

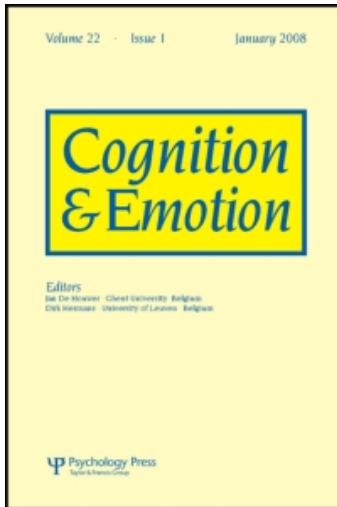
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### The role of causal attribution in hurt feelings and related social emotions elicited in reaction to other's feedback about failure

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# The role of causal attribution in hurt feelings and related social emotions elicited in reaction to other's feedback about failure

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The present research addressed the question of what it is that makes certain types of feedback on the reasons for failure hurtful. The results of two studies demonstrated that the causal structure implied by an explanation for failure explains the degree to which the explanation is perceived as hurtful and likely to elicit anger, shame, and guilt. In contrast, the perceived validity of the explanations is of relatively less importance for the elicitation of hurt feelings and anger than the content of the explanation. Overall, these results provide further evidence for the importance of attributional information for social emotions, whereas the validity of the information had a relatively lesser effect.

When people fail they often try to understand the reasons for this outcome (Weiner, 1985). One important source of such understanding is feedback from others. Specifically, it is sometimes easier for an external observer to provide the failing person with an explanation of the likely cause of this failure. These types of explanations can be part of the formal or informal performance feedback in such settings as the school or workplace. Regardless of the context in which they are transmitted, these explanations can provide the person who received the feedback with an opportunity for improving future performance or with a better perspective regarding his/her capabilities (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Weiner, 1985). At the same time, feedback on the causes of failure often entrains negative

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social emotions such as hurt feelings as well as anger, shame and guilt. The goal of the present paper is to investigate some of the factors that determine under which circumstances causal explanations for failure can lead to negative emotional consequences.

We propose Weiner's (1986) attribution theory of emotion and motivation as a theoretical framework. In particular, this theory predicts the type of explanation for failure that will be perceived as more or less hurtful and that may elicit negative emotions such as anger, shame or guilt. Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to offer and test a theoretical framework that explains how attributional information, communicated via verbal explanations for failure, elicits feelings of hurt and related emotions. We also expand this framework by considering the effect of the validity of explanations. We will first discuss this theoretical framework and then present the results of two studies that tested it.

### Communicated explanations for failure, causal attribution and emotions

In general, messages are emotionally hurtful if they imply a relational devaluation (Leary & Springer, 2001; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansel, & Evans, 1998; Vangelisti, 1994). Such messages also elicit other emotions such as anger, guilt, anxiety, shame and embarrassment (Gabriel, 1998; Leary et al., 1998). Among other things, the way a message is phrased was found to determine recipients' feelings of hurt. Messages criticizing one's actions or accomplishments lead to negative feelings (Gabriel, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Young, 2004) as do communications that involve harsh or abrasive statements or the use of extreme language (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Young, 2004). However, these studies focus specifically on whether a message contains a specific type of statement that would be hurtful. Yet, even messages that are delivered in a friendly tone and are meant to be supportive may be hurtful. What is missing from the literature is a better understanding of the specific content elements of a hurtful message, over and above such features as the use of extreme or insulting language. We believe that Weiner's (1986) attribution theory can provide an important insight to the factors that make verbal communications hurtful.

Weiner describes three dimensions of perceived causes: locus, controllability, and stability (Weiner, 1985, 1986). That is, causes can be considered internal or external to the actor (locus), controllable or uncontrollable by the actor or others (controllability), and varying or unvarying over time (stability). The locus of the causality determines whether something about the person or something outside the person brought about the failure. In addition, causal stability defines how permanent or transitory the cause is, and, for internal causes, the dimension of controllability describes the extent

to which the outcome is the result of the person's own actions. For example, both effort and luck are unstable, yet effort is internal and under the person's own control whereas luck is external and uncontrollable by the achiever. When these causes are provided as reasons for failure, they convey information on the role that the individual has played in bringing the failure about (Hareli & Weiner, 2000, 2002; Weiner, 1985, 1986).

Given that communications that devalue a person's worth tend to be hurtful (Leary et al., 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Young, 2004), explanations that suggest that the individual is at cause for the failure are likely to be hurtful. This expectation fits the fact that locus is known to affect self-esteem and related emotions (Weiner, 1986) as self-esteem can be considered to be a subjective estimate of relational evaluation (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Within the spectrum of explanations that associate failure with internal causes, the causal dimensions of stability and controllability are also expected to play a role in inducing hurt feelings. In general, causal stability is associated with expectations for the future (Weiner, 1986). Accordingly, if an explanation for failure suggests that the cause is not only associated with the self but also one that is stable and thus characteristic of the self, this implies that further failures have to be anticipated. And because hurt feelings are associated with devaluation (e.g., Snapp & Leary, 2001), explanations that describe a stable property in this context are expected to be particularly hurtful because they imply very low expectations for improvement in the future. This idea is also consistent with the fact that such attributional information is related to hopelessness (Weiner, 1986).

Finally, the ascription of a controllable rather than an uncontrollable cause should entrain less intense hurt feelings. Controllability implies that one can change the situation if one wants to, and hence, if the internal cause of failure is not under one's control, this implies that no remedial actions can be taken that would lead to better performance in the future. Thus, the ascription of failure to an uncontrollable internal cause is a particularly strong devaluation of a person's worth, as it suggests not only lack of worth in the present but predicts continued failure for the future. In sum, both stability and controllability are expected to affect hurt feelings in interaction with locus. Furthermore, based on the considerations outlined above, it is expected that the most hurtful message would be a message connecting the failure with an internal, stable and uncontrollable cause.

As mentioned above, hurt feelings are usually accompanied by other emotions such as anger, shame and guilt. We predict that the extent to which these emotions are elicited by the failure feedback is also determined by the implied attributional information. Anger is an emotion that is determined, among other things, by the degree of damage inflicted by another person (Averill, 1982; Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Hence it is

expected that the more hurtful the message, the more anger will be elicited as well. That is, the same underlying causal structure that leads to more intense hurt will also lead to increased levels of anger.

Unlike anger, which is an emotion directed at another person, shame and guilt are both self-directed negative emotions (Frijda, 1986). It has been contended that shame is elicited by a public characteristic of the self that is not under volitional control. In contrast, guilt follows from a violation of a norm and is evoked by a self-judgment of responsibility (see Izard, 1977; Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002; Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983). That is, as Roseman, Antoniou, and Jose (1996) noted, both shame and guilt result from a self-caused outcome; however, shame follows when the cause is one of character, whereas for guilt, the cause is behavioural. Accordingly, it is expected that failure feedback that implies internal and stable causes will lead to higher levels of shame, whereas failure feedback that implies personal responsibility and control will elicit more guilt.

Although the causal structure of an explanation for one's failure offered by an observer should affect that observer's emotional reaction to it, external sources vary in validity. The perceived accuracy of the feedback can be expected to interact with the causal dimensions in its effect on the resulting feelings. On the one hand, valid explanations should be more hurtful because they point to a real or perceived negative aspect of the achiever. On the other hand, given that hurt feelings arise in the context of relationships, invalid information can be even more hurtful because in addition to providing hurtful feedback, they may further indicate ill intentions on the part of the feedback provider. This outcome is suggested by the observation that individuals prefer honest communications (Schlenker, 1975). In particular, the validity of the failure feedback is expected to play a significant role for the elicitation of guilt and shame but also anger as providing invalid feedback can be construed as an expression of ill will. In contrast, guilt and shame are related to undesirable aspects of the self and hence should be affected more strongly when failure feedback is valid rather than invalid. However, undesirable communications have been shown to affect others even when they are perceived to be invalid. For example, Parkinson (1999) found that people feel guilty when blamed by others even when they know that they are not accountable for a given outcome.

Study 1 was planned to test our predictions in relation with causal attribution in the context of valid explanations given for failure at school by a peer of the failing student. The goal of Study 2 was to test more specifically the role of the presumed validity of the explanation in conjunction with the causal information provided by failure feedback in a similar context.

For this a vignette paradigm was chosen. Vignettes have been criticized because they represent a reality that is different from the more stimulus rich and interactive environment of actual emotional interactions (see, for

example, Parkinson & Manstead, 1993, for a discussion of this issue). As such, vignettes are not suited to assess how people would actually react in a given social situation. However, for the same reasons vignettes are an excellent tool to assess the symbolic knowledge that people apply when judging social interactions. Specifically, we wanted to assess the impact of the causal information implied in failure feedback. Yet, any given actual interpersonal situation varies with regard to a number of ancillary aspects and other social norms and rules may interact with that information. For example, feedback from a person perceived as caring (for example because of a “maternal” appearance) may well be perceived as more acceptable and less hurtful than feedback from a person who appears socially dominant (and who may be perceived as competitive as a result). In contrast, vignettes have the advantage of allowing for a certain abstraction from the specific characteristics of the feedback provider such as voice quality and facial expression, which would likely interact with the message. Hence, the present design allows us to assess the impact of the nature of the message in isolation.

## STUDY 1

### Method

*Participants.* Participants were 120 (65 female, 51 male, and 4 gender unknown) undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at different departments of the University of Haifa and the Iezreel Valley College who participated in the experiment voluntarily during regular class sessions.

*Materials and procedure.* Participants read one of eight variations of a scenario that described a situation in which they were asked to imagine receiving a very low grade (40 out of 100) for a paper submitted for an important course. The instructions further asked participants to imagine that on the following day, with no third party present, they meet another student from the same course in the corridor of the department and a discussion about the paper ensued. The participant was asked to imagine telling the other student about the grade and expressing bewilderment about how this grade came about. In response, the peer offers one out of eight different explanations. Finally, participants were instructed to assume that they felt that the provided explanation reflected the true reason for the failure. The explanation varied the cause according to a 2 (Locus: internal vs. external)  $\times$  2 (Stability: stable vs. unstable)  $\times$  2 (Controllability: controllable vs. uncontrollable) design (see Table 1).

The following is an example of one variation on the scenario. The parts that varied between experimental conditions to achieve the desired manipulations of type of explanation appear in italics.

You took a seminar that requires students to submit a paper to fulfil its requirements. Your paper received a very low grade (40). The next day, you happen to meet in the corridor of the department a fellow student who also took this course. During your conversation with the other student, you tell him/her about your grade and that you wonder why you received such a low grade. In response, the other student answers that you didn't manage to prepare a sufficiently good paper because *you did not invest sufficient effort*.

*Emotion ratings.* Upon reading the description of the scenario, participants answered questions intended to measure their emotional reactions to the feedback by the other student. In addition to providing ratings, on Likert scales anchored with 1 = "not at all" and 7 = "to a large extent", of the degree that their feelings would be hurt, they rated expected shame and guilt, as well levels of anger towards the other student.

*Causal attributions.* Questions on causal attributions served as manipulation checks. Participants were asked, "To what extent is the cause the other student mentioned as the reason for your grade . . . (a) located within you or within the environment?" (ranging from 1 = "located within you" to 7 = "located within the environment"—locus); (b) something that is permanent or temporary?" (ranging from 1 = "temporary" to 7 = "permanent"—stability); (c) controllable or uncontrollable by you (control by self); and (d) controllable or uncontrollable by another person (ranging from 1 = "controllable" to 7 = "not-controllable").

TABLE 1  
The causal structure of the explanations used in Study 1 and Study 2

<i>Causal dimensions and their levels</i>		<i>Explanation</i>
<i>Locus</i>	<i>Stability</i>	<i>Controllability</i>
Internal Stable	Uncontrollable	Low ability
Internal Stable	Controllable	Like always invested no effort
Internal Unstable	Uncontrollable	Severe flu on exam day
Internal Unstable	Controllable	Low effort this time
External Stable	Uncontrollable	The topic of the seminar is always difficult for everyone
External Stable	Controllable	The professor always gives a subject that is difficult for everyone
External Unstable	Uncontrollable	Bad luck in topic choice
External Unstable	Controllable	Bad advice of TA in topic choice

## Results and discussion

*Manipulation checks.* To test the effectiveness of the causal dimension manipulations, a series of 2 (Locus)  $\times$  2 (Stability)  $\times$  2 (Controllability) between-subjects design ANOVAs were conducted. Significant main effects emerged for each of the causal dimensions. Confirming the manipulation, external explanations were perceived to be located in the environment ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) rather than within the person ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ),  $F(1, 112) = 9.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$  and stable explanations were seen as more stable ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) than unstable ones ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $F(1, 110) = 5.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Further, controllable explanations were perceived as more controllable than uncontrollable explanations (sum rating of the person's own controllability and other's controllability:  $M = 8.49$ ,  $SD = 2.86$  versus  $M = 7.02$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ),  $F(1, 109) = 8.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . No other effects proved significant.

### *Emotion ratings*

To assess the effect of causal feedback on self-reported emotions, a series of 2 (Locus)  $\times$  2 (Stability)  $\times$  2 (Controllability) ANOVAs were conducted for each of the ratings.

*Hurt feelings.* As expected, a significant three-way interaction emerged,  $F(1, 112) = 4.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . As shown in Table 2, the internal, uncontrollable and stable explanation (lack of ability) was significantly more hurtful than any other cause, none of which differed from one another in level of hurtfulness. This finding is consistent with the notion that an explanation for failure that points to personal characteristics of the achiever that are relatively permanent and unchangeable presents the most undesirable situation from the point of view of an achiever (Hareli & Weiner, 2002). In addition, a significant main effect of locus emerged,  $F(1, 112) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , as well as interactions with controllability,  $F(1, 112) = 6.77$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$  and stability,  $F(1, 112) = 4.62$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . However these effects were fully qualified by the three-way interaction.

*Anger.* Like for hurt feelings, a significant three-way interaction emerged,  $F(1, 112) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Specifically, the internal, uncontrollable, stable cause (lack of ability) induced significantly more anger than any other cause (see lower row of Table 2), indicating again the potent impact of this combination. In addition, a main effect for stability emerged  $F(1, 112) = 5.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , as well as a two-way interaction between stability and controllability,  $F(1, 112) = 4.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Again, these effects were fully qualified by the three-way interaction.



TABLE 2  
Means of hurt feelings and anger ratings by pattern of causal dimensions underlying the explanation: Study 1

Variable	Causal dimension	Explanation							
		Int.	Int.	Int.	Int.	Ext.	Ext.	Ext.	Ext.
	Locus	Unsta.	Unsta.	Sta.	Sta.	Unsta.	Unsta.	Sta.	Sta.
	Stability	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.
	Controllability								
Hurt feelings									
<i>M</i>		1.73 <sub>a</sub>	2.80 <sub>a</sub>	4.20 <sub>b</sub>	2.80 <sub>a</sub>	2.47 <sub>a</sub>	2.33 <sub>a</sub>	2.20 <sub>a</sub>	2.00 <sub>a</sub>
<i>(SD)</i>		(1.39)	(1.42)	(1.97)	(2.08)	(1.73)	(1.40)	(1.57)	(1.13)
Anger									
<i>M</i>		1.73 <sub>a</sub>	2.80 <sub>ab</sub>	4.33 <sub>b</sub>	2.67 <sub>ab</sub>	2.60 <sub>ab</sub>	1.80 <sub>a</sub>	2.80 <sub>ab</sub>	2.20 <sub>a</sub>
<i>(SD)</i>		(1.28)	(1.66)	(2.02)	(1.84)	(2.10)	(0.86)	(2.04)	(1.66)

Notes:  $N = 119$ ; Int. = Internal, Ext. = External, Unsta. = Unstable, Sta. = Stable, Uncont. = Uncontrollable, Cont. = Controllable; Subscripts based on Newman-Keuls tests at  $p < .05$ . Higher numbers represent greater level of hurt feelings. Numbers with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ . In the context of anger, the internal, unstable, uncontrollable explanation is marginally significantly different than all other explanations marked by the subscript b ( $p = .054$ ).

TABLE 3  
Effects of causal dimensions underlying observer's communicated explanation for failure on guilt and shame: Study 1

<i>Causal dimension</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	<i>F(1, 112)</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>Shame</i>	<i>F(1, 112)</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Locus</i>						
Internal <i>M (SD)</i>	3.30 (1.97)	6.28*	.05	2.88 (2.13)	5.65*	.05
External <i>M (SD)</i>	2.50 (1.52)			2.15 (1.42)		
<i>Stability</i>						
Stable <i>M (SD)</i>	2.97 (1.99)	.18	.002	2.95 (2.06)	7.89**	.07
Unstable <i>M (SD)</i>	2.83 (1.60)			2.08 (1.49)		
<i>Controllability</i>						
Controllable <i>M (SD)</i>	3.03 (1.90)	.70	.008	2.42 (1.77)	.42	.004
Uncontrollable <i>M (SD)</i>	2.77 (1.70)			2.62 (1.92)		

Notes:  $N=120$ ; Higher values indicate a greater degree of that variable. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

*Shame and guilt.* For these emotions a significant main effect for locus emerged, reflecting higher levels for these emotions when the cause was internal to the failing person (see Table 3). For shame this effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between locus and stability such that internal, stable causes ( $M=3.87$ ;  $SD=2.27$ ) elicited significantly higher levels of shame than any of the other causes, which again did not differ significantly from each other (internal unstable:  $M=1.90$ ,  $SD=1.45$ ; external stable:  $M=2.03$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ; external unstable:  $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ),  $F(1, 112)=12.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2=.10$ . In sum, as expected, an internal, stable cause elicits more shame than any other cause as such a cause points to an undesirable and unchangeable characteristic (i.e., stable property) of the self (Lewis, 1971; Niedenthal, Tangney & Gavanski, 1994; Weiner, 1986). Also, in agreement with predictions is that explanations suggesting internal causes for failure elicited higher levels of guilt, as guilt feelings are associated with undesirable actions by the self (Lewis, 1971; Niedenthal et al., 1994). However, guilt usually also presumes responsibility for these actions and one can only be responsible for events that are controllable, hence it is surprising that there was no interaction between locus and controllability in this context.

## Conclusions

In sum, Study 1 confirmed the predicted association between the causal structure implied by failure feedback, hurt feelings and negative social emotions. Overall, internal, stable and uncontrollable causes are most hurtful and elicit the most intense anger. Internal causes also elicit shame and guilt. The self-reports of the four emotions are, as one would expect, correlated ( $r$ s ranging from .32 to .64;  $p$ s  $< .05$ ); however, the level of the

correlations as well as the divergent results, suggest that all emotions add unique variance to the analysis. Hence, hurt feelings are more than a reflection of anger, shame and guilt. Study 1 asked participants to assume that the feedback was valid. Study 2 addresses specifically the effect of feedback validity.

## STUDY 2

### Method

*Participants.* Participants were 227 (155 female, 71 male, and one 1 gender unknown) undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses in different departments at the University of Haifa who participated in the experiment voluntarily during regular class sessions.

*Materials and procedure.* To simplify the design of the study we used only feedback implying internal explanations, as these elicited stronger feelings in Study 1. Participants read the same four internal cause scenarios as in Study 1 (four first explanations in Table 1). There were two versions for each scenario. In one version the participants were instructed, as in Study 1, to imagine that the explanation described the real reason for the failure. The other version mentioned that the participant is aware of the fact that the other student knows that the real reason for the failure was bad luck in the assignment of the paper's topic (i.e., most topics were fairly easy but this one was very difficult and was assigned to the person on a random basis). Bad luck with regard to the paper's topic was chosen because it is a cause that reflects a low degree of involvement on the part of the achiever. Also it does not suggest inferences concerning other pertinent characteristics (unlike help, for example, which is also external but suggests that the achiever has low ability). This resulted in a 2 (Validity: valid vs. invalid)  $\times$  2 (Stability: stable vs. unstable)  $\times$  2 (Controllability: controllable vs. uncontrollable) between-subjects factorial design. The same emotion rating scales as in Study 1 were used. Because the vignettes were the same as those used in Study 1, manipulation checks were not employed in this study.

### Results and discussion

To examine the relations between the validity of the explanation, the causal dimensions of stability and controllability, and the self-reported emotions, a series of 2 (Validity)  $\times$  2 (Stability)  $\times$  2 (Controllability) ANOVAs was conducted.

### Validity

*Hurt feelings.* For validity, only a marginally significant main effect emerged,  $F(1, 219) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .077$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , such that false explanations were somewhat more hurtful than valid explanations ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 2.05$  vs.  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ), suggesting a relatively minor influence of validity on hurt feelings.

*Anger.* A significant main effect of validity emerged, such that, as predicted, a false explanation elicited higher levels of anger,  $F(1, 219) = 12.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , in line with the notion that anger is elicited by the undesirable, intentional actions of another person (e.g., Ortony et al., 1988; Weiner, 1985). Thus, a lie is seen as an intention to hurt and hence elicits more anger than a truthful, albeit unpalatable, statement. As in Study 1, the pattern of means for anger closely follows the pattern of means for hurt feeling. However, as the effect size indicates, anger seems to be more sensitive to the effect of validity than hurt feelings.

*Shame and guilt.* As expected, a different pattern emerged for the effect of validity on shame and guilt. For these emotions a true explanation elicited more intense guilt ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.84$  vs.  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ),  $F(1, 217) = 18.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ , as well as shame ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.91$  vs.  $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $F(1, 219) = 12.09$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ . This finding is in line with the notion that these emotions are reactions to undesirable aspects of the self (Lewis, 1971; Niedenthal et al., 1994). Accordingly, when negative feedback describes a valid situation the intensity of these emotions increases.

Yet, for guilt we also found interactions with the causal dimensions. Specifically, a two-way interaction between the validity of the explanation and controllability emerged,  $F(1, 217) = 10.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , such that the lowest level of guilt was reported for controllable, false causes ( $M = 2.68$ ;  $SD = 1.58$ ). An intermediate level of guilt was elicited by uncontrollable causes ( $M = 3.33$ ;  $SD = 1.69$ ; and,  $M = 3.54$ ;  $SD = 1.88$ , for invalid and valid explanations, respectively) whereas the highest level of guilt was reported for a valid explanation describing a controllable cause ( $M = 4.38$ ;  $SD = 1.73$ ). This effect was further qualified by a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 217) = 6.74$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Significantly higher levels of guilt were reported for a valid explanation describing a stable and controllable cause rather than an unstable and uncontrollable cause (with the other valid explanations not being significantly different; see Table 4). The lowest level of guilt was reported for a false explanation describing an unstable, controllable cause (other conditions did not differ significantly).

TABLE 4  
Means of guilt and shame ratings by the validity of the explanation and its underlying causal dimensions of stability and controllability: Study 2

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Causal dimension</i>	<i>Explanation</i>							
		True	True	True	True	False	False	False	False
	Validity	Unsta.	Unsta.	Sta.	Sta.	Unsta.	Unsta.	Sta.	Sta.
	Stability	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.	Uncont.	Cont.
	Controllability								
Guilt									
<i>M</i>		2.86 <sub>ab</sub>	4.07 <sub>bcd</sub>	4.27 <sub>cd</sub>	4.66 <sub>d</sub>	3.55 <sub>bcd</sub>	2.17 <sub>a</sub>	3.11 <sub>abc</sub>	3.21 <sub>ab</sub>
( <i>SD</i> )		(1.80)	(1.72)	(1.71)	(1.72)	(1.76)	(1.47)	(1.62)	(1.55)
Shame									
<i>M</i>		1.96 <sub>a</sub>	3.75 <sub>bc</sub>	4.70 <sub>c</sub>	3.79 <sub>bc</sub>	3.24 <sub>b</sub>	1.97 <sub>a</sub>	3.14 <sub>b</sub>	2.86 <sub>ab</sub>
( <i>SD</i> )		(1.32)	(1.73)	(1.66)	(1.86)	(1.66)	(1.45)	(1.78)	(1.46)

Notes:  $N = 224$ ; Unsta. = Unstable, Sta. = Stable, Uncont. = Uncontrollable, Cont. = Controllable; Subscripts based on Newman-Keuls tests at  $p < .05$ . Higher numbers represent greater level of that variable. Numbers with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

Nevertheless, these effects did not completely qualify the main effect reported above because for all valid explanations, except for the unstable, uncontrollable explanation, the level of guilt was higher than it was for the invalid explanations. Thus, whereas for controllable causes, the valid explanation elicited higher levels of guilt than the invalid explanation, for the uncontrollable, unstable causes the validity of the explanation does not make a difference. The former finding is congruent with the importance of responsibility for guilt feelings (Weiner, 1986); only when one has in fact had control over a situation are guilt feelings to be expected. In contrast to findings by Parkinson (1999) that guilt feelings can also arise when the person who is blamed knows that the blame is unwarranted, the present findings suggest in order for unwarranted blame to induce guilt, the protagonist must assume that the other person truly believes that the blame is deserved.

For shame a more complex and not entirely expected pattern emerged. A main effect of validity emerged,  $F(1, 219) = 12.09, p < .01, \eta^2 = .08$ . This effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between validity and controllability,  $F(1, 219) = 7.95, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$  as well as a two-way interaction between validity and stability,  $F(1, 219) = 5.29, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . These effects were fully qualified by a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 219) = 18.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ . As shown in Table 4, and in contrast to what was expected, the highest level of shame was elicited by the valid explanations, with the exception of the unstable, uncontrollable explanation, which elicited the lowest level of shame. A similarly low level of shame was elicited by the invalid, unstable controllable explanation.

### *Stability and controllability*

For hurt feelings and anger, the effects of stability and controllability found in Study 1, were largely replicated in Study 2.

*Hurt feelings.* A significant main effect for stability emerged,  $F(1, 219) = 5.51, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ . This main effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between stability and controllability,  $F(1, 219) = 17.69, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .08$ , such that an explanation describing an unstable, uncontrollable cause ( $M = 2.60; SD = 1.72$ ) was significantly less hurtful than all other explanations, which did not differ from each other significantly (stable, controllable:  $M = 3.57; SD = 2.11$ ; unstable, controllable:  $M = 4.04; SD = 1.94$ ; stable, uncontrollable:  $M = 4.24; SD = 1.79$ ). However, unlike Study 1, the uncontrollable stable cause was not significantly more hurtful, even though the pattern of means points in this direction.

*Anger.* As in Study 1, a main effect for stability emerged,  $F(1, 219) = 17.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ . Yet, this effect was again qualified by a stability by controllability interaction,  $F(1, 219) = 38.36, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .15$ , indicating that an explanation that included an unstable, uncontrollable cause ( $M = 2.44; SD = 1.62$ ) elicited the lowest degrees of anger. When the cause was controllable ( $M = 3.33; SD = 1.82$ ; and,  $M = 3.82; SD = 1.91$ , for stable and unstable explanations, respectively) intermediate levels of anger were elicited which were significantly lower than the anger elicited by an explanation pointing to a stable, uncontrollable cause ( $M = 4.89; SD = 1.94$ ). These effects replicate the findings of Study 1.

*Shame and guilt.* As in Study 1, explanations suggestive of a stable cause elicited more guilt ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.76$  vs.  $M = 3.16, SD = 1.82$ ),  $F(1, 217) = 8.46, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$ , as well as more shame ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.82$  vs.  $M = 2.73, SD = 1.72$ ),  $F(1, 219) = 17.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The goal of the present research was to investigate the aspects of a reason for failure provided by an external observer that make such communications emotionally hurtful. We proposed Weiner's (1986) attribution theory as a pertinent theoretical framework. As predicted by the theory, the causal dimensions that underlie a specific explanation for failure are important determinants of how hurtful the message is and which other social emotions will be elicited. However, the perceived validity of a failure explanation was found to affect emotional reactions to a much lesser degree.

Further, as predicted, the pattern of findings for hurt feelings and anger were quite similar such that explanations suggesting either higher levels of stability or lower levels of controllability or both, increased these reactions. This confirms the notion that explanations stating that a failure was caused by something that is characteristic of the person who failed are particularly hurtful. This is further in line with the proposal that hurt feelings stem from relational devaluation (Leary et al., 1998; Leary & Springer, 2001; Vangelisti, 1994). Specifically, attributing failure to something that is an integral part of a person devalues that person.

Also as expected, we found guilt and shame to be determined by the causal dimensions underlying the failure feedback. Thus, internal, stable causes for failure increased shame. Conversely, guilt was increased when the explanation offered a cause that was under the achiever's control. In fact, controllability increased guilt regardless of the locus of the cause. When a cause for failure is external and controllable by others, i.e., bad advice by a TA, the person who failed may be perceived as sharing responsibility as it

was their choice to accept the advice. That is, perceptions of controllability by others may not be completely independent from perceptions of controllability by the self. This explanation, however, requires further research.

Turning to the impact of the validity of an explanation, we found that both anger and hurt feelings were relatively insensitive to this factor. This is even more surprising given that the invalid explanation also offered an internal, that is, less desirable, cause for the failure and can be construed as an expression of ill will. The validity of the explanation was expected to be especially important for guilt and shame. We predicted that valid explanations associating failure with controllability would elicit higher levels of guilt whereas valid explanations pointing to stable, uncontrollable causes would increase shame. This expectation was only partially confirmed. Thus, valid explanations referring to a controllable cause induced more guilt than did invalid explanations. However, certain invalid explanations led to quite comparable levels of guilt as were found for certain valid explanations. Similarly for shame, some invalid explanations elicited levels of shame that were comparable to levels of shame elicited by valid explanations.

Overall, the complex pattern of results for shame and guilt suggests that the validity of the explanation had relatively less impact on the elicited emotions. That is, the message content seemed in certain cases to override the information of whether the message conveyed true or false information (see Parkinson, 1999, for similar results in the context of guilt).

In the present case the invalid explanation provided an internal cause, which is suggestive of ill will by the feedback provider. It would be interesting to study the effect of invalid external causes, which could be perceived as either condescending or intended to be face saving. In this case, there may be complex effects on feelings of shame and guilt, which may be even intensified by the implied need to protect a person from the consequences of their own failure. This is suggestive of the possibility that validity itself is less predictive of emotional reactions than the specific relation between the real causes and those presented by the feedback provider.

The relative lesser importance of validity fits findings from other domains that involve reactions to social information, for example, social judgements and social emotions. In these contexts reactions are also often found to be relatively insensitive to the extent to which the underlying information is valid. For example, inferences about arrogance are determined mostly by the way people explain their achievements with little regard as to whether the achievement is truly significant (Hareli & Weiner, 2000) or the explanation for success reflects the real reason for attaining it or not (Hareli, Weiner, & Yee, 2006). In sum, it is possible that in an interpersonal context, the nature of what is said is generally more important for the reaction of an



audience than its perceived validity. The impact of valid versus invalid failure feedback on the emotions studied in the paper would then be another such case.

On the whole, these studies provide good evidence for the ability of attribution theory of emotion and motivation (Weiner, 1986) to explain emotional reactions to failure feedback over and above previously studied factors. Specifically, previous research stressed the major role that relational devaluation plays for hurt feelings and which other emotional reactions are likely to arise in such contexts (Leary et al., 1998; Leary & Springer, 2001; Vangelisti, 1994). However, these studies did not delineate what it is about a message that makes it devaluating. The present research extends this literature by offering a theoretical framework that specifies the defining characteristics of devaluating messages in the context of failure feedback. However, although the present research focused on feedback to a specific failure event, the same type of information can be found in other types of verbal exchanges. Thus, it is not uncommon that people say things that belittle others by, for example, referring to their undesirable qualities (e.g., low ability or unattractive looks) in order to hurt their feelings, even when there is no specific failure that one tries to explain by such a message. The present research suggests that the reason that such messages are hurtful as well as elicit anger, shame and guilt can be traced to the causal attributions conveyed by such messages.

In sum, the present research provides convincing evidence for the potential of causal inferences to elicit hurt. However, the present studies focus on a limited context. First, we purposefully focused on a failure event, as such events provide a justified context for unpalatable truths. Yet, the emotions elicited by the idea of failing may have interacted with the reactions to the feedback. Thus, some explanations may have different effects if no previous failure occurred. In addition, even within the context of failure, the importance of the achievement for the individual can be expected to moderate reactions. In the present study, students were requested to imagine the failure to be relevant for their success in their studies, based on the notion that emotions arise in the context of personally significant events and that their intensity is positively correlated with the subjective significance of these events (Frijda, 1986, 1988). Conversely, this implies that the same feedback in the context of a nonrelevant failure (for example in an arts class taken for recreation) may have different effects. Second, the social context can be expected to interact with the feedback. For example, the quality of the relationship with the other should be pertinent, as people tend to interpret criticism voiced by individuals with whom they have good relationships as more constructive and hence as less hurtful (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). The presence and absence of third parties and the relationship to them should also be relevant.

Overall, these ideas suggest various factors relevant to the feedback situation or the social context in which it occurs, affect the extent to which a given message is hurtful. Nevertheless, all of these factors are expected to interact with the causal dimensions that are implied by the message. In this context, it is also advisable that future research consider the role of other causal dimensions. For example, the dimension of the globality of the communicated cause suggested by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) may also have an important role in this context.

Although in both studies most of our predictions were confirmed, one limitation deserves to be noted. By using questionnaires in which participants are asked to imagine a relevant emotional situation, one cannot be assured that the results represent people's real emotional reactions. Yet, even though appraisals made in the context of hypothetical scenarios compared to actual appraisals tend to represent participants' beliefs about such situations rather than actual experiences, there seems to be considerable overlap between the two (Robinson & Clore, 2002). That is, reactions to hypothetical situations are quantitatively but not qualitatively different, i.e., exaggerations or underestimations of the actual reaction not completely different reactions (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Robinson & Clore, 2002; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000).

One should also note that hurtful events often have long-term consequences (Leary & Springer, 2001). These consequences mostly arise when there is a pre-existing relationship between the interaction partners (Leary et al., 1998). Given that self-reported reactions to hypothetical events reflect beliefs about such events and that such beliefs often have a greater importance for long-term consequences than the actual emotional responses during a specific event (Robinson & Clore, 2002), the present findings are important in and of themselves. For example, the likelihood of forgiving a person who has hurt us by providing a certain type of failure feedback may be affected more strongly by beliefs about the emotional episode than by the actual emotional reaction, especially when the action of forgiving is more remote in time from the hurtful event.

In sum, we believe that the present paper provides a valuable framework for the study of the determinants of the emotional consequences of hurtful communications. Further, on a more general level, this research considered the role that the validity of the information in a social encounter has for social emotions. Research on social emotions has largely ignored this factor.

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