recipients are coping with a moderate or severe emotional upset rather than a mild upset.

When recipients are less motivated to process the comforting messages they receive in a highly systematic manner (as, perhaps, when experiencing a mild upset), other features of the communicative situation, such as the sex of the helper,

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may act as environmental cues that influence recipient responses. Extensive research (see Cialdini, 2001) indicates that people utilize heuristics (simple decision rules) in responding to communicative situations when they are less motivated to process messages systematically. One heuristic that people may rely upon when they receive support in mildly upsetting situations is that women provide better (i.e., more sensitive, effective, and helpful) support than do men. Several lines of research suggest that this is a commonly used heuristic: there is a broadly shared cultural expectation that women will be ready providers of warm, nurturing support; women, compared with men, are more nurturing, "tender minded," expressive, and emotionally supportive; and women are more likely than men to provide more sophisticated forms of emotional support (including HPC comforting) to those in need (see review by Burleson & Kunkel, 2006). Indeed, several experiments that have exposed people to identical, standardized support messages (e.g., Uno, Uchino, & Smith, 2002) have found that recipients respond more favorably to these messages when they are attributed to female helpers rather than to male helpers.

Thus Study 3 evaluated the prediction that sex of the helper would influence judgments of comforting message quality when recipients confronted a mildly upsetting situation but not when they confronted a more intense upset. When dealing with more intense upsets, it was expected that judgments of message quality would be a sole function of message person centeredness; furthermore, it was expected that message person centeredness would explain more variance in judgments of message quality when recipients confronted a moderate rather than a mild upset.

METHOD

Participants were 131 college students (59 men and 72 women) enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at a large midwestern university. To obtain evaluations of comforting messages, participants read about (and were asked to assume they were experiencing) one of six upsetting problem situations (e.g., not doing well on a test; receiving a parking citation). There were two versions for each of these situations: a mildly severe version (e.g., getting a C on a quiz that counted 1% of the course grade; receiving a \$25 parking ticket) and a moderately severe version (e.g., getting a D in a course that required a B for admission into one's chosen major; getting one's car booted and having to pay \$350 in fines and fees to get the car released). Participants next read a set of six comforting messages that were attributed to either a female or male helper; in each set, two messages exhibited low, moderate, and high levels of person centeredness. Participants rated each of the six messages on four 5-point items tapping perceptions of message helpfulness (e.g., helpful, effective). Internal

consistencies of these message evaluations were good, with alphas ranging from .81 to .91 and averaging .86. Finally, participants completed three items intended to check the problem-severity manipulation (i.e., the perceived severity, seriousness, and degree of upset associated with the situation). The reliability of the items for the manipulation check was excellent, $\alpha = .90$.

RESULTS

The manipulation of problem severity was successful, with the mildly severe problems being rated as significantly less serious ($M = 2.76$) than the moderately severe problems ($M = 4.18$), $t(129) = 8.94$, $p < .001$. Given the success of this manipulation, the effects of helper sex and message person centeredness in mild and moderately severe situations were evaluated through a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. The between-groups factors were problem severity (mild vs. moderate) and helper sex (female vs. male), and the repeated factor was message person centeredness (low, moderate, and high). The dependent variable was evaluation of message helpfulness. There was a strong main effect for message person centeredness, $F(2, 254) = 161.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$, with HPC messages ($M = 3.86$) rated as more helpful ($p < .001$) than MPC messages ($M = 2.86$), and MPC messages rated as more helpful ($p < .001$) than LPC messages ($M = 2.17$). The main effect for problem severity was not significant, $F(1, 127) = 1.76$, $p > .15$, nor was the main effect for helper sex, $F(1, 127) = 2.11$, $p = .15$.

There was, however, a near significant interaction between problem severity and message person centeredness, $F(2, 254) = 2.34$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$ (see Figure 10.4). Decomposition of this interaction (utilizing polynomial trend analysis) revealed that, as anticipated, the linear effect for message person centeredness explained more variance in message ratings (at a near significant level) among those coping with a moderate upset ($\eta^2 = .76$) than among those coping with mild upset ($\eta^2 = .59$), $F(1, 127) = 2.84$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$. In addition, there was a significant interaction between problem severity and helper sex, $F(1, 127) = 4.10$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$ (see Figure 10.5). Decomposition of this interaction indicated, as predicted, that in the mild severity condition, female helpers were perceived as using more helpful messages than male helpers, $t(65) = 2.65$, $p < .01$, whereas in the moderate severity condition, there was no difference in the perceived helpfulness of the messages used by female and male helpers, $t(62) = 0.38$, *ns*. The interaction between helper sex and message person centeredness was not significant, $F(2, 254) = 0.39$, *ns*, nor was the three-way interaction between problem severity, helper sex, and message person centeredness $F(2, 254) = 0.42$, *ns*, which indicates that the effects of message person centeredness were not qualified by helper sex.

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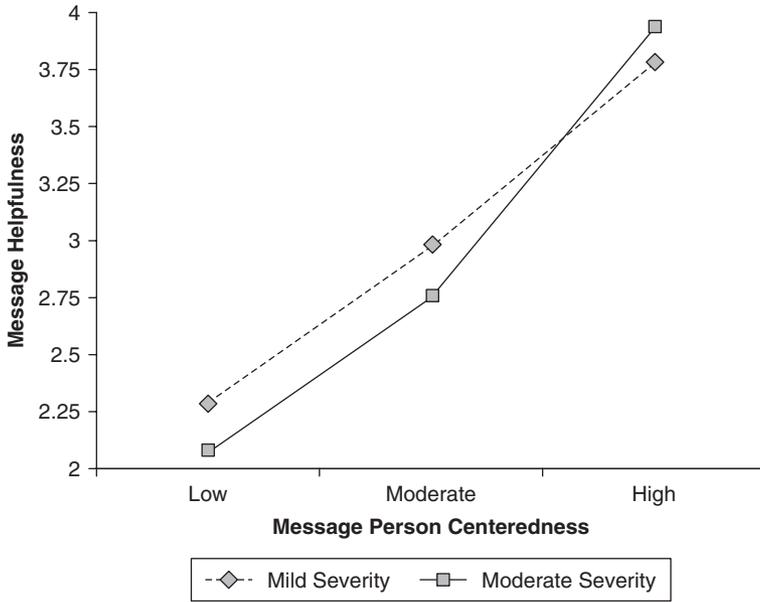


Figure 10.4 Effects of Person Centeredness and Problem Severity on Message Evaluations in Study 3

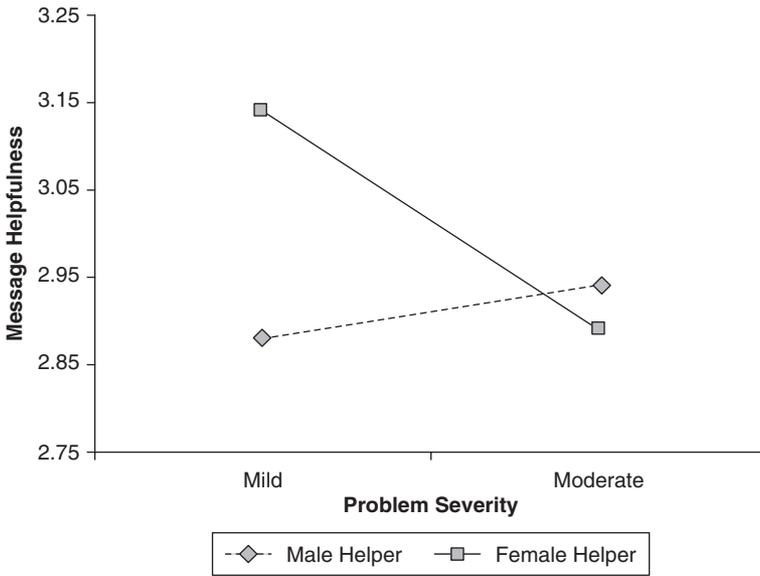


Figure 10.5 Effects of Problem Severity and Helper Sex on Message Evaluations in Study 3

DISCUSSION

The results of Study 3 indicate that the person-centered quality of a comforting message has a somewhat greater impact on recipients when they are coping with a moderate rather than a mild upset, perhaps because the more intense upset motivates greater systematic processing of received messages. It is also possible that people may view less person-centered messages as appropriate in situations in which they only experience mild distress, though the data here clearly indicate that highly person-centered messages remain preferred even when participants imagine themselves coping with a mild upset (see Figure 10.4). When coping with a comparatively mild upset, a peripheral feature of the communicative context, the helper's sex, was found to influence judgments of message quality, perhaps because recipients make use of decisional heuristics (e.g., "women provide helpful support") when processing supportive behavior in the context of relatively mild upsets.

Although these situational variations in message evaluations are theoretically interesting, they should not obscure the fact that message person centeredness was, by far, the strongest influence on message evaluations. Regardless of problem severity and helper sex, HPC messages were rated as more helpful than MPC messages, and MPC messages were rated as more helpful than LPC messages (review Figure 10.4). The practical implication of these findings is straightforward: helpers should employ HPC comforting messages when seeking to assist a distressed other, regardless of the helper's sex and the severity of the problem faced by the other.

Conclusion

The current studies were undertaken to explore how selected psychological and situational factors influence responses to comforting messages that exhibit different degrees of person centeredness. Previous research indicates that there are some variations in responses to person-centered comforting messages as a function of demographic factors such as sex, age, ethnicity, and nationality; however, the influence of these demographic variables is small, especially in comparison to the uniformly large effects observed for the person-centered quality of the messages. Similarly, the three studies reported here found that although certain psychological and situational factors had some effect on responses to various comforting messages, the influence of these factors is relatively minor, especially in comparison to the uniformly large effects for message person centeredness.

These results have considerable theoretical interest, since they suggest people generally attend to the features of comforting messages directed at them and the features of these messages exert a stronger influence on message outcomes than do situational or recipient characteristics. The modest effects observed for personality and situational factors in the current studies (as well as for demographic

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factors in previous studies), in conjunction with the large effects observed for message person centeredness, suggest that messages with different levels of person centeredness exert differential effects on recipients because they impact underlying cognitive and emotional processes in recipients. More specifically, it does not appear that HPC messages are simply conventional devices within certain social groups for indicating care and concern; rather, these messages appear to influence how recipients *think* about their feelings and the circumstances producing those feelings (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones & Wirtz, 2006).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our current knowledge concerning the effects of demographic, psychological, and situational factors on responses to comforting messages has some fairly direct pragmatic implications. To date, no factor (or combination of factors) has been found that renders HPC comforting messages less effective and helpful than MPC or LPC messages. This indicates that helpers should employ HPC comforting messages when seeking to assist a distressed other, regardless of the helper's characteristics (e.g., sex), features of the situation (e.g., problem severity), or recipient's characteristics (e.g., demographic, personality, or cognitive qualities). Of course, this recommendation is based on research examining how *most* people respond to messages under various conditions, and in the real world helpers may sometimes encounter the exception. Thus the helper's knowledge of the specific other to be comforted must be the ultimate guide for the selection and implementation of support efforts. Obviously, the point of providing support is to help a particular individual (and not to use a particular type of message); thus helpers must always remain sensitive to the particular others they seek to help and the qualities of the support situation in which they find themselves. Still, the available evidence indicates that most people respond most favorably to HPC comforting messages most of the time, and this means that in the absence of contraindications, helpers are most likely to effectively comfort a distressed other by using HPC messages.

Unfortunately, it appears that a great many people do not spontaneously use HPC comforting messages when seeking to provide support and, indeed, may be incapable of generating such messages even when motivated to do so (Burlison, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003). The implication that follows from this is particularly salient for those of us who define ourselves as communication educators as well as researchers: we need to develop and implement curricula that efficiently and effectively enhance the supportive communication skills of our students and other members of our communities. Elsewhere, I have sketched some of the issues that must be addressed in such curriculum development efforts (Burlison, 2003a). Developing such curricula will be no small task, and these efforts should be informed by theoretical models of both support skill and the

message production process. The contributions of effective emotional support to our personal, physical, and social well-being make the development of such curricula a worthy undertaking, despite the challenges of doing so.

Until research on comforting effectiveness is completed, the following guidelines may facilitate the use of helpful comforting strategies. First, helpers help by getting a distressed person to talk about his or her feelings and the circumstances producing those feelings (Burluson & Goldsmith, 1998). Hence, what a helper wants to do is (a) create a conversational environment in which the distressed person feels comfortable talking about his or her troubles and (b) assist the distressed person in telling a story about the upsetting problem. To help achieve the first goal (creating a supportive conversational environment), the helper can *express genuine care and concern* (“Gee, you seem pretty upset. I really care about you. You matter to me; I hope you know that”). The helper might also *emphasize his or her availability and willingness to listen* (“I want you to know that I’m here for you. Let me hear you out. I’ve got plenty of time. I think you may need to talk about this, and I certainly want to listen”). And the helper can directly *support the expression of feelings*—something that many people have trouble with (“Say whatever you are feeling. It’s okay to be emotional; it’s okay to cry”).

Once the distressed person begins telling his or her story, there are several things the helper can do to facilitate this process. First, the helper can *emphasize that the other should feel free to tell an extended story* about the upsetting event (“Go ahead, tell me about it. Take your time. I want to hear the whole story”). While the other person is telling the story, the helper can assist by *prompting continuation and elaboration* (“Um-hum. Yes. And then what happened? What happened after that?”). It is essential that a distressed person talk about his or her feelings and not just external events. The helper can assist with this by *asking explicitly about the other’s thoughts and feelings about the situation* (“Wow. And how did you feel when that happened? What were you thinking when she said that?”). Helpers can also encourage the distressed person to talk about his or her feelings by *indicating understanding of the feelings expressed* (“Gee, if that happened to me, I’d be very upset too. Of course I understand”). *“Giving voice” to emotions and expressing empathy* for the other also helps encourage the expression of feelings (e.g., “That had to be really tough; no wonder you’re upset”).

However, expressions of emotion should *not* focus *extensively* on the helper’s own emotional experiences. That is, the helper should *avoid* statements like “Gosh, I know exactly how you feel. Something like that happened to me and I felt . . .,” since this may draw attention away from the experiences and feelings of the distressed other. Helpers should also avoid *evaluating the other person*, or his or her feelings, or other people connected with the situation; *giving advice* about how to solve the problem; *telling the distressed person how he or she should think or act* in the situation; *trying to find the silver lining in the cloud*; *distracting the other’s attention* from his or her painful feelings; and *ignoring the other’s feelings*.

In sum, good comforting comes down to helping distressed others work through their troubled feelings about an upsetting event or situation. Good comforters are good listeners—active, involved listeners who are really there for the other and encourage the other in the telling of his or her tale.

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