

Making Sense of Hurtful Mother-in-law Messages: Applying Attribution Theory to the In-Law Triad

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This study focused on hurtful messages daughters-in-law (DILs, N = 132) reported receiving from mothers-in-law (MILs). Results reveal various hurtful message types: under- and overinvolvement, personal attacks, and hurt communicated to or through a third party. Grounded in attribution theory, we examined DILs' attributions for MILs' hurtful messages and their perceived agreement with their husbands' reasoning for the message. Our findings illuminate distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing attribution biases for MILs' behaviors, such that DILs who were less satisfied with their MILs tended to make more internal attributions for MIL hurtful behaviors, and more satisfied DILs tended to make more external attributions. The degree to which a DIL believed she and her husband interpreted his mother's behavior similarly was also important and positively predicted marital satisfaction. Findings add to the growing portrait of in-law communication, offering directions for hurtful messages and attribution theorizing in the in-law context.

Keywords: *Attributions; Distress-Maintaining; Hurtful Messages; In-Law Relations; Relationship-Enhancing*

Recent research both confirms and challenges the age-old assumption that the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law (MIL/DIL) relationship is fraught with problems. On the one hand, positive MIL/DIL communication is linked to important relational and individual variables, such as relational satisfaction, unity, and caregiving

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intentions (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). On the other hand, DILs report significant tension and negativity in their relationships with their MILs (e.g., Hung, 2005; Merrill, 2007; Nuner, 2004). MIL/DIL communication is often hurtful and dissatisfying (Merrill, 2007; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Moreover, poor MIL/DIL relationships tend to impair DILs' marriages (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989).

Extant research has examined the communication and contextual constructs that help to explain MIL/DIL relationship quality (see Serewicz, 2006). Less is known, however, about how DILs perceive their communication with their MILs and how those cognitive processes help to explain relational functioning. It is important to address this gap given empirical suggestions that relational partners' interpretations of communication behavior can be more important than each other's actual behaviors in explaining their relational health (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Dun, & Leonard 2001; Vangelisti, Corbin, Lucchetti, & Sprague, 1999).

In line with those perspectives, we employed attribution theory to better understand how DILs made sense of their MILs' hurtful behaviors, and how those attributions related to DILs' relationships with their MILs and with their husbands. Specifically, our goals were to reveal the types of MIL messages that DILs perceive as hurtful and to test the links between DIL attributions for the MIL hurtful message and DIL satisfaction with the MIL. We also set out to extend current attribution research by incorporating spousal sense-making and by examining the degree to which the similarity between DILs' own and their husbands' attributions helps to explain marital quality. Understanding the intersection between communication and sense-making processes should further explain why some in-law relationships are functional and some are fraught with tension (Merrill, 2007).

Hurtful MIL Messages

Previous research outlines a number of communication behaviors that contribute to DIL dissatisfaction with and disassociation from the MIL, such as interfering in family affairs and making the daughter feel unwelcomed in family rituals (Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). The construct of hurt is a useful unifying framework within which to examine MIL/DIL communication because, as Vangelisti (1994) argues, the hurtfulness often results from the perception of devaluation. Hurtful messages encompass a wide array of behaviors—verbal and nonverbal—that communicate to recipients a sense of rejection, exclusion, or negative evaluation (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Mills, Naser, & Farrell, 2005) and therefore may induce a complex amalgam of emotions such as fear, anger, humiliation, guilt, and shame. Although often brief, hurtful messages can have a pervasive and potentially lasting impact on the ways parents, children, romantic partners, and friends feel about each other, their relationships, and themselves (e.g., Vangelisti & Young, 2000). The MIL/DIL relationship is rife with reports of negativity, rejection or disassociation, and negative evaluation (Merrill, 2007); therefore, hurtful messages provide an existing framework for better addressing MIL “misbehaviors” and subsequent DIL interpretations.

Though the content of hurtful messages can vary based on the targeted relationship (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Young & Bippus, 2001), several types of hurtful messages have emerged across relational contexts. These include criticism, teasing, threats, mistreatment through a third party, avoidance, and various forms of betrayal (Feeney, 2004; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Mills et al., 2005; Young & Bippus, 2001). Vangelisti (1994) inductively analyzed participants' reports of hurtful messages and categorized them as accusations (i.e., "a charge of fault or offense"), evaluations (e.g., "Going out with you was the biggest mistake of my life"), and informative messages (e.g., "You aren't a priority in my life") (p. 61); less frequently reported categories included lies, threats, directives, expressed desires, questions, and jokes.

Extant research on MIL/DIL communication offers instances of harm that parallel the hurtful messages framework. Such problematic MIL behaviors include unsolicited advice and failure to provide support, exclusion from the sharing of family stories and/or secrets, as well as ignoring or ridiculing aspects of the DIL's family-of-origin such as her religious practices and family traditions (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Serewicz, 2007). Frequently, negative MIL behaviors involve the son/spouse and/or (grand)children. The most common problems are MIL's excessive involvement, control, or general mistreatment toward the son (Merrill, 2007; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Similarly, some DILs complain about MILs who criticize or override DILs' parenting choices, while others complain of MILs' direct mistreatment or uninvolvement as grandmothers (Merrill, 2007; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Grandchild mistreatment often coincides with another noted concern—preferential treatment toward another child or child-in-law and his/her family (Merrill, 2007). Overall, the themes of MIL misbehaviors reflect a sense of over- or underinvolvement with the DIL's immediate family (i.e., spouse and child) and/or criticisms of the DIL and her family of origin, reflecting the undesirable stereotypes cross-culturally ascribed to MILs (Adler, Denmark, & Ahmed, 1989).

Although previous research has identified various MIL "misbehaviors" that have the potential to be hurtful, researchers have yet to specifically investigate the types of messages DILs identify as hurtful or the content or degree of hurtfulness of MIL communication. Understanding the content of hurtful messages lends insight into what communication between MILs and DILs looks like—a step necessary to addressing communication problems in this relational context. Because of this gap, and because of the likelihood that the negativity ascribed to much MIL/DIL communication can be explained by its hurtful nature (Vangelisti, 2007), we posed the following research question:

RQ1: What types of hurtful messages do daughters-in-law report receiving from their mothers-in-law?

Different types of messages are more hurtful than others. Within romantic relationships, betrayals and active disassociations (e.g., expressing an absence of love, desire, and commitment; lessening or dissolving the relationship) are the most hurtful (Feeney, 2004). These types of messages may be particularly hurtful to DILs based

on reports that MILs often made them feel like outsiders rather than family, unwanted in family events and practices (Prentice, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Previous research on hurtful family communication also suggests that comparisons can be particularly hurtful. For example, adult children reference their parents' use of sibling comparisons (e.g., "why can't you be more like your brother?") as among the most hurtful—both generally (Mills et al., 2005) and in regard to academics (Myers, Schrodtt, & Rittenour, 2006). Similarly, MILs' comparisons between children-in-law and disproportionate attention and affection to grandchildren have been identified as problematic (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009) and are likely particularly hurtful to DILs.

The degree to which people experience certain message types as hurtful varies not only from message type but also from relationship to relationship. For instance, family members and romantic partners' messages tend to hurt more than those from friends (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998), whereas message type does not differentiate degree of hurt in sibling relationships (Myers & Bryant, 2008), probably because siblings have such strong relational histories and confirmed expectations for indestructible bonds. In this way, siblings are far different from in-laws whose lack of a (long) shared family history, and corresponding ambiguity in regard to rules and expectations (Fischer, 1983), are more likely to lead them to differentiate between the types of messages that elicit varying amounts of hurt. To test this, we pose the following hypothesis:

H1: Types of mother-in-law hurtful messages will help to explain differences in the degree to which daughters-in-law feel hurt by the messages.

Attributions for Hurtful MIL Messages

The degree to which a message hurts us also depends on the causes, or attributions, that we assign to the message. As naïve scientists (Heider, 1958), we engage regularly in this process of sense making, including understanding why things happen, assigning reasons for others' behaviors, and assessing our own feelings of hurt. We are particularly prone to attribution making when we perceive another's behavior to be *negative* (Baucom, 1987; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Manusov, 1990; Manusov, Floyd, & Kerksen-Griep, 1997; Wong & Weiner, 1981), as in the case of hurtful messages. In particular, when it comes to perpetuating or ameliorating the negativity of the message (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), much of our emotional and communicative responses depend on the internal/external locus we assign to the negative behavior.

In their expansive literature on marital attributions, Bradbury and Fincham have demonstrated that external versus internal attributions are linked to our perceptions of and responses to others' behaviors (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury, Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1996; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). People making internal attributions assign cause to others' "enduring characteristics"—persisting over time in all types of situations—as the cause of the harmful event (Bradbury &

Fincham, 1990, p. 5). Internal attributions also place *responsibility* on the sender who intended to inflict harm and blame the sender for having selfish motivations (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Conversely, those making external attributions perceive external factors that are unreflective of the partner as the cause, and assign (little to) no responsibility or blame on the one doing the harming (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Assigning external or internal attributions can exist on a continuum, and a couple's tendencies toward more internal or external attribution-making for negative behavior are indicative of other relational factors.

How DILs assign cause to their MILs hurtful behaviors matters in light of previous research showing that attributional locus coincides with relational well-being. Specifically, attributional tendencies covary with relationship satisfaction in what are commonly referred to as the distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing hypotheses. Those who attribute another's negative (i.e., hurtful) behavior as external generally report higher levels of relational satisfaction (a relationship-enhancing bias) than those who attribute them as internal (a distress-maintaining bias; see Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). The process through which internal attributions exert their harm on relationships is perhaps best shown in comparisons of distressed and non-distressed couples (Baucom et al., 1996). Distressed couples tend to follow a trajectory whereby one spouse hurts the other by violating an expectation. Next, the hurt spouse makes internal attributions and experiences a high level of negative affect. When this spouse responds with his/her own negative communication, the cycle can repeat (Baucom et al., 1996; Manusov, 1990). Whereas non-distressed couples tend to prescribe external attributions to their partners' negative behaviors, distressed couples tend to have negative relational beliefs that can breed a trajectory of negative communication between partners. This combination of negative communication and negative beliefs about the relationship perpetuates an atmosphere in which negative violations are not easily overlooked, and resentment builds (Baucom et al., 1996). Thus, spouses' negative behaviors are often attributed to internal causes, thereby helping to maintain the distress in the relationship. Important to the context of MIL/DIL relations, this pattern is more likely among wives than among husbands (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992).

We might presume that satisfaction drives attribution type, but longitudinal evidence suggests that the direction of this relationship is reversed. Specifically, in research by Fincham and Bradbury (1987), satisfaction at the initial data collection did not significantly predict couples' attributions up to one year later; however, particularly for women, initial attributions were linked to later satisfaction scores. Though most commonly documented among married couples, the attribution/relationship satisfaction links identified in research on relationship-enhancing and distress-maintaining biases have been found for other family members and friends (Vangelisti & Young, 2000) and are expected within the MIL/DIL context.

The power of the MIL's hurtful message on the DIL's perceptions of this critical relationship is also likely dependent upon the degree of hurt incited. Previous trends indicate that hurtfulness is negatively associated with the target's affect toward the relationship itself and toward one or both of the involved parties (Mills et al.,

2005; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Thus, based on previous research on attribution biases and degree of hurt, we suspect that:

H2: Daughter-in-laws' relational satisfaction with mothers-in-law is inversely related to both the degree to which DILs assign internal attributions to MILs' hurtful messages and the degree of DILs' hurt in response to the MILs' hurtful messages.

Attributions in the Triad

Sense making is not only an intrapersonal process. In the case of the in-law triad, DILs are likely to turn to their spouses to make sense of their MILs' hurtful message. In doing so, they get a sense for their spouses' attributions, have the opportunity to compare them to their own, and may also engage in communicated sense making with their spouses. These intra- and interpersonal processes may be significant to understanding communication and hurt in the MIL/DIL/spouse triad.

Those making attributions for the same behavior are likely to disagree at times (e.g., Manusov et al., 1997). Broadly, general similarity within couples coincides with their well-being and relational longevity (e.g., Zhang, Ho, & Yip, 2012). Indeed, spouses' differing perspectives are linked to poorer relational health (Sillars et al., 2001). Spousal agreement, and even more so spouses' *perceptions* of agreement (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993), tends to increase over time in most (non-distressed) marriages and friendships, bringing the parties closer over time (for overview see Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003). Among these realms of similarity, values, beliefs, and emotions are particularly important to a couple's cohesion and closeness over time (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007), suggesting that couples who are similar in their emotions surrounding *in-law* (mis)behavior would also be closer than those who are dissimilar. According to Weber, Harvey, and Stanley (1987), when explaining relational events, it is not the factual truth of accounts that matters but rather agreement between romantic partners on the story's meaning. Indeed, Weber et al. argue that when differing explanations for significant events illuminate one partner's rejection of the other's social reality, "their role may be devastating to the relationship" (p. 121). Moreover, agreement predicts the success of romantic relationships, likely because "being on the same page" yields better interactions (Anderson et al., 2003).

Although messages of hurt vary in their intensity and impact on the receiver, spousal agreement about these issues likely matters in the MIL/DIL/spouse triad. For example, previous DIL reports of dissatisfaction surrounding the husband's "siding" with the MIL instead of the DIL (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009) suggest the potential negative effects of perceived attribution disagreement. Thus, DILs' perceptions of their own and their husbands' attributions for MILs' hurtful messages merit attention.

There is great support for the notion that disagreement about *in-law* behavior would be particularly problematic in the marriage. Problems with in-laws are associated with marital dissatisfaction (Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989). These links might emerge before marriage, as a parent-in-law's dislike of a future child-in-law tends

to decrease the chances for marital success (Bryant et al., 2001). In a longitudinal assessment, Bryant and colleagues found that in-law discord predicted DILs' marital stability (i.e., satisfaction, commitment), suggesting that in-law problems are the source rather than the consequence of marital strife (Bryant et al., 2001). In short, based on previous research suggesting a negative relationship between dissimilarity and satisfaction in marriages, we propose that DILs' perceived dissimilarity in spousal attributions for hurtful MIL messages will coincide with perceived marital dissatisfaction. Thus, we test the following:

H3: Daughter-in-law perceptions of spousal attribution similarity and the importance of spousal attribution similarity will predict daughter-in-law relational satisfaction with husbands.

Method

Participants

We solicited daughters-in-law ($N=132$) through in-law/family-focused websites (e.g., motherinlawstories.com) and chatrooms ($N=62$), and communication classes ($N=46$) at a midwestern and an eastern university. Twenty-four additional participants did not indicate how they learned of the study. Student participants were able to complete the study themselves or recruit parents, siblings, or friends for extra credit in their courses. All women were married at the time of the study and reported on their living MIL from their current marriage. To avoid potential family-type effects, the MIL had to be the biological mother of the DIL's husband. Participants had to have experienced at least one hurtful message from their MIL that they later discussed with their spouse. DILs were between the ages of 20 and 62 ($M=37.74$, $SD=9.80$), and reported the following cultural backgrounds: 112 identified as Caucasian (84%), 1 African American, 4 Hispanic (3%), 1 Native American, 1 Asian, 6 identified themselves as biracial (4.5%), and 2 (1.5%) indicated "other." Five individuals did not report their background (3.8%). They had been married for an average of 19.5 years ($SD=8.4$, $Range=6-32$) and had approximately 1.69 children ($Median=2.0$, $SD=1.05$, $Range=0-5$). MILs were reportedly between the ages of 43 and 86 ($M=64.16$, $SD=8.92$) and lived between 0 and 2,500 miles apart ($M=302.87$, $SD=560.71$, $Median=40.00$). The hurtful event occurred an average of 35 months prior to survey completion and ranged from less than one month to 26 years prior. When subjected to several correlation and difference tests, the variable of "time since the hurtful event" was not revealed to significantly influence the hurtfulness of the message, attributions, nor relational satisfaction with the MIL.

Procedures and Measures

Daughters-in-law who learned of the study online were able to access the survey hyperlink directly from the family-centered website or chatroom they were visiting

(e.g., motherinlawstories.com). Participants who learned about the study through a communication course received the survey link in an email from the researchers after they expressed interest in participating. We deleted all email correspondence to ensure participant anonymity. Surveys were never linked with participants email addresses. The survey link directed all participants to a security-protected questionnaire through an online survey software platform. Following provision of their informed consent, participants completed the following measures.

Hurtful messages. DILs typed the hurtful message they remembered receiving from MILs in accordance with these instructions, "Think of a time when your mother-in-law said or did something that hurt your feelings. Remember, this must be something that you and your partner have discussed. Please describe your mother-in-law's hurtful behavior in the space below." This textbox was expandable, thus there were no length restrictions imposed on the open-ended description. We administered the following closed-ended measures, modifying all to reflect the appropriate relationships, to assess the research questions and hypotheses.

Perceived hurtfulness of the message. Daughters-in-law completed Young and Bippus's (2001) two item, unidimensional Likert assessment of the degree to which the message was *not at all hurtful* (1) to *extremely hurtful* (7) and *did not cause emotional pain* (1) to *caused a great deal of emotional pain* (7). The intra-class correlation suggests acceptable reliability ($ICC = 0.741, p < 0.01; M = 5.89, SD = 1.31$).

Attributions. Participants completed a modified version of The Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM), a 6-item Likert scale in which participants report their degree of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with a series of statements about the locus (internal or external) of their relational partners' behaviors (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). We modified the RAM in two ways. First, we replaced the measure's original language about "criticism" with the broader term "hurtful behavior" such that our participants were referencing the hurtful event that they reported for this study. Second, to increase scale clarity, two original items were separated (i.e., "My MIL hurt me on purpose rather than unintentionally" was split into "My MIL hurt me on purpose" and "My MIL hurt me unintentionally" and "My MIL's behavior was motivated by selfish rather than unselfish concerns" was split into "My MIL's behavior was motivated by selfish concerns" and "My MIL's behavior was motivated by unselfish concerns") for a total of eight items. Of these, the four items about external attributions were reverse coded, thus higher composite scores reflect more internal attributions. The modified scale yielded acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.84, M = 5.70, SD = 1.13$).

Relationship satisfaction. DIL satisfaction with her spouse and MIL were each assessed using two modified (for relationship) versions of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire. This 7-point scale is composed of 10 semantic differential items assessing aspects of satisfying relationships (e.g., miserable-enjoyable, lonely-friendly) and a final item addressing global relational

satisfaction (i.e., 1 = *completely satisfied*, 7 = *completely dissatisfied*). Six items are reverse coded, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of satisfaction. As the originators suggest, two filler items were dropped from the analysis (free-tied down, hard-easy). The average of two components then produced the final score: (a) the eight remaining semantic differential items (MIL satisfaction $\alpha = 0.96$; Spousal satisfaction $\alpha = 0.97$) and (b) the 11th global satisfaction item (MIL satisfaction $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.78$; Spousal satisfaction $M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.53$).

Spousal attribution similarity and importance of spousal attribution similarity. These two subscales were created by Koenig Kellas (2010) to assess couples' degree of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with two realms of similarity: perceived similarity with a target (i.e., the husband) and the importance of attribution similarity with the target. DILs were asked to consider the following: "How much did your husband's explanation match your own explanation for this hurtful message?" and rated three items of similarity (e.g., "Our perspectives about why the mother-in-law's hurtful message occurred were very similar.") and four items of the importance of similarity (e.g., "I really want[ed] us to share the same explanation for my mother-in-law's hurtful message") on a scale from. Both similarity ($\alpha = 0.97$, $M = 4.57$, $SD = 2.19$) and importance of similarity ($\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.34$) measures were reliable.

Data Analysis

In order to answer Research Question 1, which asked about the types of hurtful messages DILs reported hearing from their MILs, we inductively coded the open-ended data (see Bulmer, 1979 for similar message coding methods; Koenig Kellas, 2010; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). First, we read through the entire data set, taking notes on emergent categories (i.e., types) that seemed to help explain the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then met to compare and discuss the emergent types of hurtful messages. During this process, we developed an initial coding scheme and separately reviewed 20% of the data again to assess the coding scheme's validity. After further revising the coding scheme based on instances that were not explained by the coding scheme (i.e., negative case analysis; Bulmer, 1979) and correcting any overlapping categories, we ran initial tests of intercoder reliability by coding 20% ($n = 27$) of the data in common. This resulted in good intercoder reliability ($kappa = 0.71$). In an attempt to increase intercoder reliability, we discussed and came to agreement on any discrepancies and revised the coding scheme as necessary. Following this process, we finalized the codebook, coded the remainder of the data, and assessed intercoder reliability overall ($kappa = 0.70$), and corrected any discrepancies. The codebook, including examples of each message type, is available from the authors. In line with previous research (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2010; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998), each message was therefore assigned one primary code, or hurtful message type. This was the type that was most prominent in the response, following Owen's

Table 1 Supra and Sub Types of MIL Hurtful Messages

Supratype	Subtype	Frequency primary code (secondary code)
Overinvolvement		<i>n</i> = 53, 39.8% (<i>n</i> = 7, 20%)
	Toxic triad	<i>n</i> = 30, 22.6% (<i>n</i> = 2, 6%)
	Control	<i>n</i> = 23, 17.3% (<i>n</i> = 5, 14.2%)
Personal Attack		<i>n</i> = 43, 32.3% (<i>n</i> = 13, 37.1%)
Underinvolvement		<i>n</i> = 18, 13.5% (<i>n</i> = 7, 20%)
	Silence/uninvolved	<i>n</i> = 12, 9% (<i>n</i> = 0, 0%)
	Family membership	<i>n</i> = 6, 4.5% (<i>n</i> = 7, 20%)
Third Party		<i>n</i> = 17, 12.8% (<i>n</i> = 8, 22.9%)
	Mistreatment of other(s)	<i>n</i> = 9, 6.8% (<i>n</i> = 2, 6%)
	Gossip	<i>n</i> = 8, 6% (<i>n</i> = 6, 17.1%)

(1984) guidelines of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. The types that emerged in this process are presented in the Results and in Table 1.

Results

Research Question 1 asked what types of hurtful messages DILs report receiving from their MILs. Inductive coding revealed the emergence of four supratypes and a total of seven subtypes of MIL hurtful messages. Type descriptions are below; Table 1 shows frequencies and examples.

Overinvolvement

The most frequently occurring messages included those under the supratype of overinvolvement. Overinvolvement in the DIL's/family life involved MIL's intrusions into the DIL/spouse relationship outside of the realm of what DILs saw as appropriate. DILs often described the MIL as trying to drive a wedge between the couple or trying to manipulate the spousal relationship (or the entire family) to meet her own desires as opposed to those of her DIL. These messages implied to DILs that they were not worthy partners for the MIL's son and conveyed to DILs their MILs' desires to weaken sons' marriages by discrediting the DILs. The overinvolvement supratype was characterized by messages in two subtypes: *Toxic triad* and *control*.

Toxic triad messages included any messages that referred (negatively) to the husband/wife (or pre-marital) relationship, manifesting as expressed negative attitudes toward the DIL (e.g., calling her a bad wife or poor mother) and/or expressed positive attitudes toward the (MIL's) son for doing hurtful things to the DIL (e.g., supporting infidelity). In some instances, DILs reported that MILs tried to convince their sons not to marry the DIL or that MILs directly or indirectly suggested that the DIL was/is not good enough for the son. Ultimately, toxic triad messages were those that

brought the son into the message and, in particular, communicated some type of interference in the husband-wife relationship.

Control messages also communicated overinvolvement in a hurtful way through unwanted actions or advice. MILs exerted their control by completing unsolicited tasks for DILs or directly instructing the DIL on how to (better) enact these behaviors. Control messages created power struggles between the MIL and DIL. MILs were perceived as doing *too* much for the DILs' husband and/or children, including MILs' ignoring or contradicting parenting decisions. Most instances of ignoring boundaries involved unplanned or unwelcomed visits to the DIL's home (see Table 1). Generally, DILs had the sense that the MIL was "butting in" either physically or behaviorally in ways that communicated attempts at control and power.

Personal Attacks

The second most frequently occurring type of hurtful MIL message falls under the supratype of *personal attack*. Personal attacks were messages communicated directly from MILs to DILs that discredited, insulted, and maliciously attacked DILs. These took the form of insults to the DIL as well as criticisms about the DIL's character or appearance, and—unlike toxic triad messages—did not directly or indirectly involve the spouse or his relationship with the DIL. Unlike *overinvolvement* that implied MIL superiority, personal attacks were direct and often included name-calling and other hurtful words. Not surprisingly, DILs considered these messages to be insensitive, rude, or dismissive of DILs' feelings and/or ideas.

Underinvolvement

Although DILs found overinvolvement problematic, they also reported underinvolvement as hurtful. Underinvolvement messages communicated MILs' sense of detachment from the DIL and her family, including her spouse and children. At times, DILs conveyed this through comparisons to MIL's treatment of other family members (e.g., her other children, other grandchildren). Two subtypes characterized underinvolvement—messages about *family membership* and messages that showed *silence/uninvolvement*. Family membership messages were those that directly or indirectly communicated to the DIL that the MIL did not see her (or her children) as family, such that the DIL felt she didn't "belong" and was unwelcomed in the activities of (true) family members. Silence/uninvolved messages were those through which the MIL ignored the DIL and/or acted as if the DIL was not present in a given interaction. For example, MILs ignored DILs' comments, did not solicit their input, or did not acknowledge their presence at a family gathering or interaction (see Table 1).

Third Party

Finally, the supratype of third party messages were those in which the message was sent *through* someone other than the DIL. These included the subtypes *gossip* and

mistreatment of other(s). Gossip messages were any lies, rumors, or disparaging comments MILs made about DILs to a third party that DILs either overheard, read on a social networking site (e.g., Facebook), or found out about after the message was communicated by the MIL. DILs commented on the “backhanded” nature of these gossip messages, reflecting a sort of passive aggressiveness in which MILs harmed without having to interact *with* their DIL. Mistreatment of other(s) also included MIL messages that were hurtful to a third party dear to the DIL—namely her children or her husband (the MIL’s son). Though the message was not directly about the DIL, the DIL was indirectly hurt through the hurt inflicted on the third party.

In sum, inductive analyses revealed four supratypes of categories for the kinds of hurtful messages DILs reported receiving from their MILs. Interestingly, both overinvolvement, by way of toxic triad manipulations and control messages, and underinvolvement were seen as hurtful communication by DILs in the current study. DILs also found MILs’ direct (personal attacks) and indirect (third party) messages to be hurtful. The hypotheses assessed below investigate the degree to which these message types affect and reflect relational functioning.

In the first hypothesis, we proposed that different hurtful messages (i.e., types) would help to explain varying levels of hurt. A oneway ANOVA with type as the independent variable and degree of hurt as the dependent variables was used to test H1. Neither supra- nor subtypes of hurtful messages predicted differences in degree of hurt (subtype, $F [6, 123] = 0.42$, n.s.; supratype, $F [3, 126] = 0.81$, n.s.). H1 was not supported.

The second hypothesis predicted that DIL’s satisfaction with the MIL would be negatively associated with two variables pertaining to the hurtful message: the degree to which the DIL made internal attributions for her MIL’s hurtful communication and the degree of hurt DIL reported. Through a standard multiple regression of the 124 participants who completed all closed-ended measures, the hypothesis was partially supported. The degree to which DIL attribution ratings for MIL messages were internal was a significant negative predictor of DIL satisfaction with the MIL ($\beta = -0.61$; $p < 0.001$), accounting for 47% of the variation in DIL satisfaction with the MIL; $F(2, 122) = 55.32$, $p < 0.01$. However, hurtfulness was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.12$; n.s.). In sum, regarding the DIL/MIL relationship, results support attribution biases, but do not support a hurtfulness-dissatisfaction link. H2 was partially supported.

In the third hypothesis, we predicted that the DILs’ relational satisfaction with husbands differs based on DILs’ perceptions of both spousal attribution similarity and the importance of spousal attribution similarity. The model was significant, $F(2, 116) = 10.60$, $p < 0.001$, and accounted for 16% of the variance in marital satisfaction. Spousal attribution similarity was a significant positive predictor of DILs’ reported marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). The importance of that similarity ($\beta = -0.06$; n.s.), however, was not a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. H3 was partially supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine an aspect of negative communication that characterizes the MIL/DIL relationship to understand how DILs experience and make sense of hurt in the in-law triad and how those attributional processes relate to relationship satisfaction. Several types of hurtful messages emerged from DILs' reports of their MILs' behavior, some of which correspond with previous literature and some of which offer new insights. All categories paint a more vivid picture of the ways in which DILs perceive MIL communication. In line with previous research using attribution theory, the communication of hurt in the MIL/DIL relationship appears to be subject to distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing attribution biases well documented in marital bonds. Further, the importance of similarity shown in previous attribution and broader couple research was also evident in this new domain of spousal similarity in attributions for MIL's hurtful behavior. In what follows, we discuss these results alongside several implications and directions for attribution theories and in-law/marital dynamics.

In line with previous research on hurtful messages in other relationship types (Vangelisti, 1994), DILs largely experience hurt through feelings of devaluation. Specifically, DILs reported hurt when their MILs degraded their personal experience and removed her from "familial" activities. The nature of MIL devaluation in the current study, however, reveals idiosyncrasies about the relationship that suggest an extension of hurtful message theorizing. More specifically, the current findings show that MIL messages also inflict hurt through third parties. DILs report hurt when MILs harm the people DILs love, as shown most obviously in this study's *third party* supratype and in previous research in the form of "negative spouse-MIL relationship" and "negative grandparent-grandchild relationship" (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). MILs also hurt DILs by attacking DILs' roles *with* those third parties, by directly (e.g., personal attack message type) or indirectly (e.g., overinvolvement) communicating that the DIL is an insufficient mother or wife. These are all consistent with previous DIL reports of interference (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). Though these message types reflect previous MIL/DIL literature, this "third party pathway" presents an avenue of inflicting hurt beyond those frequently documented in family/friend contexts (e.g., Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

When the emergent hurtful messages were assessed to determine differences in the hurt they incited in DILs, no significant differences emerged. This non-significant finding may be explained by the idiosyncratic nature of MIL/DIL bonds. MILs and DILs do not (directly) choose one another and have little to no relational history before becoming family. The non-voluntary nature of the relationship, alongside society's negative stereotypes of MILs (Adler, Denmark et al., 1989), might lead DILs to perceive that MIL/DIL relationships are less meaningful than those with spouses and children. The *hurtfulness* of certain types of MIL messages may, therefore, not be as consequential to DILs' relational satisfaction. Alternatively, the MIL/DIL relationship might be so charged that DILs perceive all types of hurtful messages

as hurtful rather than distinguishing between the nuances of different forms of hurtful communication.

Though the findings did not demonstrate that the hurtfulness of the message had an impact on relational quality, partial support for the second hypothesis suggests that this satisfaction is linked to DIL attributions. Support for distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing biases within the MIL/DIL context contributes to attribution theorizing and family research. Consistent with findings from dissatisfied married couples' (Holtsworth-Munroe & Jacobsen, 1985), the more DILs attributed the cause of MIL's hurtfulness to internal qualities, the less satisfied DILs were with their relationships, while those making more external attributions were more satisfied. Given that in-law relationships are quite different from the spousal bonds in which the attribution/satisfaction link is most frequently shown to occur, our findings enhance the utility of this hypothesis across relationship forms.

Unfortunately, this may not bode well for in-laws given the highly stereotyped, involuntary, unavoidable nature of their relationship. Cross-culturally, there is a negative bias against mothers-in-law (Adler, Davis et al., 1989), suggesting that DILs may enter this relationship expecting discord. These negative attitudes can then lead to the type of negative attribution/communication cycle characteristic of distress-maintaining spouses wherein negative views of marriage perpetuate negative interactions which in turn confirm original negative perceptions (Baucom et al., 1996). Because of the involuntary nature of the relationship, DILs might find it even more difficult to break this cycle. Moving forward, we might aim to shift public perceptions of the MIL/DIL relationship to induce more positive relationship outlooks that might put in-laws on the right footing, potentially leading to more relationship-enhancing attribution trajectories.

In the current study, we were also interested in how DILs perceived similarity with the way their husbands explained MILs hurtful behavior and how those comparisons of attributions related to marital satisfaction. Our findings extend the empirical trend linking marital satisfaction to perceived similarity in partner's cognitions. Specifically, support for the links between spousal attribution agreement and marital satisfaction were significant. In this way, DILs who felt they were "on the same page" with their husbands were also more satisfied than those perceiving opposing perceptions. Thus, consistent with research on communicated perspective-taking (Koenig Kellas, Trees, Schrodtt, LeClair-Underberg, & Willer, 2010; Koenig Kellas, Willer, & Trees, 2013), similarity seems to affect and reflect feelings of relational efficacy, which may be particularly important in a complicated relational triad. Future research should investigate attributions of both husbands and wives, particularly based on research which suggests that spouses are largely inaccurate in their identification of each other's thoughts (e.g., Ickes, Marangoni, & Garcia, 1997), to test whether or not perceived similarity is more important than actual similarity, as is shown in previous marital research. Finally, as it adds specificity to broader trends linking in-law problems and marriage problems (e.g., Bryant et al., 2001), this finding might help practitioners to better counsel couples on the importance of shared sense-making.

Given that similarity was predictive of husband-wife satisfaction in the current study of MIL-targeted attributions, we believe future research on the communication about MIL hurt between spouses is warranted. As Manusov and her colleagues propose (Manusov & Koenig, 2001; Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008), researchers should focus on the communication *of* attributions. We propose that DIL's satisfaction with spousal communication *about* hurtful MIL behavior might be integral to her feelings about the hurtful situation as well as both relationships. This would complement Song and Zhang's findings that DIL marital and in-law satisfaction were connected to husband's conflict style during in-law related conflicts (Song & Zhang, 2012). This suggests that DILs are troubled when their husbands do not communicate *with* or *about* the MIL in a way that is consistent with the DIL's desires. Moreover, satisfying spousal communication is linked to positive relationship- and partner-based affect (Hecht & Seleno, 1985; Hecht, Sereno, & Spitzberg, 1984). A couple's satisfaction with a discussion about a hurtful MIL message might buffer DIL's hurt feelings or even help her to see the situation from a new perspective. Thus, communication about hurt and about attributions might be the key to helping couples—even those who disagree—manage problems with extended family.

Limitations and Conclusions

In addition to the aforementioned suggestions for future research, we urge scholars to address our limitations. First, our participants did not report the commonality or frequency of these hurtful interactions (i.e., “how typical is this type of message from your MIL?”), nor did we assess components of the communication preceding these hurtful events that might have gauged more about their prominence. Second, the study was also limited by its sample of wives who were highly satisfied with their marriages. Aforementioned research suggests that highly *dissatisfied* wives may have different in-law relationships and family-related dynamics (though there is evidence that in-law problems cause wives' marital dissatisfaction, not the inverse [Bryant et al., 2001]), including those addressed herein. As seen in the dynamic distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing marital literature, a broader sample of wives might serve more elaborate analyses of spousal/in-law dynamics. A third limitation is a failure to capture everyday communication (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991) and relational factors that existed prior to the hurtful message. A characterizing feature of hurtful messages is the sender's damage to the (receiver's perceived) closeness of the relationship (Vangelisti, 1994). Though we assessed DIL's satisfaction at the time she recalled the event, we have no measure of her closeness before she was hurt. Given that family hurtful messages can elicit more hurt than those holding non-family status (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998) and given that DILs varying consideration of in-laws *as* family has consequences for their relationship (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011; Morr Serewicz, Hosmer, Ballard, & Griffin, 2008; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009), our limitation might best be addressed through measuring degree to which DILs “felt like family” with their MILs before and after the hurtful event occurred. In addition to these limitations, we only assessed DILs' perspectives. Researchers should assess the

perspectives of multiple family members using analytic procedures such as hierarchical linear modeling to better understand individual and relational contributions to variance. Such adjustments might enhance in-law communication, hurtful message, and attribution scholarly domains.

Despite these limitations, the current study illuminated components of MIL hurtful messages to DILs and successfully revealed the importance of two long-standing marital trends within the new context of the in-law triad. The first of these is the relationship-enhancing and distress-maintaining attribution biases; the second is the predictive power of perceived attribution similarity (within the marriage) on wives' marital satisfaction. Future research should compare the attributions of all members of the in-law triad in order to better understand the cognitive and communicative processes by which members of this complicated family triangle negotiate hurt and harmony.

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