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## Explaining Recipient Responses to Supportive Messages

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### Development and Tests of a Dual-Process Theory

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I have spent much of the last 30 years engaged in the study of *comforting communication*, which I define as messages having the goal of alleviating or lessening the emotional distresses experienced by others (Burleson, 1985). Comforting is closely related to *emotional support*, which has been defined as specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress (Burleson, 2003a). Both comforting and emotional support are subsets of the broader construct of *supportive communication*—verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Some especially important questions about comforting messages include how, when, and why these messages have positive or negative effects on recipients. In the past few years, several of my students and I have been developing a new theory that seeks to explain the diverse outcomes of comforting messages. In this chapter, I share the current version of this theory

and summarize some of the recent research we've conducted to test it. First, though, I provide some background information about the nature and significance of comforting communication.

## **Supportive Communication: Its Significance and Features**

### **The Significance of Comforting Communication**

You might wonder how someone can spend the better part of 30 years studying any one thing, especially comforting communication. As a matter of fact, I find comforting a more intriguing subject matter today than when I first began studying it in the late 1970s; indeed, the more I study this phenomenon, the more fascinated I become with it.

One question that captures my attention is, "How can one person affect the emotional states of another—sometimes profoundly—just by talking to that other person?" For me, this question goes to the heart of the comforting phenomenon: Comforting aims to change the feelings of someone who appears to be angry, anxious, despondent, sad, or otherwise upset. When effective, the recipient of comforting efforts feels better about things, at least to some extent for some period of time. So how does this happen? How is it possible for one person to change the feelings of another? This is a fundamental theoretical question, and one that I continue to find absorbing. Answering this question requires not only a deep understanding of communication but also a full appreciation of emotions and how they work.

Beyond this fundamental theoretical question, there are a host of good reasons to study comforting. Most obviously, comforting communication can really help someone who is upset to feel better (Burleson, 1994). Comforting can also promote more effective coping behavior, helping people think more clearly about the problems they face and assisting them with the formulation of more effective plans for managing these problems (Thoits, 1986).

Less obviously, the comfort that we receive from others can protect our health and may even help us live longer. A growing body of research indicates that the stress that accompanies emotional upset can be harmful to our health, particularly if that emotional stress is frequent and/or enduring (Dougall & Baum, 2001). By reducing emotional upset, effective comforting can diminish the health-harming effects of stress on the cardiovascular system, the neuroendocrine system, and the immune system (Wills & Fegan, 2001).

Effective comforting also contributes to the “health” of our interpersonal relationships and our satisfaction with those relationships. People value the comforting skills of those in their social network, and they expect their friends, family members, and other intimates to “be there” for them in times of trouble and to offer sensitive expressions of sympathy, care, and support (Burlleson, 2003b). Thus, it should come as little surprise that people who are skilled at providing emotional support are more popular, better liked, and have more lasting friendships and intimate relationships than those who are less skilled (Burlleson, 2003a). These are some of the many reasons why I believe that comforting communication is important and merits study (for additional reasons, see Burlleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

One of the things we know about comforting (that you can verify from your own experience) is that some messages intended to provide comfort are more effective than others. Some messages do a really good job of helping people feel better in a lot of different situations, other messages are only somewhat helpful, still other messages may not do much of anything, and some messages actually lead the recipient to feel a little—or a lot—worse about things. Indeed, there is a considerable body of research that shows that although many of the things that people say in the effort to make distressed others feel better are at least somewhat helpful, other things people say are ineffective and even downright hurtful (see Goldsmith, 2004). One implication of these findings is that effectiveness as a comforter requires more than good intentions (i.e., the intention to provide comfort and support); rather, effectiveness as a comforter generally requires several kinds of knowledge or skill, including knowledge of the comforting strategies that are more and less likely to improve negative emotional states.

### Characteristics of Better and Worse Comforting Messages and How These Messages Work

If some of the things that people say in the effort to provide comfort are helpful and others are not, a relevant question is, “What are the characteristics or properties of more and less helpful comforting messages?” Several researchers, including me, have sought to answer this question (for reviews, see Burlleson, 2003a; Goldsmith, 2004). My answer to this question makes use of the concept of *person-centered communication*. In the context of emotional support, person centeredness pertains to the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the feelings and perspective of a distressed other (Burlleson, 1994). Thus, messages that exhibit low person centeredness (LPC) deny the other’s feelings and perspective by criticizing or challenging their legitimacy, or by telling the other

how he or she should act and feel. Moderately person-centered (MPC) comforting messages afford an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by attempting to distract the other's attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting explanations of the situation that are intended to reduce the other's distress. Highly person-centered (HPC) comforting messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings by helping the other articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and explore how those feelings fit in a broader context.

Originally, we only claimed that HPC comforting messages were more developmentally advanced and were more sophisticated forms of behavior than MPC or LPC messages. And we were very successful in showing that HPC messages are, in fact, more developmentally advanced; these messages are generated more often and are better understood by older adolescents and adults than by children and younger adolescents (Burleson, 1982; Clinton & Hancock, 1991). We were also successful in showing that, compared with less person-centered alternatives, HPC comforting messages are more sophisticated forms of behavior: HPC messages pursue more complex sets of interactional goals than less person-centered alternatives and the ability to produce these messages depends on advanced social-cognitive abilities (see Burleson, 1985). These findings are important for numerous theoretical reasons (Coopman, 1997). But if HPC comforting messages aren't also *functionally* more effective than LPC messages (i.e., if they don't do a better job of reducing upset), then the theory of person-centered comforting would have little practical utility.

So, beginning in 1985, colleagues and I initiated a series of studies aimed at determining if HPC comforting messages are evaluated more positively than LPC messages and actually do a better job of improving the emotional states of recipients (Burleson & Samter, 1985). These studies were highly successful in demonstrating that people evaluate HPC comforting messages more positively than MPC and LPC messages and that HPC messages produce more desirable outcomes than MPC and, especially, LPC messages. Indeed, we were able to demonstrate the comparative effectiveness of HPC comforting messages for diverse message recipients under diverse sets of conditions (see review in Burleson et al., 2005). These findings clearly supported the claim that HPC comforting messages generally represent more effective strategies for providing emotional support than MPC or LPC messages.

In addition to finding strong effects for the person-centered quality of comforting messages, we also found differences in people's responses to comforting messages as a function of numerous source, recipient, and

contextual variables. Typically, the effect sizes for these variables were small in comparison with the large effects observed for quality of the message (i.e., level of person centeredness). For example, in several studies, we found that men responded somewhat more positively than women to LPC comforting messages, whereas women responded somewhat more positively than men to HPC comforting messages; however, even with these differences, both men and women responded *much* more positively to HPC messages than to LPC messages (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Similar patterns of small differences existing within large similarities were found for several variables, including culture of the recipient (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003), personality of the recipient (Jones, 2005), and perceptions of recipient responsibility for the problem situation (Jones & Burleson, 1997). The small effects associated with these source, recipient, and contextual factors, as well as the challenge of explaining their influence, often led us to discount the effects of these variables or to provide only brief (and frequently ad hoc) accounts for their impact.

The theory of message person centeredness is an analysis of message features or message design. That is, the theory of message person centeredness provides a typology of messages, identifies important distinguishing features of messages, and makes claims about what are better and worse message forms with regard to both formal and functional criteria (i.e., message sophistication and message effectiveness). However, the theory of message person centeredness does *not* explain how and why certain messages (e.g., HPC strategies) affect the emotional states of others in the ways they do. That is, the theory of message person centeredness does not specify the underlying mechanisms through which various comforting messages influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of recipients. This is a limitation I did not fully appreciate for several years.

Eventually, however, a colleague and I offered a theoretical account explaining why HPC comforting messages produced greater and more lasting changes in emotion than LPC messages (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). We argued that HPC messages (and similar message forms) do a better job than LPC messages of facilitating the recipient's cognitive reappraisal of the upsetting circumstance. Appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) maintain that people's appraisals of events (their cognitive representations and judgments about the personal significance of events) produce emotional reactions. Thus, in our *theory of conversationally induced reappraisals*, we argued that to help someone change their feelings about an upsetting situation, helpers need to foster the recipient's cognitive reappraisal of that situation, and we suggested HPC comforting messages do this better than alternative messages. HPC messages, in particular, encourage the distressed

person to reflect on, explore, and seek understanding of their feelings. Experimental research (Jones & Wirtz, 2006) has recently provided direct support for this theoretical account of the causal mechanism through which HPC messages facilitate positive emotional change.

There is an important limitation in our theory of conversationally induced reappraisals, which was not evident to us when we developed this theory, but has become increasingly apparent. Specifically, this theory does not offer much, if any, explanation about how comforting messages that are moderate or low in person centeredness affect the emotional states of their recipients. Although MPC and LPC messages generally are not as effective as HPC messages at facilitating positive emotional change, and at least some LPC messages may make recipients feel worse rather than better, these messages *do* affect the emotional states of recipients and, for at least MPC messages, these effects are largely positive. However it is that MPC and LPC messages influence recipients, they don't appear to do so by fostering reappraisals of the problematic situation. So the mechanisms through which these less-than-optimal messages influence the emotional states of recipients also need to be explained.

As I considered this limitation of our reappraisal theory, it occurred to me that other theories that seek to explain the effects of supportive messages (e.g., Cutrona, 1990; Rogers, 1975) share this limitation. That is, most theories of supportive message effects focus on explaining how "optimal" message forms (however these may be defined) work, and frequently do not explain how suboptimal messages work. Reflection on this limitation suggested that a complete theory of supportive message effects needs to specify *multiple* distinct mechanisms through which various comforting messages influence the emotions of recipients. Thus, although HPC messages may foster reappraisals of the problematic situation, perhaps the MPC messages that express sympathy, care, and concern (e.g., "Gee, I'm really sorry this is happening to you; is there anything I can do? I really care") help the recipient feel better by bolstering his or her sense of social acceptance and self-worth, whereas the MPC messages that suggest a compensating activity (e.g., "Hey, Ben is having a party tonight; let's go over there for a while") help by getting recipients to refocus attention on a different (and presumably happier) circumstance. LPC messages that minimize the recipient's feelings (e.g., "Look, it's just not that big of a deal; do yourself a favor and just forget about it") might even provide some temporary relief by motivating recipients to suppress or ignore their feelings for some period, although intense scrutiny of this message might also result in recipients feeling criticized and rejected. A comprehensive theory needs to identify *all* the mechanisms through which different supportive messages

produce their effects, as well as consider the magnitude and stability of the changes in recipient emotions typically achieved through each of these mechanisms.

## A Conceptual Problem and a Path to a Potential Solution

Despite the limitations in our theories and research, by the late 1990s, I was pretty satisfied with our understanding of comforting skill, especially which messages worked best. Early in this decade (about 2001–2003), however, I worked on several projects that, collectively, led me to raise fundamental questions about *how* comforting messages work—and sometimes don't work.

First, I researched and wrote several articles during this period that provided extensive reviews of the supportive communication literature (Burlison, 2003a, 2003b; Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Doing the research for these articles made me better appreciate that variation in responses to supportive messages was common and sometimes pronounced. As noted above, research from our laboratory had found responses to more and less person-centered comforting messages varied as a function of several demographic, personality, and situational variables. I noticed that many other researchers were reporting similar results: Effects for message types were often moderated by several characteristics of the recipient, helper, or communication situation (see reviews by Lakey & Cohen, 2000). However, the moderating effects for several of these variables were not consistent across studies; sometimes a particular variable (e.g., sex of recipient) had one effect, sometimes a different effect, and sometimes no effect (see MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burlison, 2004). Moreover, because the moderating effects for source, recipient, and contextual variables on supportive message outcomes were rarely the focus of sustained research, explanations for them usually considered only the findings obtained in a particular study, which resulted in a disconnected set of microaccounts. Further complicating the picture, some studies found that aspects of supportive messages sometimes had little or no effect on recipients, even though other studies had found these aspects of messages exerted sizable effects (e.g., Uno, Uchino, & Smith, 2002). Other studies indicated that factors such as the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the helper and the recipient sometimes had significant effects on the outcomes of supportive interactions even when aspects of supportive messages did not (e.g., Clark et al., 1998). Thus, it became increasingly evident that there were some important inconsistencies in the literature on supportive message effects, and that these were not being addressed in a comprehensive or integrative manner.

There are numerous reasons why these variations and inconsistencies in findings about the effects of supportive messages are nontrivial and call for

a comprehensive explanation. These variations are nontrivial theoretically because they indicate that the outcomes of supportive messages are influenced by more than just the message. Thus, the variations in message effects suggested that we had an incomplete understanding of the factors that influenced people's responses to supportive messages. Variation in message effects is nontrivial pragmatically because it indicates that helpers need to understand how and when various factors moderate the effects of comforting strategies and how to accommodate to these factors.

A second set of experiences during this period shaped my thinking about how variations in supportive message outcomes might be explained. With one of my colleagues at Purdue, I edited a large handbook focused on communication and social interaction skills (Greene & Burleson, 2003). As we worked on this project, I was impressed by how much we had come to know in the past 20 years about message production, the process of generating symbolic behavior designed to convey an internal state to another in the effort to realize some goal. But I was also struck by how little we knew about message reception, the process of interpreting the intentional symbolic behavior of another in the effort to understand the meaning and implications of that behavior. Research on and theorizing about the message production process really took off in the 1980s, and this continues to be a very active area for communication scholars (e.g., Greene, 1997). In contrast, there is comparatively little theory and research addressing the message reception process in interpersonal interaction. Despite the paucity of theory and research on the message reception process, the available work on this topic suggested to me that most variations in responses to supportive messages could be explained in terms of how people processed these messages. This insight was partially suggested by a fundamental postulate that informs virtually all my thinking about human behavior: People's actions (including their responses to messages) are a function of the ways in which they interpret or make sense of events. This postulate is a core tenet of the constructivist approach to communication (Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982), a perspective to which I had been exposed to as a graduate student and which I subsequently used in most of my research on communication (Burleson, 2007). Applying this postulate to supportive messages implies that distinct responses to these messages are a function of differences in how these messages are interpreted or processed by recipients. Thus, a good theory of message reception should comprehensively explain both consistencies and variations in responses to supportive messages.

A third set of experiences during this period provided some clues about the form of a message reception theory that might successfully explain variations in responses to comforting messages. Beginning in 2000, I returned to teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses in persuasion. I had

taught courses in persuasion early in my career, but other teaching demands led me away from the persuasion area for nearly two decades. A lot can happen in two decades! In fact, there had been a revolution in persuasion theory and research beginning in the late 1970s, and by the 1990s, the landscape of persuasion scholarship had been thoroughly transformed.

This revolution was generated by the introduction of what came to be called *dual-process* theories of persuasion, the best known of which are Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Chaiken's (1980) Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM). These (and related) dual-process models maintain that (a) multiple factors influence the amount of scrutiny or thought that people give to the messages they receive on particular occasions; (b) the effects of messages vary as a function of the amount of scrutiny they are given by recipients, with message content having the strongest effect on outcomes when messages are scrutinized extensively; and (c) when message content receives little scrutiny, other factors (such as cognitive heuristics tied to certain environmental cues) may substantially influence recipient outcomes. Dual-process theories of persuasion were developed in the effort to explain several troubling inconsistencies in persuasion research (e.g., sometimes argument quality influenced attitude change and sometimes it didn't; sometimes source credibility influenced attitude change and sometimes it didn't). Models such as the ELM and HSM explained these inconsistencies in terms of the amount of processing messages received (e.g., argument quality influenced attitudes most when messages were processed extensively, whereas source credibility had the strongest influence on attitudes when messages were processed less extensively).

The success of dual-process models in explaining inconsistencies in persuasion research suggested to me that some version of a dual-process model might successfully explain variations in the outcomes of supportive messages. It was apparent, however, that the existing dual-process models such as the ELM and HSM could not be directly applied to supportive communication. Dual-process models of persuasion focus on attitude change, whereas research on supportive communication focuses on change in emotional states and related outcomes. In addition, attitudes and emotions are changed through different mechanisms; persuasive messages differ from supportive messages in their goals, features, effects, and mechanisms of change; the factors that influence the amount of scrutiny messages receive are likely to differ in persuasion *versus* support contexts; the environmental factors that influence recipient responses when messages receive little scrutiny probably differ in persuasion and support contexts; and so on. Thus, although the general logic of the dual-process approach might provide an abstract framework for a theory of supportive message processing and outcomes, any substantive theory pertaining to supportive messages could not be

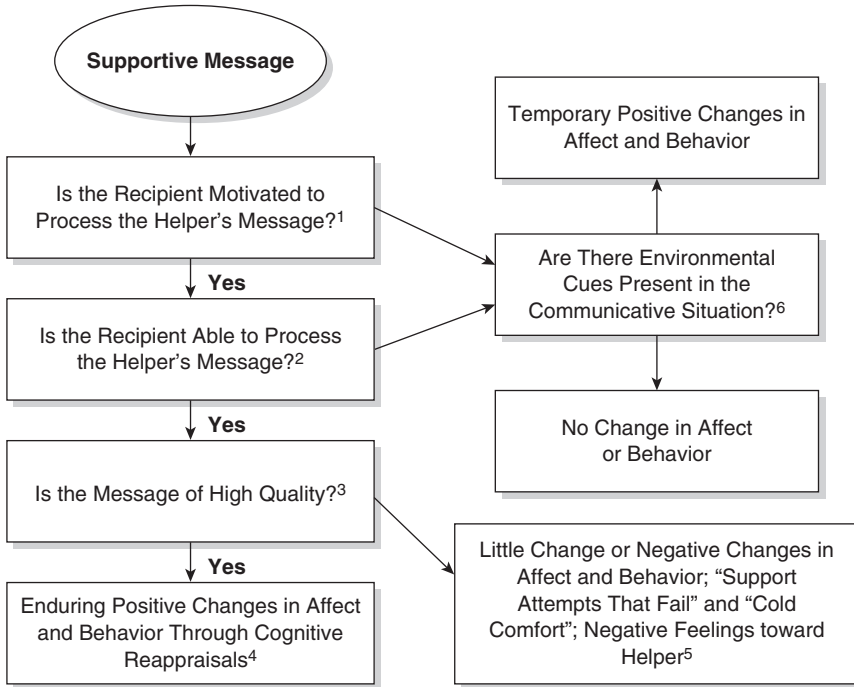
“imported,” but instead would need to be developed carefully in a manner that respected the unique qualities of this communicative genre.

By the summer of 2003, the broad elements of a theory were beginning to fall into place that might explain, among other things,<sup>1</sup> variations in responses to supportive messages. Unfortunately, I was unable to work on elaborating this prototheory for the next year due to other commitments. In fall 2004, however, I began working with a very talented group of graduate students on several projects directed at developing and testing this theory. Graham Bodie had a special interest in listening and message processing; Jessica Rack was initially interested in family communication but subsequently developed an interest in grief management for the bereaved; and Amanda Holmstrom had a special interest in emotional and esteem support. Throughout the 2004–2005 academic year, we discussed aspects of supportive communication, message reception, dual-process models, and related topics. In fall 2005, the four of us began meeting regularly to design a set of studies to test aspects of the theoretical model that we were gradually elaborating; we initiated data collection in spring 2006. Since then, we have completed a major research review, some theoretical papers, and several reports of empirical studies (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Burleson, 2008; Burleson et al., 2007, 2008; Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008; Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007). Several additional graduate students subsequently joined our research team (including Jennie Gill, Lisa Hanasono, and Jennifer McCullough), and we continue to analyze and report the data we have collected. Moreover, as I complete writing this chapter in spring 2008, both Graham and Jessica are engaged in dissertation projects focused on further refining and testing aspects of our model (Bodie, 2008; Rack, 2008). I next present the current version of our theory and describe some of our tests of it.

## **A Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Message Processing and Outcomes**

### **The Theory**

We have yet to present a formal statement of our theory, though we plan to do so in the near future (Burleson & Bodie, 2008). Elements of our theory are currently scattered in several different papers; thus, I abstract from those in describing our most recent thinking. Figure 9.1 presents a diagram (taken from Bodie & Burleson, 2008) that displays critical elements of our theory and how we think these elements may be connected.



**Figure 9.1** A Dual-Process Model for the Processing and Outcomes of Supportive Messages

Source: Bodie and Burleson (2008).

Notes:

1. Motivation to process supportive messages is influenced by both situational factors (e.g., severity of problem, timing of message, message content) and individual-difference factors (e.g., perceived support availability, attachment style, affiliative need, locus of control).
2. Ability to process supportive messages is influenced by both situational factors (e.g., presence/absence of attention distracters) and individual-difference factors (e.g., age, cognitive complexity, communicative competence).
3. Quality of supportive messages is influenced by factors such as the explicit statement of helping intentions, verbal person centeredness, facework or politeness, and nonverbal immediacy, among others.
4. Mechanisms through which cognitive reappraisals effect enduring positive changes in affect and behavior are described by Burleson and Goldsmith (1998).
5. The harmful consequences of poor quality supportive messages that receive thoughtful processing are detailed in Burleson (2003a).
6. Environmental cues that can activate low elaboration affect change mechanisms include sex and attractiveness of the helper and type of the relationship between the helper and recipient.

Our dual-process theory maintains that *affective change* is the critical dependent variable in support contexts,<sup>2</sup> and that the crucial factors affecting outcomes of supportive interactions are (a) the content of the supportive message (e.g., LPC vs. HPC messages), (b) environmental cues in the support situation that can trigger responses to the message or helper, and (c) the degree of scrutiny (i.e., attention, thought, elaboration) supportive messages receive from their recipients. We propose that if supportive messages receive a high degree of scrutiny from recipients, then the outcomes of support situations will largely be influenced by aspects of message content (e.g., the sensitivity or person centeredness of the supportive message). On the other hand, if supportive messages receive little scrutiny, message content should have a smaller (and perhaps inconsequential) effect on outcomes; in such cases, other factors, including a variety of environmental cues (e.g., sex of the helper, attractiveness of the helper), may substantially influence outcomes of the supportive encounter. Thus, according to our theory, the effects of supportive interactions should vary as a joint function of the way in which these interactions are processed (thoughtfully vs. superficially) and features of the communicative situation (message content vs. environmental cues).

Our theory also proposes that different aspects of message content and the environment influence the emotional states of recipients through the activation of particular affect change mechanisms. These mechanisms differ in their processing demands (i.e., the amount of thinking each takes to generate some degree of affect change), as well as in the magnitude, speed, and stability of the changes they produce. For example, shifting the recipient's attention away from the troubling situation to something more pleasant (which might be accomplished through a variety of message features and/or environmental cues) may quickly and easily produce moderate to substantial changes in the feelings and behaviors of a distressed recipient. However, these changes are likely to be temporary, especially in the case of serious upsets; refocusing attention does nothing to alter the fundamental cause of emotional distress (a person's appraisals of a problematic situation), so a recipient's attention is likely to return to the situation, regenerating the emotional upset (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993). In contrast, prompting reappraisals of the troubling situation through HPC messages is cognitively more demanding and may yield changes in emotions and behaviors rather slowly, but these changes are likely to be large and lasting once achieved since the underlying cause of the upset (the recipient's appraisals) has been modified (Donnelly & Murray, 1991).

Our theory also identifies numerous factors that influence the recipient's ability and motivation to process supportive messages (for a review of these, see Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Both aspects of the person (i.e., the individual

differences) and the context (i.e., the situational factors) likely influence the capacity (ability) to process message content in a given situation and the desire and/or willingness (motivation) to process that content.

We recognize that our theory needs a good deal more conceptual work (more about this in the conclusion to this chapter). But in addition to generating refinements in theory through additional conceptual analyses, we believe that researchers can develop theory through empirical efforts designed to test aspects of the theory. Thus, I discuss some of our recent empirical studies next.

### Testing Our Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Message Outcomes

As I hope is apparent, our theory is capable of generating numerous predictions about the processing and effects of supportive messages. In our initial empirical work, we focused on directly testing hypotheses about how the ability and motivation to process supportive messages influence some outcomes of these messages. We started here since our theory clearly predicts that supportive messages should have different outcomes as a function of the degree of processing they receive; if these predictions aren't supported, then there would be serious doubt about the theory as a whole.

We recently conducted two somewhat similar studies that focused on how factors that are supposed to influence processing ability and motivation affected people's evaluations of supportive messages.<sup>3</sup> One study examined recently bereaved adults' responses to grief management messages (Burlleson et al., 2007). Participants in this study had experienced the death of someone personally known to them in the previous 2 years; they answered a brief questionnaire about that loss and the degree of upset they experienced. They then listed their thoughts about that situation; thought listing is a common way of measuring degree or depth of processing (see Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). Participants next evaluated the helpfulness of 64 different messages that are often used by people when seeking to comfort the bereaved; these messages were subsequently classified as exhibiting a low, moderate, or high level of person centeredness. The participants also completed measures of several cognitive abilities and personality traits.

A second study examined college students' evaluations of comforting messages that might be used by peers to help them cope with one of several upsetting problems (Burlleson et al., 2008). Participants in this study received a scenario that described either a mildly severe problem (e.g., receiving a \$20 parking ticket) or a moderately severe problem (e.g., getting one's car "booted" and having to pay \$350 in fines and fees to get the car released). After having time to read and consider this situation, participants were asked

to list their thoughts about it and to indicate how upsetting they found the situation. Participants were then asked to imagine they ran into a peer helper (either a male or female acquaintance) with whom they discussed the upsetting situation; they subsequently read and evaluated the helpfulness of six different messages that this helper might use “to make you feel better.” These messages varied in level of person centeredness (2 low, 2 moderate, and 2 high). Again, participants also completed measures of several cognitive abilities and personality traits.

Both studies examined how message evaluations were influenced by *interpersonal cognitive complexity* (an individual difference that should influence the ability to process supportive messages) and degree of emotional upset (a situational factor that should influence the motivation to process supportive messages). Measures of cognitive complexity essentially tap social information processing capacity (Burlison et al., 2008; Burlison & Caplan, 1998); thus, if highly complex people are better able to process supportive messages, they should distinguish more sharply among messages that vary in person centeredness than less complex people. Because emotional distress is unpleasant, people experiencing greater distress should be more motivated than those experiencing less distress to reduce their degree of upset, and therefore may give greater attention to the content of helpers’ supportive messages. Thus, if more upset people are more motivated to process supportive messages, they should distinguish more sharply among messages that vary in person centeredness than less upset people.

Both studies found support for the predicted effects of cognitive complexity and emotional upset on message evaluations. That is, in both studies, people who were cognitively complex and relatively upset discriminated more sharply between LPC and HPC messages in their evaluations of the helpfulness of these messages. Moreover, there was some indication that people who were *both* cognitively complex *and* comparatively upset discriminated the most sharply between LPC and HPC messages in their helpfulness ratings. In other words, and just as our theory predicts, the people who were both able and motivated to scrutinize supportive messages evaluated these messages more critically, judging LPC messages as less helpful and HPC messages as more helpful than people with lesser levels of ability and motivation. In addition, our studies found that the number of thoughts that people had about the upsetting situation, which presumably measures extent of processing, (a) was positively associated with the measures of cognitive complexity and emotional upset and (b) partially mediated the effects of the ability and motivation factors on message evaluations. These latter findings underscore that cognitive complexity and emotional upset partially influence message evaluations by influencing the degree of scrutiny those messages receive.

These studies obtained several other interesting findings. For example, in both studies there was evidence that very high levels of emotional upset undermined the ability to carefully process supportive messages. This finding is theoretically interesting because it suggests that a single variable (emotional upset) can, at different levels, both positively influence processing motivation and negatively influence processing ability; dual-process theories often emphasize that a particular variable can serve multiple roles with respect to message outcomes (see Petty & Wegener, 1998). This finding is pragmatically important in suggesting that even the most helpful and sensitive supportive messages (i.e., HPC strategies) will have suboptimal outcomes for recipients suffering from extreme upset; thus, helpers should probably seek to reduce the disruptively high upset of these recipients, perhaps through repeatedly offering simple condolences and expressions of sympathy (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993), before using HPC messages.

Perhaps even more interesting, our comforting study found that when the motivation to process was low (due to low emotional upset), an aspect of the environment—sex of helper—influenced message evaluations. Specifically, we found that when processing motivation was low, male participants evaluated comforting messages attributed to female sources as more helpful than when those same messages were attributed to male sources. However, when participants were more motivated to scrutinize messages to reduce a somewhat greater degree of assumed upset, the effect for sex of helper disappeared. We interpret these results as indicating that our male participants used a “women provide good support” heuristic in evaluating messages when the motivation to scrutinize message content was low; women may be less inclined to use this heuristic than men since they appear to be both more motivated and able to process supportive messages than men (see Bodie & Burleson, 2008).

## Conclusion

We are excited about our dual-process theory of supportive message processing and outcomes. This framework appears capable of explaining both variations and consistencies in the effects of supportive messages, doing so in a way that informs both theory and practice. Our theory allows us to explain parsimoniously most existing findings about factors moderating the effects of supportive messages and generates a host of new predictions that can be examined in empirical research. Our theory also holds considerable pragmatic potential; it provides an empirically sound basis for prescribing the types of support strategies to be used on various occasions with various recipients.

We have made some progress in specifying each of the major elements of our theory, but much work remains to be done in this regard. In particular, we need to give a great deal more attention to detailing the nature and operation of what we term *the social mechanisms of affect change*, the underlying processes through which message content and environmental cues promote modifications in the feelings and behaviors of support recipients. There surely are a host of such mechanisms, and we have only begun to identify them and how they work. Furthermore, research needs to determine the specific aspects of message content or the environment that typically activate a particular mechanism (or set of mechanisms).

Much more thinking is needed about the aspects of supportive interaction environments (i.e., cues) that can elicit changes in the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of support recipients, especially when processing motivation and/or ability are low. In addition, research needs to determine whether message content and environmental cues can jointly influence the outcomes of supportive interactions and, if so, just how content and cues can work cooperatively or antagonistically. As some persuasion researchers suggest (e.g., Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002), we suspect that cues can add to the effects of message content on some occasions, be overridden by message content on other occasions, and bias the impact of message content on still other occasions. But these suspicions need to be formulated precisely and then subjected to test.

Another critical matter that requires additional conceptual and empirical work pertains to the fundamental nature of “elaboration” or “information processing” in the context of supportive situations. Exactly what is it that people do when they elaborate on (think about) supportive message, what are the most important aspects of the elaboration concept that must be captured in a theory, and what are the most reliable and valid measures of elaboration with respect to supportive interactions? Conversely, what is the specific nature of low elaboration in support situations? This latter question is particularly important because, unlike persuasion contexts, all support contexts will have some relevance to the recipients of supportive efforts; after all, it is the helper’s perception that the recipient is upset and needs assistance that prompts supportive efforts. This suggests that, in support situations, message recipients will almost always have *some* motivation to attend to a helper’s supportive efforts. Thus, “low elaboration” processing in support situations may be more active and involved than in persuasion situations, and this difference in what counts as *relatively* low elaboration may have important implications for the processing and outcomes of both environmental cues and message content. In particular, our two studies found that message quality (i.e., message person centeredness) had a strong effect even for participants who had lower degrees of processing motivation and

ability—just not as strong an effect as for participants who had higher degrees of processing motivation and ability. So the nature and consequences of low elaboration processing in support situations needs a good deal more conceptual and empirical analysis.

The results of our two recent studies testing hypotheses derived from our dual-process theory are encouraging; these studies show that both message content and environmental cues affect outcomes of supportive communication in predicted ways under various processing conditions. Of course, our studies also exhibit several limitations, including small effect sizes for many of the variables examined; these small effects may stem from the use of assessments based on recall (the bereavement study) or projection (the comforting study). I believe that we can learn a lot from people's recollections of what they found helpful in the past (the bereavement study), as well as from people's projections of what they think would be helpful in certain situations, were they to occur (the comforting study); previous research (Burlison & Samter, 1985; Jones, 2004) has found that these recollections and projections closely correspond with what actually helps people feel better. Still, examining recollections and projections is not the same as finding out what actually helps people feel better when they experience upsetting emotions as a result of some stressor.

Thus, our theory needs to be tested and refined through studies that examine how message quality, environmental cues, and factors that influence message processing jointly influence people's emotional states in "real-world" situations, both immediately and over time. We also need to conduct research that enables us to examine the processes (i.e., the affect change mechanisms) through which message content and/or environmental cues bring about emotional change, as well as the magnitude and stability of these changes. As a matter of fact, Graham Bodie is currently conducting a pair of studies for his dissertation research that address just these issues (Bodie, 2008).

In sum, the two studies we have thus far conducted leave a host of important questions unanswered; clearly, these studies need to be replicated and extended by research that examines other variables through more realistic and engaging designs. Still, we believe that our results to date suggest that a comprehensive dual-process approach to supportive communication can be developed and will have important insights for both theorists and practitioners.

## Notes

1. One exciting additional implication of this developing theory was the insight that explaining variations in responses to comforting messages requires a much more general explanation of how people process and respond to supportive communication.

2. Our theory also provides analyses of several other dependent variables that are often of interest in studies of social support and supportive communication, including aspects of well-being such as stress, physical health, mental health, coping behavior, and relationship satisfaction and stability. In the context of research on emotional support, all these additional outcomes are generally viewed as influenced by affect change, which is why we regard affect change as the critical variable in studies of emotional support.

3. Petty and Wegener (1998, p. 328) observe that “perhaps the most popular procedure . . . to gauge the extent of message processing” involves varying the quality of experimental messages and then assessing the size of the message quality effect on dependent variables; larger message effects signal more extensive processing. Thus, in research on supportive messages, larger effects for the factor of person centeredness (i.e., message quality) on evaluations of message helpfulness signal more extensive processing of those messages.

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