

2012

## **Advice in troubles talk conversations between strangers: the role of problem seriousness and the impact of advice on helper supportiveness and the desire for future interactions**

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ADVICE IN TROUBLES TALK CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN STRANGERS:  
THE ROLE OF PROBLEM SERIOUSNESS AND THE IMPACT OF ADVICE ON  
HELPER SUPPORTIVENESS AND THE DESIRE FOR FUTURE INTERACTIONS

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
Andrea Jean Vickery  
B.S., Chapman University, 2005  
August 2012

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, David and Patricia Koepke; and my husband, Zachary Vickery. I am forever grateful for your love, support, and encouragement.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Graham Bodie. I would like to thank Dr. Bodie for selecting me to be his research assistant on the Board of Regents grant. He has taught me so very much, and I am grateful to have him as a mentor, friend and advisor.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Loretta Pecchioni and Dr. James M. Honeycutt. Dr. Pecchioni has provided me with useful and applicable advice about writing and graduate school, and she has made me laugh at times when humor was needed! Dr. Honeycutt has always made me feel welcome in his office, encouraging my frequent questions about everything from Imagined Interactions, statistics, and LSU football.

I would like to thank Dr. Erina MacGeorge and Dr. Daena J. Goldsmith. Without Dr. MacGeorge's advice manual, this project would not have been able to be completed. Dr. Goldsmith's insight about advice at NCA helped me conceptualize this thesis project.

I am inevitably drawn to supportive communication research because of the support provided by my friends and loved ones. In no order, particular thank you to: Zach Vickery, David & Patricia Koepke, Mary May Aicher (and Riley, Zach, and Casey), Ashley Cunningham, Ted & Diana Cunningham, Lena Marie Bethell, Bill & Kori Kelso, Crystal Tran, Emily Smilor, Kim Cashin, John & Ingrid Blanchette, Carly Watanabe, Mr. Marvin, Sugar Magnolia, God, Helena Nguyen, Colby Mitchell, Timothy J. Rodes, Michael Melilli, Shaughan Keaton, Christopher Gearhart, Liz Sills, Mike Rold, Laura Hatcher, Michelle Pence, the Veggie Vixens (Carol, Erin, Jordan, Zara, Allie, Erica, Mary, Mel, Erika, Sarah, and Jen), Heather Durbin, Katelyn Vickery, Frau Heather Ter-Jung, Lynne Doti, Donna Sparks, Lisa Landry, the Communication Studies Department at LSU, my trivia friends, my former coworkers at Bank of America, and the community of Chapman University.

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## **Abstract**

In troubles talk conversations, problems are disclosed and discussed. When responding to problem disclosures, advice is one common response where the respondent recommends how to think, feel or act in response to a problem. This thesis focuses on extending our understanding of advice messages, with a main research question focused on determining if advice occurs in initial interactions between strangers. Through an analysis of 125 transcribed conversations, advice was present in 38.4% ( $n = 44$ ) of the conversations. Advice was offered in response to less serious problems, supporting the first hypothesis. There was no support found for the positive association between the presence of advice and positive evaluations of helpfulness; additionally, there was no support found for a negative association between the presence of advice and negative evaluations of supportiveness or sensitivity. Finally, no difference was found supporting a decreased desire to interact further with an advice giver. While advice occurs in initial interactions, there may be additional influences beyond the provision of advice messages influencing helper evaluations of supportiveness and the desire for future interactions.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Through our interactions with others, we accomplish important social goals. Although interlocutors co-construct and meet a variety of goals in these interactions (perhaps even meeting multiple goals in a single conversation), one of the more prevalent interaction goals is understanding and making sense of upsetting events. Indeed, everyday talk is filled with the disclosure of and response to personal and relational problems (Lewis & Manusov, 2009). Coined “troubles talk” (Jefferson, 1980) and focused on the prevalence of general problems beyond those specific to a given relationship, this element of social interaction is important not only for its prevalence in our everyday interactions, but also because a troubles talk interaction contains and informs us about basic communication processes and structures such as message reception and processing (Bodie & Burleson, 2008) and interaction coordination (Goldsmith, 2000).

When responding to a conversational partner’s upsetting situations and problems, one common type of response is advice, or “recommendations about what might be thought, said, or done to manage a problem” (MacGeorge, Feng & Thompson, 2008, p. 150). Due to the ubiquity of advice, previous research has explored the role of facework on advice messages (Goldsmith, 2000; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, Budarz, 2004), the efficacy of advice messages (MacGeorge, et al., 2004), as well as characteristics of advice providers and recipients (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Combined, such research has advanced our knowledge regarding, for instance, the message features that constitute “good” and “bad” advice (MacGeorge, 2008) and the situational contexts, including the relationship between partners, that cause recipients to view advice messages more (or less) favorably (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006). Additionally, the study of advice has led to advancements in our

understanding of basic features of human communication such as message processing and outcomes (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010) as well as message sequencing and coordination (Feng, 2009). Finally, given the conceptualization of advice containing elements of both persuasive and supportive discourse, its study can help promote “creative cross-fertilization” in interpersonal communication scholarship more generally (Bodie, in press). Indeed, the study of advice opens up a variety of important theoretical and practical issues for communication scholars and practitioners alike.

However productive the study of advice has been to date, it is not a closed book. As reviewed by MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011), the study of advice as a communicative phenomenon is in its infancy and thus ripe for the empirical and theoretical picking. One area of unexplored interest is the natural occurrence of advice messages in troubles talk conversations (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). To date, most of our knowledge about advice is predicated on particular methodological paradigms (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). In these popular methodological paradigms, participants either evaluate researcher-generated messages, or “participants provide retrospective self-reports regarding ‘helpful’ and ‘unhelpful’ messages they have received from others” (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 389). Although both methodological paradigms have recognized strengths and have generated theoretically important findings on advice, neither is well suited for studying advice as it occurs during troubles talk conversations.

Studies utilizing the laboratory setting have had great success in extending other lines of supportive communication research, such as Jones and Guerrero’s (2001) observations of verbal person centeredness and nonverbal immediacy in response to emotionally distressing events in conversations, and Jones’s (2004) examination of these constructs in relation to

comforting message outcomes. The methodological advantages and gains from this type of research should be extended to other areas of supportive communication research, including advice research. Duck and Montgomery (1991) argue, “the purpose of interaction research is to change the knowledge base, ideally by increasing it” (p. 11). There are strong methodological reasons why it is important to study advice in naturalistic conversations, in hopes of extending and increasing the knowledge base for advice messages.

Theoretically, this study recognizes an important underlying premise of social support; that is, “support-seeking and support-giving acts occur in interactions” (Albrecht, Burleson, & Goldsmith, 1994, p.438), and focuses on advice as it occurs in a troubles talk conversation. The problems discussed in troubles talk are “unique from conversations in which participants discuss problems in relationships” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 4), and focus instead on other problems experienced by an individual in his or her day-to-day life (e.g., personal finances, academic problems, job-related problems), where advice may be a welcomed or expected response as we disclose these problems to others.

The context of troubles talk conversations is familiar because we frequently engage in this type of conversation in our everyday lives, sharing our problems with those in our social network. Feng (2009) proposes the practical necessity that “we study advice as it occurs in the boarder supportive communication context” (p. 116), and the troubles talk conversation is one context where advice occurs. Practically speaking, the findings from this thesis may be more generalizable to our own conversational experiences more so than focusing on advice messages that are removed from the context of conversation. Additionally, Barnes and Duck (1994) recommend, “it is necessary to consider more rigorously the import of everyday

discourse” (p. 191). Thus, this thesis heeds both theoretical and practical recommendations for the study of advice as it occurs in troubles talk conversations.

Also of theoretical and practical importance for this thesis and the study of advice is the type of relationships represented in troubles talk conversations. Studies frequently examine advice as it occurs between friends (e.g., Clark, MacGeorge, & Robinson, 2008; Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), and may use the frequency of advice in relationships as evidence of the ubiquity of advice across all types of interactions. Naturally occurring advice messages occur between married partners (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994), lending some support for the claim of ubiquity, but this claim remains largely untested in other types of relationships. If advice is truly ubiquitous, it should occur even among less acquainted partners. There is an opportunity to test claims of ubiquity of advice by focusing on the interactions of strangers engaged in troubles talk conversations, as these interactions provide an environment where advice may likely be exchanged.

The focus on strangers is not without its warrant: indeed, practical recommendations stemming from research claim “advice should be given sparingly in interactions with strangers and acquaintances” (MacGeorge, et al., 2008, p.150). Most likely this recommendation draws only from the influence of relational closeness on evaluations of advice messages (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), as there have been no empirical studies directly examining the impact of advice messages on interactions with strangers. Also, this recommendation recognizes impressions of potential relational partners are formed in initial interactions, and the messages exchanged in initial interactions may influence our evaluations of a potential relational partner. While the role of relational closeness cannot be ignored, it remains only one potential influence on our evaluations of advice messages and the

conversational partners who offer advice. In disclosing problems, “distressed people will take their troubles to anyone who will listen: a family member, friend, neighbor, formal or informal caregiver,” (Cowen, Gesten, Boike, Norton, Wilson, & Destafno, 1979, p. 636), and certainly, in the right environment, a stranger who is willing and able to listen becomes a likely conversational partner, despite the weak ties (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1984) and type of personal disclosure (e.g., Vanlear, 1984) between conversational partners. This thesis provides an opportunity to provide empirical support for this practical recommendation by first examining how frequent advice is in staged initial interactions and how the presence of advice impacts evaluations of our conversational partners. For the methodological, theoretical and practical reasons mentioned, this thesis explores the provision of advice messages in troubles talk conversations between strangers.

With a focus on the interactions between strangers in initial interactions, my thesis will first examine if advice is offered in response to troubles talk conversations, and how the presence of advice may impact subsequent evaluations of a conversational partner. Through this contribution, I hope to bring attention to the role of advice messages in evaluations of a conversational partner who offers (or does not offer) advice to a partner during troubles talk conversations. In this thesis, my contributions can be outlined in the following chapters: Chapter 2 provides a selective review of the advice research to date in order to propose one comprehensive research question and three hypotheses. Chapter 3 details the collection methods and measures utilized in this thesis. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data analysis. Chapter 5 discusses the results in light of the theoretical and practical contributions to advice scholarship and supportive behaviors in initial interactions and summarizes the thesis in its entirety.

## **Chapter 2: Advice as Supportive Communication**

In the field of communication, advice is most generally conceptualized as a compliance gaining strategy used primarily in supportive conversations (Bodie, in press). Within conversations where the primary goal is to express and make sense of upsetting or distressing events, advice messages attempt to gain the compliance of an individual who is seen as needing assistance figuring out some course of corrective action for a particular problem (Wilson, 2002). Yet, advice can also be categorized as a component of supportive communication, which incorporates all of the “verbal and nonverbal behavior intended to provide or seek help” (MacGeorge, Feng & Burleson, 2011, p. 323). This thesis focuses on the provision of advice as a support message intended to help and respond to a problem disclosed in troubles talk conversation, rather than a persuasive message intended to gain compliance or provide corrective action.

Most generally, support messages can be categorized based on their focus. Whereas some messages provide primarily emotional support – lines of communicative action with the intent of reducing emotional distress, focusing on the feelings or emotions of the help seeker – other messages provide primarily instrumental support, focusing on the aspects or characteristics of the problem impacting the help seeker. Emotional and instrumental support responses recognize “changing cognitive and behavioral efforts” involved in the coping process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141). Extended from that context, it makes sense that some messages are more likely to influence emotion-focused coping, where a helper’s goal is to “improve the affect state and functioning of the target” (Burleson, 2003, p. 553), while other messages are more likely to influence problem-focused coping, where a helper’s goal is to “solve or eliminate the problem” causing the target’s distress (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) with

the acknowledgement that these two processes are not fully mutually exclusive or exhaustive of the possibilities in a supportive conversation.<sup>1</sup>

Problem-focused support, or instrumental support, includes problem inquiry, or questions focused on a specific problem, as well as advice, or recommendations focused on what to do, say, or feel in response to the specific problem (e.g., Feng, 2009). Considerable research has been devoted to the other behaviors associated with the broader phenomenon of supportive communication, especially specific lines of verbal (e.g., Burleson, 1994a; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., Jones & Guerrero, 2001) that help people deal with problematic emotions, but research focused on advice continues as a distinct domain of supportive communication. Advice research is primarily motivated by the fact that advice can both help and hinder the process of feeling better about a particular problem (e.g., MacGeorge & Feng, 2010; Young, 2010). Whether it helps or hurts is a function of numerous variables, several classes of which are explored in the next few sections.

### **What makes for “Good” or “Bad” Advice**

Like other forms of supportive communication, research on advice focuses primarily on specific ways in which support providers can structure their advice messages for maximum effectiveness with effectiveness primarily defined in terms of positive evaluations of the advice provider (or advice giver) and the advice message, as well as the likelihood of

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<sup>1</sup> Other forms of support beyond instrumental or emotional support include tangible assistance, esteem support, and network support (e.g., Shaefer, Coyne & Lazarus, 1981; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). The most basic distinction in the literature is between emotion- and problem-focused coping, thus my focus on defining these terms versus all types of support. I acknowledge that a supportive conversation (and any given supportive utterance from that conversation) might meet multiple support goals, but the distinction between instrumental and emotional support is necessary for situating and defining advice.

implementing the advice (MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011). In other words, “good,” or effective, advice messages are positively evaluated in terms of the feasibility, efficacy, and ease of implementation (Feng, 2009) of the message, whereas “bad” advice messages are seen as less effective (MacGeorge, et al., 2008). Through the collective findings on advice, “good” advice also implicitly (Goldsmith, 2000) and explicitly recognizes the relationship (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006) between the advice provider and advice recipient and focuses on controllable problems (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). In contrast, “bad” advice does not take into account the appropriateness of advice or an individual’s desire for advice (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007).

The following sections provide a summary of work to date on advice features including facework, general advice message content, advice provider characteristics and advice recipient characteristics. While these features have contributed to the overall recognition of “good” and “bad” advice messages, the contributions and findings of facework, advice message content, advice provider characteristics, advice recipient characteristics and problem are important for understanding advice in initial interactions and the impact of advice on evaluations of an advice provider.

**Face and facework.** Within the study of the features of advice messages, initial research focused on the presence of facework as one specific characteristic of advice messages. The facework framework emerged from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Brown & Levinson, 1987) and is defined as “communication designed to create, support, enhance, or challenge” another’s face (Miczo & Burgoon, 2008, p. 247) or another’s “public-self image” (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 66). In the context of advice research, facework is recognized as “a relational-level characteristic of advice messages, conveying



information about the identities, roles and relationships of advice givers and recipients” (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, 2004, p. 62). Perceived regard for face is a significant predictor of the perceived effectiveness of an advice message (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000), and evaluations of advice messages that include facework are rated more positively than blunt advice messages, or those messages not taking face into consideration (MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Pressey, 2002).

Facework in advice messages has been explored in depth (Goldsmith, 1994; Goldsmith, 1999; Goldsmith, 2000), and, as an advice characteristic, facework inherently recognizes the relationship between advice provider and recipient. Without concern for face, a bald-on-record advice messages such as, “Pat, join Gym for Life” (Goldsmith, 2008, p.257), contains advice but does not recognize the relationship. In comparison, a detailed advice message such as, “Look, I know I’m about the last person to give health advice, but I wondered if maybe you’d considered possibly, you know, joining a gym?” (Goldsmith, 2008, p.257), is an on-record advice message containing negative face redress where the advice provider states the advice without presuming or imposing on the advice recipient. One noted limitation of this framework, however, is that by focusing on a relational level characteristic, research in the facework framework is “overlooking the fact that advice messages recommend particular actions and may be evaluated on the basis of this content” (MacGeorge, et al, 2004, p. 43). In other words, facework strategies are overly broad, and the research tends to ignore specific ways in which advice messages vary to influence outcomes. Consequently, following the foundation of facework, additional research has focused on characterizing the specific content of advice messages.

**Advice message content.** Additional characteristics of advice messages examined in previous research have included the persuasiveness of the advice message, the explicit argumentation present in an advice message, and the timing of advice messages relative to emotional support and problem inquiry. First, the examination of the persuasiveness of the advice message recognizes the inherent similarities between advice messages and persuasive messages as advice advocates recommended proposals (Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994). Based on the shared similarities, four dimensions of stock issues analysis, drawn from research on persuasion, have been identified as part of advice messages: comprehensibility, feasibility, relevance, and the absence of limitations (MacGeorge, et al, 2004). Of these characteristics, absence of limitations in the advice given has been found to influence the perceived sufficiency of support, while the usefulness and feasibility of the advice message have been found to affect sufficiency of support, coping facilitation and the intention to implement the advice (MacGeorge, et al, 2004).

Second, Feng and Burleson (2008) examined the explicitness, or the presentation of “the underlying premise or information that supports a position” (p.853), present in advice messages, building upon the research on the feasibility of advice (MacGeorge, et al., 2004). Advice messages that articulate the efficacy, feasibility, and absence of limitations of the recommended action are perceived more positively than messages where these characteristics are not explicitly articulated (Feng & Burleson, 2008).

Lastly, the research on advice message features has been extended to focus on the timing of advice messages relative to problem inquiry and emotional support (Feng, 2009). While this focus is not a specifically identifiable feature like the presence or absence of facework or argument explicitness, the placement of advice extends research on the features

of advice by recognizing advice as one possible response in a supportive conversation where more general emotional support also occurs (see Goldsmith, 1999). Advice that follows emotional support (rather than before or without emotional support), and advice offered after problem inquiry (rather than before problem inquiry), were both evaluated more positively, signifying that in addition to specific features, the timing of advice in a conversation also matters (Feng, 2009).

**Advice provider characteristics.** In addition to advice message features (e.g., efficacy, explicitness, timing), characteristics of the advice provider also have been recognized for their influence on the evaluation of advice messages. The characteristics of relational closeness and expertise are highly influential for advice message evaluation (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006). First, when an advice provider is not perceived as “sufficiently close,” his or her advice is not perceived as caring; instead it is interpreted as inappropriate (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997, p. 464). Second, providers’ “knowledge and expertise relevant to the problematic situation” (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006, p.69) also influences evaluations of advice messages. Expertise, similar to relational closeness, is a positive predictor of receptiveness to advice (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006). Individuals who offer advice but lack expertise have been evaluated as “butting in,” with advice messages perceived as criticism (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997, p. 463). Certainly, these characteristics of advice providers can enhance the advice message; conversely, individuals who craft an efficacious advice message containing facework, explicit argumentation, and efficacy may not be received as positively if they are not a perceived expert or sufficiently close to the advice recipient.

Advice messages exchanged between strangers have not been directly examined in advice research. The lack of a close relationship may influence evaluations of advice

messages and advice providers. Strangers who take the time to establish credibility before providing advice not be evaluated as negatively as strangers who simply offer advice.

**Advice recipient characteristics.** Advice messages are a product of the advice provider, and as such, prior advice research has focused more on understanding characteristics influencing the recipients' evaluations of the source and content of advice messages, rather than characteristics specific to the advice recipient. In consideration of the advice recipient, research has identified one characteristic essential for evaluating and understanding advice messages: the recipient's need, or desire, for advice. For example, advice is consistently viewed as unhelpful to bereaved individuals (Lehman, Ellard & Wortman, 1986; Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007).

**Problem characteristics.** The problem experienced by the advice recipient has been examined as an independent contributor to the evaluation of advice and is very important to the study of advice: without a problem, there is no need to provide advice. Initial research from instrumental support suggests informational support including advice "should be more salient for controllable problems" (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Subsequent research found that in married couples, the controllability of a problem was a positive predictor of the frequency of instrumental support offered to a spouse (Cutrona & Russell, 1992). The controllability of a problem is important, as advice is considered more effective when it is free from limitations (e.g., MacGeorge, et al., 2004). One major limitation may be the ability for a help seeker to take action on the problem. For example, problems with mandated policies from a different division at a large corporation are less controllable than problems with a direct supervisor or subordinate employee. Focused advice research has since researched the role of additional problem characteristics.

Two additional characteristics included in recent advice research are problem severity, or seriousness, and problem responsibility. Problem seriousness and the advice recipient's responsibility for the problem were found to be the "poorest predictors of receptiveness to advice" (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006, p. 79). Additional research focused solely on the role of problem seriousness as it moderates advice respondent, or source, factors and outcome evaluations (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), instead of only focusing on the receptiveness to the advice. In this study, the authors found that as problem seriousness increased, source factors (e.g., expertise, liking, similarity, trustworthiness of the advice respondent) had a larger impact on the evaluation of advice quality, facilitation of coping, and intention to implement advice (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010). With more serious problems, advice recipient characteristics have a greater impact on the recipient's evaluations of advice. These evaluations also impact coping, implementation and evaluations of the quality of the advice message. Similar to other characteristics of advice messages, problem characteristics represent the complexity present in advice messages, especially as related to "good" and "bad" advice messages.

**Summary.** Advice messages are one type of instrumental support present in a supportive interaction, with identified characteristics pertaining to the advice message, advice provider, advice recipient, and the disclosed problem. This introduction is important as it provides the necessary background to frame advice messages as one form of supportive communication, and describe particular aspects of advice messages that may be especially important when advice is exchanged between strangers in experimental troubles talk conversations. The specific research questions and hypotheses of this thesis project focused on this context are now presented.

## **The Current Study**

As implied in the opening paragraph, our daily conversations occur with a variety of individuals, each with unique characteristics, propensities, and conversational goals. When we engage in troubles talk, advice and instrumental support is frequently offered from our conversational partners (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994), and our receptiveness towards advice can vary depending on how close we are to a particular conversational partner and that partner's expertise with our current problem (e.g., Feng & MacGeorge, 2006). Sometimes advice, even from a close relational partner, is not a welcomed response (Jones & Petronio, 2006). The seriousness of a problem also influences how we evaluate advice, how we cope with the problem, and if we intend to implement the advice received (e.g., Feng & MacGeorge, 2010).

MacGeorge and her associates (2008) ultimately suggest "advice should be given sparingly in interactions with strangers and acquaintances" (p.150). While this statement is likely appropriate based on prior findings focused on relational closeness, it does not mean that this recommendation is always considered in our interactions with others. In the marketplace, strangers provide advice to other shoppers to assist with decision-making (McGrath & Otnes, 1995); message board visitors provide unsolicited advice to other visitors (Vayreda & Antaki, 2009); and students offer solicited and unsolicited advice to each other about a range of academic and non-academic topics (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Ruble, 2011). As a result, it is possible that social support can come from a variety of partners, including strangers (e.g., Smith & Goodnow, 1999). Each of us likely has a story or anecdote that involves a stranger sharing troubles on an airplane, in a bar, or in other social settings that all but force us to interact with individuals we may or may not know and with whom we may or

may not have the chance to interact again to develop a deeper relationship (e.g., conferences, workshops). If there are initial interactions that provide a conversational setting conducive to the enactment of some form of supportive communication, it is entirely possible that strangers in these initial interactions provide advice despite practical recommendations and academic research suggesting otherwise.

Although this reasoning is largely ampliative, it is not completely void of empirical warrant. At least one study hints at this possibility (Smith & Goodnow, 1999): when asked to report incidents of unsolicited advice and unasked-for support, participants identified a stranger as the source 14% of the time. Based on this finding, as well as the broader findings focused on advice messages, advice givers, and advice recipients outlined in this chapter's introduction, the general research question driving this thesis focuses on further investigating the occurrence of advice in the context of an interaction between strangers conducive to the enactment of supportive communication:

RQ1: In an initial interaction where strangers engage in a troubles talk conversation, how often (if at all) does advice occur as a response to a problem disclosure?

When individuals disclose a problem, this disclosure “is a vehicle for obtaining social support that might not be available if other people did not know about one's difficulties” (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993, p. 111). In troubles talk disclosures, information about a problem is shared, and certain characteristics about this problem are important for understanding when advice is (or is not) offered in an initial interaction. One characteristic of interest is the severity, or seriousness, of the problem. In relation to the proposed research question, the severity of the problem disclosed may relate to the provision of advice in a troubles talk conversation. In supportive interactions, “just as the help seeker's

self-esteem is at risk when he or she presents a problem, the help giver's self-esteem is challenged when he or she attempts to provide an effective solution or to relieve distress" (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995, p. 399). Problem respondents may be internally motivated to offer specific responses to problems due to the concern of self-esteem, especially in an initial interaction where impression formation occurs. The disclosure of a less serious problem presents a reduced risk to self-esteem: in other words, strangers may be more likely to provide advice in response to a less serious problem due to his or her own concern for self-esteem. Formally, the first hypothesis of this thesis project is:

H1: Advice is more likely to occur in conversations where the problem disclosed is less serious.

Situating this study in the context of supportive interactions between strangers also opens up the opportunity to expand on previous advice research by approaching and studying advice from a different methodological paradigm. In particular, the interaction analysis paradigm focuses "on conversations between pairs of participants ... in a laboratory during which one discusses a current stressor and the other responds" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 390). One of the strengths of this paradigm is that it affords "quasi-natural support interactions" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 390), with the ability to code for "instances of specific behaviors" (p. 390); in this study, the specific behavior is the provision of unscripted advice to a partner disclosing a problem in a laboratory setting. Additionally, the application of this research paradigm allows for the use of "measures that tap a range of outcomes" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 390), opening up opportunities for evaluation of a variety of advice related outcomes, including evaluations of the advice giver. While this approach is not commonly used in advice studies likely due to the time and commitment involved in data



collection, based on the design and overall merits of the interaction analysis paradigm it is the appropriate approach for the interests germane to the current study.

In addition to allowing for the natural occurrence of supportive behavior specifically including advice (and the subsequent coding of that behavior) the methodological choice made in the present study also affords an ability to advance our understanding of how advice is used to evaluate conversational partners. Recalling the presence of advice in both supportive and persuasive contexts, it is important to note “relationships are an implicit basis for much persuasion” (Duck, 1998, p. 128). In supportive conversations between strangers, individuals may be particularly attuned to advice not only due to a partner’s desire to offer help, but also due to a partner’s desire to influence outcomes, as advice is one form of persuasion (Cody, Canary & Smith, 1994; MacGeorge, et al., 2004). In evaluating a supportive interaction, “participants’ evaluations of troubles talk conversations are an important conceptual link between enacted social support and individual and relational outcomes” (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000, p. 370). The presence of advice messages may in turn influence these individual and relational outcomes.

The primary interest for this thesis is whether the presence of advice influences how individuals evaluate the supportiveness of their conversational partner. MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011) observe, “sometimes supportive communication efforts are so inept or injurious that one must wonder if they were genuinely intended to help” (p. 239). Statements such as “I think you ought to get over it” (Holstrom, Burleson, & Jones, 2005, p. 165), encourage help seekers to forget or minimize feelings about a particular problem, and do not recognize the help seeker’s experience. Advice messages can be “good” or “bad” (MacGeorge, et al., 2008), but both types of messages should be considered attempts at

supportive communication with different outcome evaluations. According to Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander (2000), supportive communication can range in *helpfulness*, or problem-solving utility; *supportiveness*, or relational assurance; and *sensitivity*, or emotional awareness. The helpfulness dimension may be especially important for conversations containing advice messages. Goldsmith and her associates argue, “the perceived helpfulness of advice is influenced by how the advice is given and its symbolic implications for identity and relationship” (2004, p. 58), supporting the continued research paradigm of facework in conjunction with advice messages, as well as the evaluation of advice messages as either helpful, or unhelpful, when offered as a response in conversations.

Most notable in recognizing the dimensions of supportiveness is the appreciation that the provision of support may be considered ultimately helpful, but not necessarily sensitive or supportive. Giving advice could be a natural response, as “helpers may experience a pressure to *fix* the other’s distress by telling him or her what to think, do, or feel” (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 270, italics in original). This type of supportive response differs from comforting messages that “bring about a lessening of emotional distress” (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 247), rather than trying to fix the source of the distress. Advice messages may not effectively recognize the emotional distress caused by a problem, as they are focused on fixing the source of the emotional distress, or the problem. In the provision of advice, individuals may be evaluated as helpful, but not particularly sensitive or supportive. Based on this logic, then:

H2: There is a positive association between the amount of advice and perceived helpfulness of a supportive conversation, while at the same time a negative association between the amount of advice and both sensitivity and supportiveness.

One final element that may be important to understanding the influence of advice in initial interactions is that in an initial interaction where enacted social support occurs, individuals may also be evaluating their conversational partner based on their potential as a future relational partner. Sillars (1991) argues, “human relationships evolve from, and are, in effect, constituted by specific interactional behaviors” (p. 198). Advice may be one of the specific interactional behaviors that influences how a relationship develops. The potential of a partner’s future as a relational partner (e.g., friend, romantic partner) and as potential source of social support may influence evaluations of partners who offer advice.

Supportiveness provided in an initial interaction may be important for evaluating a partner’s specific potential for providing support as a future relational partner. Burleson (1994b) states, “acts of comforting signal interest, caring, and concern, these acts play a central role in the formation of and development of relationships” (p. 5). Recalling the duality of advice messages as both persuasive and supportive, Bodie (in press) claims, “during initial interactions we are likely primed to look for both supportive and persuasive behaviors and to assess the degree to which these behaviors signal a ‘good’ friend or partner” (p. 19). Albrecht, Burleson and Goldsmith (1994) claim, “some attempts at support do more harm than good” (p. 432): for example, women providing low person centered messages to other women are perceived as less effective (Holstrom, et al., 2005). In an initial interaction where support is given, a supportive response like advice may be one of the attempts at support that negatively harms a desire for a more interpersonal relationship. The impact of advice goes further than the reception of evaluation of an advice message: “the meanings of advice have ramifications not only for how the advice recipient copes with the particular problem for which advice is offered, but also for the advice recipient’s personal identity and relationship

with the advice giver” (Goldsmith, 2004, p.78), and this may include the desire to interact further with the advice giver when advice occurs as part of an initial interaction. Based on a brief review of the importance of conversations on relational development and the importance of advice messages in relationships, a final hypothesis is posited:

H3: There is a negative association between the amount of advice and the desire for future interactions.

Advice, as part of supportive communication, has been studied in relation to features of the advice message, advice giver, and advice recipient. The frequency with which advice occurs in initial interactions has not yet been explored, but may yield interesting findings related to the perceived supportiveness of an individual who provides advice in an initial interaction. Additionally, employing methods centering on advice messages offered in an experimental initial interaction is a natural extension of previous research outlined in this introduction. The methods and results for the research question and three hypotheses are now presented in Chapters 3 and 4, followed by a final chapter containing a discussion of these results.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

This study is part of a larger research project interested in studying listening as a form of supportive communication. The larger project is currently funded by the Louisiana Board of Regents by a Research Competitiveness Subprogram awarded to Dr. Graham D. Bodie, #LEQSF(2011-14)-RD-A-04. The essential procedures are described below along with methods and measures relevant to the goals of this study.

#### **Participants**

Participants ( $N = 250$ ) were students enrolled in a Communication Studies course at Louisiana State University during the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 2011. Participants selected this study from a list of IRB approved studies offered by the Department of Communication Studies and were required to report to the Matchbox Interaction Lab at a specific time as part of their participation. Participants received a small portion of class credit (3% of their course grade) in exchange for their participation, and could only sign up once for this study even if they were enrolled in multiple Communication Studies courses during the span of the semesters.

In addition to the specific study measures, participants voluntarily provided demographic information. Participants were on average 20.84 years of age ( $SD = 4.13$ ). The majority (59.2%) of the participants were female ( $n = 148$ ; 9 missing) and primarily reported a Caucasian race (70.4%) and sophomore status (30.8%). Participants reported their academic program, and all undergraduate academic programs offered by Louisiana State University were represented. Graduate and professional programs were included as selection options, but were not represented in this sample. Table 1 provides the detailed demographic data broken down by conversational roles as described in the study procedures section.

Table 1

*Demographic Information for Participants by Conversational Role*

	Problem Respondent	Problem Discloser
<b>Biological Sex*</b>		
Male	49 (39.2%)	44 (35.2%)
Female	76 (60.8%)	72 (57.6%)
<b>Age</b>		
Mean	20.85	20.82
Standard Deviation	4.30	3.96
Median	20.00	20.00
Mode	19	19
Range	18-52	18-47
<b>Race/Ethnicity**</b>		
African/American	18 (14.40%)	19 (15.20%)
Asian	4 (3.20%)	4 (3.20%)
Caucasian/White	92 (73.60%)	84 (67.20%)
Chicano/Chicana	2 (1.60%)	2 (1.60%)
Hispanic	5 (4.00%)	2 (1.60%)
Latino/Latina	1 (0.80%)	2 (1.60%)
Native American	1 (0.80%)	----
Pacific Islander	1 (0.80%)	1 (0.80%)
“Other”	2 (1.60%)	2 (1.60%)
<b>Year in School</b>		
Freshman	33 (26.40%)	25 (20.00%)
Sophomore	39 (31.20%)	38 (30.40%)
Junior	30 (24.00%)	30 (24.00%)
Senior	23 (18.40%)	23 (18.40%)
Graduate Student	----	----
Non-Degree Seeking	----	----
<b>Academic Program</b>		
Agriculture	9 (7.2%)	9 (7.2%)
Art & Design	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Arts & Sciences	12 (9.6%)	12 (9.6%)
Basic Sciences	10 (8.0%)	8 (6.4%)
Business	38 (30.4%)	29 (23.2%)

*(Table Continues)*

Table 1 (Continued)

*Demographic Information by Conversational Role*

	Problem Respondent	Problem Discloser
<b>Academic Program</b> (continued)		
Coast & Environment	----	----
Continuing Education	----	----
Education	7 (5.6%)	17 (13.6%)
Engineering	11 (8.8%)	11 (8.8%)
Graduate School	----	----
Honors College	1 (0.8%)	----
Library & Info. Sciences	1 (0.8%)	----
Mass Communication	4 (3.2%)	3 (2.4%)
Music & Dramatic Arts	2 (1.6%)	2 (1.6%)
Social Work	----	1 (0.8%)
University College	2 (1.6%)	2 (1.6%)
Veterinary Medicine	2 (1.6%)	----
No Answer	16 (12.8%)	28 (22.4%)
Other (checked) ***	7 (5.6%)	2 (1.6%)
Other (open ended examples)	<i>“General Studies”</i> <i>“Spanish &amp; Psychology”</i>	<i>“Pre-Nursing”</i> <i>“Sports administration”</i>

*Notes:* Participants voluntarily provided all demographic information in addition to survey measures.

\*For Problem Disclosers, 9 individuals did not provide their biological sex.

\*\*For Race/Ethnicity, participants were allowed to select multiple options, including “other.”

\*\*\* For “other” program, some participants only checked the “other” box while others both checked the box and listed their program. Many participants provided the name of his/her major in the open-ended “other” option. Examples are provided for each conversational role.

## Study Procedure

When listed in the electronic bulletin board, the study was entitled “Disclosing and Listening to Upsetting Events.” Each time slot allowed for two random participants to sign up for the same time slot, without seeing the name of the other participant or any other identifying information (See Appendix A). Upon signing up for a time slot, participants received a confirmation email (See Appendix B) and completed a pre-survey that included demographic information and various measures not germane to the current study.

At their appointed time slot, both participants arrived at the laboratory and were greeted by two research assistants. The research assistants verified that participants had arrived for the correct time slot and that the participants did not know each other. Participants were then provided with an IRB approved informed consent form (See Appendix C). After providing written consent, participants were randomly assigned their roles for the conversation by drawing a slip of paper labeled “discloser” ( $n = 125$ ) or “listener,” referred to in this thesis as respondent ( $n = 125$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Once conversational roles were assigned, participants were briefly separated. While separated, the discloser described and evaluated two recent emotional events on a seven-point scale from “not at all emotionally distressing” to “very emotionally distressing” (See Appendix D). The mean score for all provided emotionally distressing problems was a 4.72 ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ,  $Mode = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). The research assistant read through the descriptions for both events, selected one event, and informed the discloser that he or she would be discussing the selected event in the upcoming conversation. For the selected problem, the mean score for the emotionally distressing problem was a 5.11 ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ,  $Mode = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).<sup>3</sup> Table 3.2 provides thematic categories of problem topics and example problem descriptions. Following the event selection, the discloser completed various measures relating to the event and the upcoming conversation; those germane to this study are detailed below.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the name of this study in the electronic bulletin board system, the terms “discloser” and “listener” were used with the participants to explain conversational roles. As such, the term “listener” is introduced here for consistency with the initial study procedures. From this point forward, the term “respondent” or “respondents” is used as this study in place of listener/listeners as this thesis focuses on advice as a possible response from the participants assigned to the listening role and does not measure or evaluate listening.

<sup>3</sup> There was a statistically significant difference in the rating of problem seriousness between all problems ( $M = 4.72$ ) and the selected problem ( $M = 5.11$ ),  $t = 2.49$ ,  $df = 373$ ,  $p < .001$ .



During this time, the respondent was completing various individual measures and measures related to the upcoming conversation (none of which are relevant to the current study) while supervised by the second research assistant.

After completing the associated pre-measures, the participants joined each other and were given final instructions for the conversation. The discloser was instructed to talk about the event, and the respondent was instructed to respond as he or she normally would in a conversation about emotionally distressing events with friends (See Appendix E). The participants were given one minute to engage in unrecorded small talk before engaging in the 5-minute, video-recorded conversation. After five minutes, participants were separated while completing various post measures evaluating their conversational partner and the conversation. Before being dismissed, participants received a flyer with the contact information for mental health services offered by the University due to the nature of the study and variability in conversations about emotionally distressing events (See Appendix F).

Following the collection of all conversations over the three-semester period, the videos were provided to a team of undergraduate researchers at an unaffiliated university located in the upper Midwest. The research assistants watched the videos and transcribed the conversations into written transcripts, capturing the verbal record of the conversation. These transcripts were structured in turn-taking format, representing the speaking turns of both disclosers and respondents. A group of research assistants at Louisiana State University consisting of three graduate assistants (including the thesis author) and one advanced undergraduate student compared the videos to the written transcripts. The transcripts were revised as necessary to ensure accuracy.

Table 2

*Conversational Topics for Troubles Talk Conversations*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Verbatim Example(s) from Discloser</b>
Academic Problems	Problems related to strictly academic contexts (e.g., tests, quizzes, midterms, programs of study, advisors)	<i>"Having four exams in one week"</i> <i>"Stress of applying to medical school"</i>
Balancing Problems	Problems specifically mentioning the word "balance" between two obligations, or problems that include two general categories of problems in one stressor.	<i>"Balancing between school and work"</i> <i>"Having to work until 1:30am the night before a spring intercession Chemistry class"</i>
College-specific Problems	Problems that do not mention academic stressors, but are related specifically to college experiences.	<i>"Living in a dorm: germs"</i> <i>"Commuting to class every morning and being late to class"</i>
Family Problems	Problems related directly to a situation with a family member, including that family member's health or general condition.	<i>"Arguing with my mother over traveling"</i> <i>"Death of a family member"</i>
Personal Health Problems	Problems related to the discloser's own personal health.	<i>"Knee Surgery"</i> <i>"Diagnosed with a disease"</i>
Pet Problems	Problems related specifically to the discloser's animal companions.	<i>"Gave away family pet"</i> <i>"Raising a puppy"</i>
Relationship Problems	Problems related to the discloser's relationships with either dating partners or friendships.	<i>"Long distance relationship"</i> <i>"Best Friend and I had a fight"</i>
Work Problems	Problems related to employment or internships.	<i>"Can't find a job"</i> <i>"Quit my job of 5 years"</i>
Other	Problems specific to the individual; unable to be generalized to a broader category.	<i>"Air Force Officer Training"</i> <i>"On my way home and my car died"</i>

## Coding Advice Statements

In coding for advice, permission was granted to utilize a coding manual previously developed to identify advice statements in conversations (MacGeorge, 2011). Based on the coding manual specifications, the coding incorporated a two-step process: first, organizing the original transcripts into thought units; second, coding all individual thought units for the presence or absence of advice units.

**Thought units.** For the first step, the original transcripts, formatted by speaking turns, were broken into thought units. A thought unit is described as “the smallest units of meaning that have informational or affective value” (Stafford & Daly, 1984, p.386). Table 3 provides several examples of speaking turns and the corresponding thought unit construction. An independent coder who was blind to the purpose of the study was provided one hour of training and then coded a subset of the conversations (10%;  $n = 13$ ) into thought units. The itemized transcripts retained the original turns, but broke down all turns into individual thought units. The unitizing of thought units was compared between the independent coder and the thesis author, using Guetzkow’s  $U$ , which compares “the number of units obtained by each” coder to evaluate the accuracy between coders (Guetzkow, 1950, p. 54), and generates a number representing the amount of error present between the two coders. In this coding method, error occurs when a conversational turn was transformed into a different number of thought units by each coder. The reliability of the unitizing of thought units was acceptable ( $U = .02$ ) between the two coders: this low number recognizes that there was only a small difference between the two coders’ total number of thought units. After establishing acceptable reliability, the thesis author individually coded the remaining 112 transcripts.

Table 3

*Conversational Turns to Thought Unit Construction Examples*

Role	Conversational Turns	Conversational Turns as Thought Units
<b>Example #1 (Dyad 095)</b>		
Discloser (095)	<i>Okay well my mom is moving to New Jersey for the next two years so I don't really know what we're supposed to say about it but um it's kind of stressful to me because I live at home and by that I mean she is pretty much kicking me out so I have to find my own apartment which I already did but it's kinda – kinda stressful to me having to find an apartment</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Okay well my mom is moving to New Jersey for the next two years</li> <li>2. so I don't really know what we're supposed to say about it</li> <li>3. but um it's kind of stressful to me</li> <li>4. because I live at home</li> <li>5. and by that I mean she is pretty much kicking me out</li> <li>6. so I have to find my own apartment</li> <li>7. which I already did</li> <li>8. but it's kinda – kinda stressful to me having to find an apartment</li> </ol>
Respondent (095)	<i>Yeah, that's stressful</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yeah, that's stressful</li> </ol>
<b>Example #2 (Dyad 058)</b>		
Discloser (058)	<i>OK um...I guess I am going to tell you about what's stressing... I am a dental hygiene major but recently I wanted to switch to dental. And So basically to get a dental degree you need a biology degree and for dental hygiene you only need pre-requisites, you know how to get a degree, you can apply, it is like nursing school.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. OK um...I guess I am going to tell you about what's stressing</li> <li>2. I am a dental hygiene major</li> <li>3. but recently I wanted to switch to dental.</li> <li>4. And So basically to get a dental degree</li> <li>5. you need a biology degree</li> <li>6. and for dental hygiene you only need pre-requisites</li> <li>7. you know how to get a degree, you can apply</li> <li>8. it is like nursing school.</li> </ol>
Respondent (058)	<i>Yea, my girlfriend is taking nursing, so it's....</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yea, my girlfriend is taking nursing, so it's....</li> </ol>

The independent coder was monetarily reimbursed for her assistance at an hourly rate of \$7.25; the source of these funds was the Board of Regents Grant, which approved funds available for hourly assistance with data coding. Problem disclosers uttered on average 77.76 thought units in the 5-minute conversations ( $SD = 19.44$ ; range = 34 - 132). In response to the discloser, respondents uttered an average of 38.88 thought units ( $SD = 21.90$ ; range = 1 - 138).<sup>4</sup>

**Advice units.** After all transcripts were transformed into thought units, a secondary independent coder was provided with one hour of training on the coding manual (MacGeorge, 2011) and then coded a different subset (10%;  $n = 13$ ) of the conversations for advice units in the thought units of respondents. In generating a reliability coefficient, Krippendorff's alpha was employed, which corrects for chance disagreement (Krippendorff, 2004) and also allows for missing data (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). By providing a measurement of agreement, reliability is then inferred from this measure (Krippendorff, 2004). The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = .73$ ) between the two coders was appropriate: it suggests agreement levels above chance (.50) between the two coders, but not quite at a level of perfect agreement (1.00). Additionally, the total unitization of advice units in this subset was also acceptable ( $U = .03$ ), recognizing that the total number of advice units between the two coders had only some disagreement or error. The thesis author independently coded the remaining transcripts ( $n = 112$ ). The second independent coder was also monetarily reimbursed for her assistance at an hourly rate of \$7.25, using the monies available in the Board of Regents Grant.

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<sup>4</sup> There was a significant difference in the mean number of thought units expressed by the discloser ( $M = 77.76$ ) compared to the thought units expressed by the listener ( $M = 38.88$ ) in the conversation,  $t = 14.84$ ,  $df = 248$ ,  $p < .001$ . This difference is likely attributed to the discloser sharing background information and answering questions related to the disclosed problem.

Table 4

*Discloser Problem and Example Advice Unit Responses*

<b>Discloser's Problem</b>	<b>Respondent's Advice</b>
Balancing School and Work (029)	<p><i>"So maybe you should, like, give yourself a schedule and allow time to study"</i> (15<sup>th</sup> thought unit)</p> <p><i>"And kinda, take school as a full time job."</i> (20<sup>th</sup> thought unit)</p>
I have been inconsistent on the football field and earning a spot is important to me (090)	<i>"Like, just start thinking about how you are going to do it right"</i> (57 <sup>th</sup> thought unit)
Having to work until 1:30am the night before a spring intercession class (179)	<i>"You need to talk to your manager"</i> (36 <sup>th</sup> thought unit)

The total number of conversations containing advice was tabulated, creating a dichotomous variable representing the presence or absence of advice. After compiling the summed number of advice units present in each conversation, a ratio of percent of advice present in conversations was created by dividing the summed number of advice thought units by the total number of thought units. Additionally, other measures, including when the advice units occurred (e.g., the 6<sup>th</sup> thought unit), were also tabulated. Table 4 provides examples for the disclosed problem and corresponding advice units offered in response to the problem.

### **Outcome Measures**

**Supportiveness.** The problem discloser completed 12 items to evaluate the respondent (see Appendix D). Before completing the items, participants were prompted to "please think about the conversation that you just had with the other participant. Think about the things that your conversational partner said and did, and evaluate his or her behaviors." Participants were

then provided with a description of semantic differential scales and an example item before reading the final prompt: “To what extent do you think that the behavior of your conversational partner was...” This prompt was followed by 12 items identified by Goldsmith, McDermott and Alexander (2000) to measure helpfulness (e.g., *helpful* : *hurtful*, *useful* : *useless*), sensitivity (e.g., *sensitive* : *insensitive*, *understanding* : *misunderstanding*), and supportiveness (e.g., *supportive* : *unsupportive*, *compassionate* : *heartless*). Out of the 1500 possible responses on this measure, there were 14 missing values (< 0.01%), which were replaced with the mean of the surrounding values (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Based on previous use of the scale (e.g., Goldsmith, et al., 2000), confirmatory factor analysis was performed on these data (Levine, 2005). Overall model fit for the 12 item, three factor correlated model was below conventional thresholds,  $\chi^2(51) = 139.67, p < .000$ , CFI = .894, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .12 (.10, .14). Model fit can be improved through minor modifications (Levine, Hullett, Mitchell Tuner, & Knight Lapinski, 2006), such as dropping problematic items. Thus, all standardized residual covariance values and factor loadings were examined. Item 12 (“*Knowledgeable* : *Ignorant*”) displayed a standardized residual covariance value of -2.24 with item 2 (“*Sensitive* : *Insensitive*”), and a value of 2.13 with item 9 (“*Useful* : *Useless*”). Additionally, item 12 had the lowest factor loading out of all items ( $\alpha = .54$ ). After deleting item 12 (“*Knowledgeable* : *Ignorant*”), model fit improved,  $\chi^2(41) = 94.42, p < .000$ , CFI = .932, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .10 (.07, .13), with the highest standardized residual covariance of 1.38. The higher RMSEA value may be due to the combination of the number of cases ( $N = 125$ ) and the low degrees of freedom associated with this analysis (Kenny, Kaniskan, McCoach, 2011). Correlations were strong between all three

latent constructs: sensitivity and supportiveness ( $r = .81, p < .001$ ), supportiveness and helpfulness ( $r = .77, p < .001$ ), and sensitivity and helpfulness ( $r = .75, p < .001$ ).

After generating model fit statistics, reliability estimates were then generated for the three latent variables for the supportiveness measure. Measured using Cronbach's alpha, all reliability estimates were acceptable: sensitivity ( $\alpha = .84$ ), supportiveness ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and helpfulness ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Based on the strength of the overall model fit, the helpfulness scale was calculated without item 12 ("Knowledgeable : Ignorant").<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Rakov's measure was calculated for the point estimation of scale reliability, which utilizes the unstandardized regression weights and the unstandardized measurement error variances for each latent construct and is less conservative than Cronbach's alpha because it does not assume tau-equivalence. The results for Rakov's measure are the following values: sensitivity ( $\rho = .90$ ), supportiveness ( $\rho = .89$ ), and helpfulness ( $\rho = .86$ ).

**Desire for future interactions.** As a measure of desire for future interaction to test H2, disclosers were asked "To what extent would you like to interact more with your conversational partner in the future?" Responses were measured ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (7). There were no missing values on this measure. With only one evaluative item, reliability and model fit indices were not calculated. While single-item measures are not always utilized, they have been used before in studies focused on global evaluations during the acquaintanceship process (Paulhus & Bruce, 1992). Gardner and his associates (1998) suggest different formats should be considered based on the goals of the data collection; for

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<sup>5</sup> The reliability coefficient for the helpfulness scale improved with the inclusion of item 12 ( $\alpha = .76$ ), yet the item had been deleted from the overall model to improve all measures of model fit. The difference between inclusion and exclusion is only .07. Cronbach's alpha is "seen to fit within a much larger system of reliability analysis" (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004, p. 416), and this larger system can be extended to include confirmatory factor analysis.



constructs that are “relatively uncomplicated/unidimensional” (p. 912) a single item can be considered appropriate. When considering an individual’s desire for future interaction, it can be considered a relatively uncomplicated construct: a single-item measure is appropriate in this context.

## Chapter 4: Results

This thesis was driven by a desire to understand if advice does occur in troubles talk between strangers. While the frequency of advice offered in a quasi-naturalistic setting has not been explored in previous supportive communication research, the presence of advice in an initial conversation may be related to problem seriousness and influence evaluations of the advice giver. With a sample of 125, an alpha set at  $\alpha = .05$ , the power to detect a significant Pearson product moment correlation between variables was .19 for small effects ( $r = .10$ ), .82 for medium effects ( $r = .30$ ), and  $>.99$  for large effects ( $r = .50$ ).<sup>6</sup>

### Research Question

The first research question focused on discovering the frequency with which advice occurs in initial interactions. In response to the initial research question, advice occurred in 38.4% ( $n = 48$ ) of the total conversations. Within conversations containing advice, the instances of advice ranged from one to fifteen advice units ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 3.18$ ,  $Mode = 1$ ,  $Mdn = 2$ ). There was also a wide variety of when the first advice unit occurred ( $M = 15.90$ ,  $SD = 16.23$ ,  $Modes = 2$  and  $3$ ,  $Mdn = 9$ ) in the advice giver's conversational turns. As a ratio of the total number of advice units to the total number of thought units, advice units ranged from 0.1% to 41% of the respondents' total conversational turns. When including all conversations, this ratio represents the presence of advice as 0 - 41% of the respondent's conversational thought units. Table 5 summarizes the results of advice in initial interactions. In response to the initial research question, advice did occur in these initial interactions.

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<sup>6</sup> Power was calculated using the computer program G\*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The generated power values determine the power of the experimental design to discover an effect (Keppel & Wickens, 2004) at a small, medium, or large effect size as defined by Cohen (1985).

Table 5

*Summary Information for Advice in Initial Interactions***Presence of Advice in Conversations**

Mean Advice Units	3.38 ( <i>SD</i> = 3.18)
Median Advice Units	2
Mode for Advice Units	1
Range of Number of advice units	1 – 15 units
Advice as a Percentage of Respondent's	0.1 – 41%
Total Thought Units	
Total Conversations with Advice	38.4% ( <i>n</i> = 48)

**Placement (Sequencing) of First Advice Unit in Conversation**

Mean	15.90 ( <i>SD</i> = 16.23)
Median	9
Mode(s)	2, 3
Range of First Advice Unit Occurrence	1 - 79

**Hypothesis One**

The first hypothesis predicted that advice would be offered in response to a less serious problem disclosure. The discloser's rating of problem seriousness was slightly lower on conversations where advice occurred ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) than conversations where advice did not occur ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), and this difference was statistically significant, (one tailed  $t = 1.79$ ,  $df = 123$ ,  $p < .04$ ,  $d = .34$ )<sup>7</sup>. This initial hypothesis, predicting advice occurring in response to the disclosure of less serious problems, was supported by the data. Relevant to the problem seriousness is the type of conversational topic where advice was offered. While no formal hypothesis was developed about what topics would receive advice, the conversational topics originally reported in the methods section were updated to include instances of advice (and non advice) in Table 6.

<sup>7</sup> Levene's test of equivariance was not significant for this t-test, the standard t-test calculation is reported.

Table 6

*Presence of Advice by Problems Discussed*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example(s)</b>	<b>Advice</b>	<b>No Advice</b>
Academic Problems	Problems related to strictly academic contexts (e.g., tests, quizzes, midterms, programs of study, advisors)	<i>“Having four exams in one week”</i> <i>“Stress of applying to medical school”</i>	<i>n</i> = 24	<i>n</i> = 26
Balancing Problems	Problems specifically mentioning the word “balance” between two obligations, or problems that include two general categories of problems in one stressor.	<i>“Balancing between school and work”</i> <i>“Having to work until 1:30am the night before a spring intercession Chemistry class”</i>	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 0
College-specific Problems	Problems that do not mention academic stressors, but are related specifically to college experiences.	<i>“Living in a dorm: germs”</i> <i>“Commuting to class every morning and being late to class”</i>	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 5
Family Problems	Problems related directly to a situation with a family member, including that family member’s health or general condition.	<i>“Arguing with my mother over traveling”</i> <i>“Death of a family member”</i>	<i>n</i> = 4	<i>n</i> = 14
Personal Health Problems	Problems related to the discloser’s own personal health.	<i>“Knee Surgery”</i> <i>“Diagnosed with a disease”</i>	<i>n</i> = 1	<i>n</i> = 4
Pet Problems	Problems related specifically to the discloser’s animal companions.	<i>“Gave away family pet”</i> <i>“Raising a puppy”</i>	<i>n</i> = 2	<i>n</i> = 4
Relationship Problems	Problems related to the discloser’s relationships with either dating partners or friendships.	<i>“Long distance relationship”</i> <i>“Best Friend and I had a fight”</i>	<i>n</i> = 5	<i>n</i> = 14
Work Problems	Problems related to employment or internships.	<i>“Can’t find a job”</i> <i>“Quit my job of 5 years”</i>	<i>n</i> = 5	<i>n</i> = 2
Other	Problems specific to the individual; unable to be generalized to a broader category.	<i>“Air Force Officer Training”</i> <i>“On my way home and my car died”</i>	<i>n</i> = 0	<i>n</i> = 7

## **Hypothesis Two**

The second hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between the amount of advice and the perceived helpfulness of the conversational partner, and a negative relationship between the amount of advice and the perceived sensitivity and supportiveness of the conversational partner. To test this relationship, a correlational analysis was performed between the helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness measures and the percentage of advice present in the conversation. In the correlation analysis, the magnitudes of all correlations were not significant, with effect sizes lower than .01, demonstrating no support for the second hypothesis.

## **Hypothesis Three**

The third hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between the amount of advice and a desire for future interactions. To test this relationship, a correlational analysis was performed between the desire for future interactions measure and the amount of advice in the conversation. The magnitude of this correlation was not significant, demonstrating no initial support for the third hypothesis. The results of the correlation analyses for both the second and third hypothesis are combined and reported in Table 7.

Based on the lack of statistically significant results for both the second and third hypotheses, the relationship between all outcome measures and the amount of advice present in the conversation was assessed using bivariate linear regression.<sup>8</sup> For each individual bivariate relationship, a scatter plot was first generated before estimating the regression models to ensure the relationships were not curvilinear or cubic in nature (See Appendix G).

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<sup>8</sup> Both regression and correlation “assess the degree of relationship between two continuous variables” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, p.17), but regression “predicts a score on one variable from knowledge of the score on another variable” (p.17). Based on the understanding that both techniques are appropriate for a hypothesis predicting association, the regression analyses were performed to confirm the lack of statistical significance of the correlation analyses.

Table 7

*Correlations Between Evaluations and Percentage of Advice*

	Sensitivity (H2)	Supportiveness (H2)	Helpfulness (H2)	Desire for Future Interactions (H3)
Percentage of Advice	0.098 (0.278)	-0.009 (0.921)	0.032 (0.727)	0.002 (0.986)
Effect Size ( $R^2$ )	0.010	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

*Note.* Exact  $p$  values have been provided in parentheses under the correlation value.

Then, each evaluation measure was independently estimated in a bivariate regression model. The percentage of advice in the conversation was the predictor variable in all models, and helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness, and the desire for future interactions as the respective dependent variables in the independent models. The results of the regression estimations were not significant for helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness and desire for future interactions: both the overall regression models were not significant, and the standardized regression weights were also not significant. The standardized beta weights were similar to the correlation values (See Appendix H).

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Advice is frequently offered as one type of response in troubles talk conversations. The main research question of this thesis project was posed to garner a greater understanding of how often a stranger in an initial interaction offers advice (or if it is offered at all) to a problem disclosure. Through this exploratory research question, there was an opportunity to examine when advice may be offered based on problem severity and also to examine how the presence of advice messages may influence evaluations of a partner after an initial interaction. One hypothesis predicted advice would occur in problems rated lower in seriousness; the second hypotheses predicted a specific relationship between the presence of advice and the perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness of the advice givers; and the final hypothesis predicted the desire to interact further with a conversational partner would differ as a function of advice. In what follows, the results are first discussed in conjunction with previous findings on advice in supportive interactions, before examining other factors potentially contributing to the observed results.

### **Does Advice Occur in Initial Interactions?**

Results showed that 38.4% of collected conversations contained at least one advice unit, answering the research question: advice does occur in initial interactions. Undoubtedly, the presence of advice in initial interactions supports the ubiquity of advice as a response to a problem disclosure: advice occurs not only between close relational partners like friends or family, it also occurs between strangers interacting for the first time in a quasi-natural laboratory setting. Although these results certainly support the presence of advice in initial interactions, this percentage may not be descriptive of the presence of advice in all troubles talk conversations between strangers in the general population. While troubles talk conversations do occur

naturally between strangers, it is not the most common or frequent context, especially in a laboratory setting. Yet, in order to extend an understanding of the true ubiquity of advice, advice must be placed in the context of troubles talk conversations in experimental setting. The only other study advice in a quasi-naturalistic setting was focused on the specific context of marital support: Cutrona and Suhr (1994) found that married couples offered instrumental support, including both advice and problem inquiry, in 97% of conversations in their specific sample. A higher percentage similar to Cutrona and Suhr's (1994) results would be unrealistic and unexpected in the present study due to the differences in study design (this study focused only on advice messages, not general instrumental support) and the differences between the types of relational partners studied.

Only one other study has focused on the provision of advice between strangers. In the study, Smith and Goodnight (1994) found 14% of participants reported strangers as the source of unwanted or undesired support, including advice. Again, our studies differ, especially in regards to the methodological paradigm utilized (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), and overall focus: while Smith and Goodnight (1994) focused on the provision of support from a variety of partners, this thesis project focused on only one type of supportive message from a specific type of partner. Additionally, this thesis project did not capture undesired or unwanted support, but instead focused on establishing the natural occurrence of advice as support. In comparison, the higher percentage of conversations containing advice in this project may be attributed to the design, which coded advice messages directly from the transcripts. Individuals who receive advice or other forms of instrumental support from a stranger may simply forget that this form of support was offered and thus be unable to retrospectively report on the occurrence of support from strangers. This project promotes the utilization of differing research paradigms (e.g.,



Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002) in advice and supportive communication research as appropriate to the researcher's questions and hypotheses.

Despite discovering that advice does occur in interactions between strangers, the majority of conversations (61.6%) did not contain advice. In no conversation was advice the majority of the respondent's total conversational thought units. Through the discovery of advice in initial interactions, the continued description of advice as ubiquitous is warranted, as advice does occur between strangers as well as close relational partners. Advice represents only one common and expected response to problem disclosure in an initial interaction, and further consideration should be given to further examining troubles talk conversations between strangers in settings beyond the quasi-natural settings.

### **Discussion of the First Hypothesis**

Problems where advice occurred were rated slightly lower in terms of the discloser's emotional distress compared to problems where no advice was offered, suggesting some tentative inferences about this aspect of the disclosed problems. Advice may be considered a more appropriate response in an initial interaction when the problem disclosed is one that is less serious in nature. These findings should be generalized cautiously: advice may occur in response to less serious problems in an initial interaction, but these same results may not be replicated in conversations between friends or family members.

Based on the variety of conversational topics where advice was observed and the moderate effect size of problem seriousness, there may be additional reasons motivating the advice giver to respond with advice. One possible reason may be prior experience with the disclosed problem. For example, advice was offered in response to less serious academic problems, and the problem respondent may have experienced the same academic problem and

recommended a course of action based on his or her own experience. While this study does not capture all the reasons or motivations for offering (or not offering) advice, the seriousness of the problem can be considered one reason why advice is offered to a stranger in troubles talk conversations.

### **Discussion of the Second Hypothesis**

The second hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between advice and the evaluation of helpfulness, but a negative relationship between advice and the evaluations of sensitivity and supportiveness. The predicted relationships were not supported by the data. The observed results also suggest the association between the presence of advice and evaluations of helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness is not linear in nature.

Barring an explanation attributed to a mediating variable not included in this analysis, one likely explanation for the observed results is that advice recipients may have not recalled the provision of advice when evaluating their partners. If advice occurs only sporadically throughout a conversation or only represents a small percentage of everything a partner says in an initial interaction, it may be harder for a conversational partner to specifically recall the provision of advice when evaluating their partner. Certainly in these results, the unfamiliarity with a partner, competing interests in reducing uncertainty, reappraising emotions associated with the problem, disclosing the problem, and continuing the conversation in an unfamiliar laboratory setting may have contributed to advice simply not being recalled in evaluations of a problem respondent. Instead of recalling specific advice messages, disclosers may have recalled that the respondent made an effort to keep the conversation going, versus being specifically attuned to the precise messages provided during the interaction.

### **Discussion of the Third Hypothesis**

The final hypothesis predicted advice would be negatively associated with a desire for future interactions, and the results did not support this hypothesis. The lack of support for this hypothesis does not necessarily negate the original recommendation from MacGeorge and associates (2008) to give advice “sparingly in interactions with strangers and acquaintances” (p.150), but does support the need to continually test claims and further refine our understanding of the context of troubles talk conversations. Other results may be seen with a different study design, or different group of participants. While this study did not find support for the hypothesis, it was the first to examine naturally occurring advice messages between strangers, and there are likely other factors in addition to advice influencing the desire for future interactions.

Possible factors attributing to the observed results include percentage of conversations containing advice, the frequency of this advice, and the sequential placement of advice, as previously discussed. Additionally, the provision of advice thought units relative to other thought units should be considered. Advice messages occurred in the context of the respondent’s full conversational turn; in these additional thought units, respondents frequently offered supporting argumentation for the advice, or shared a similar experience to demonstrate expertise with the problem. The provision of advice and subsequent support for the advice could have been perceived as a reciprocal disclosure to establish similarities between conversational partners, placing advice as simply part of an initial interaction containing disclosures. Different evaluations in the desire for future interactions may have been observed if advice was the only type of response offered to problem disclosure, with all thought units either recommending or providing supporting argumentation for the specific advice offered, or even if advice represented

a larger percentage of a respondent's contributions to the conversation. In this study, conversational partners were asked to converse naturally, so no such manipulation occurred. The proportion of advice offered in relation to other responses in the conversations analyzed may be too low to negatively impact a desire for future interactions with the advice giver.

## **General Discussion**

First, the overall results must be discussed in terms of statistical power, followed by a brief discussion of the statistical analyses performed. The power to detect a significant Pearson product moment correlation was low for small effects, but sufficient for medium and large effect sizes. The impact of advice on evaluations of helper supportiveness and the desire for future interactions may be simply a small effect compared to the impact of other conversational behaviors and responses not studied in this thesis project. Other experimental studies have also observed small effects. Jones and Burleson (1997) found high effect sizes between verbal person centeredness and helper evaluations in hypothetical situations, but subsequent research found smaller effect sizes for verbal person centeredness on comforting evaluations following conversations in an experimental setting (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Based on the detection of no significant correlation coefficients, as well as no statistical support found in the individual regression models, the relationship between advice and these specific outcome measures may not be linear in nature.<sup>9</sup> While this does not mean there is no relationship between advice and evaluations of helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness, and the desire for future interactions, other explanatory variables or models must be considered, especially if the effect of advice is small.

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<sup>9</sup> All bivariate relationships were additionally examined using polynomial regression. In this analysis, controlling for outliers, there were no significant results, so the possibility of a curvilinear or cubic relationship was also not supported by the data.

In addition to power and statistical methods, another potential influence on the results is the number of conversations containing no advice. The ratio variable used was inclusive of these conversations based on the predictions of the specific hypotheses, but the large number of conversations containing no advice may also be influencing the observed results. This thesis project was focused on naturally occurring advice, and the study design did not manipulate the presence of advice to remove the range restriction imposed from the number of conversations containing no advice messages for the presented results.<sup>10</sup> Beyond study design and sample concerns, the large number of conversations containing little to no advice may have influenced the observed results. Without manipulating conversations to generate more advice statements, this wide range is likely contributing to all observed results.

**Halo effect.** One plausible explanation for the lack of statistical significance across the second and third hypotheses is the halo effect, or “the influence of a global evaluation on evaluations of individual attributes” (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, p. 250). When comparing mean scores for helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness, advice givers were evaluated as slightly more helpful, sensitivity and supportive than those who did not offer advice. While the difference was not statistically supported, it does support the observation of a halo effect from those who offered advice in conversations. Certainly, this thesis is not alone in experiencing the problem of halo effects, or halo errors. Feeley (2002) asserts “halo errors have been greatly overlooked in research in communication” (p.584). One reason may be due to similar constructs used as outcome measures in numerous studies focused on communicative behaviors. The

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<sup>10</sup> In conversations containing advice, there were no significant correlations between the percentage of advice and all outcome measures: sensitivity ( $r = 0.005, p = 0.972$ ), supportiveness ( $r = -0.105, p = 0.477$ ), helpfulness ( $r = -0.045, p = .762$ ), and desire for future interactions ( $r = 0.066, p = 0.657$ ).

strong correlations between the three constructs of helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness have likely contributed to this observation.

The observed results suggest problem disclosers may have evaluated their conversational partners globally, with general impressions from the conversation outweighing a specific attunement to helpfulness. Disclosers may not register advice messages as specifically more helpful, but the personalized response and effort to continue the conversation may have resulted in advice givers being evaluated generally helpful, sensitive, and supportive towards their conversational partner, creating the effect of a “helper’s halo.” A person that was helpful with the provision of advice was then positively evaluated on other dimensions of supportiveness. Additionally, the intuitiveness of advice may simply reinforce the help seeker’s current plans to manage the problem. Advice givers then affirm the help seeker’s decisions, resulting in elevated ratings of helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness.

### **Limitations of Thesis**

In this thesis, there are specific limitations that extend beyond predicted hypotheses that were not supported through statistical analyses. One notable limitation is the sample was underpowered for small effects. While the power analysis revealed that the sample was appropriately powered for medium and large effects, advice may be a small effect on outcome measures, contributing to the lack of support for the hypotheses. While significant results may have been observed with a larger sample size, a larger sample size may have simply reinforced the underlying null hypotheses of no relationship between advice and outcome evaluations of helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness and the desire for future interaction. However, as no linear relationship was detected between the variables, a larger sample may have resulted in the

same general results, especially when considering the focus on naturally occurring advice messages.

There are two specific limitations that are identified and then discussed in this section: the first limitation notes the limited focus of the evaluative measures. The second limitation notes the specific type of relationship examined in the thesis.

**Focus on evaluations of the advice provider.** Evidenced by the similarities in ratings between advice givers and non-advice givers, the limited measures employed to give focus to this thesis may have contributed to the lack of statistically significant results. Maintaining a narrow focus is important for the development of research questions, but in this case the focus may have been too narrow due to only one, 11-item instrument and one, single-item measure being used to evaluate the advice giver. Additional measures could have been utilized to expand and include other evaluations of supportiveness, first by expanding evaluations from the advice recipient's perspective, and second by including measures to assess the advice giver's perspective as well.

Recalling Chapters 1 and 2 and previous findings on the roles of the advice message, advice giver, and advice recipient in the evaluation of advice messages, a notable limitation of this thesis related to the narrow focus is that only the advice giver was evaluated. No measures capturing the discloser's receptiveness towards potential advice and no measures designed to recognize the advice messages offered were included in the current study. The inclusion of measures designed to recognize the presence of advice message (e.g., "My partner gave me advice") may have then primed the participant to specifically consider the presence or absence of advice when evaluating their partner. Despite the exclusion of these measures, this design problem presents an opportunity for future research and will be discussed in the ensuing section.

While advice was offered in response to less serious problems, this study did not capture other reasons why an advice giver might suggest recommendations versus other types of responses. For example, measures could be designed to capture reasons why advice was offered (e.g., “I had experience with the discloser’s problem”) or even self-evaluation measures to assess the advice giver’s perceptions of the advice given (e.g., “I believe my advice was appropriate,” “I believe my partner will implement my advice”). Similar questions can be included for evaluation measures for an advice recipient, and responses could be compared. The focus of this thesis did not include measures designed to capture the advice giver’s perspective, and while it would have generated different research questions, the expansion of the design to include this perspective would have enriched the findings of this thesis.

A narrow focus is a recognizable necessity in generating theoretically driven research questions and hypotheses. Based on the observed results, the focus of this thesis might have been too narrow: without a linear relationship between the presence of advice and evaluations of helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness, and a desire for future interactions, an expanded focus of measures capturing evaluations of advice may have yielded significant results.

**Interactions with strangers.** A second limitation is that this thesis focused on only one context where advice may occur: between strangers who had not met prior to having this conversation. When dealing with strangers, Duck (1998) observes “they are contextless for us and there is no special knowledge of their personal characteristics on which to draw” (p.129). Without the context of even a casual relationship or acquaintanceship, disclosers may simply apply the only context they have to their subsequent evaluations of their partner: that is, the context of a laboratory environment. When presented a limited context, people “adapt their criteria of success according to the situation” (Hecht, 1984, p. 200). The criteria for success in



the laboratory context may have revised the criteria of a supportive partner to one who simply keeps the conversation moving forward, disclosing information, and participating in the conversation. The context of a laboratory setting may have contributed to the lack of significant results, including no difference between evaluations of a partner from an initial interaction.

Recalling the original recommendation that “advice should be given sparingly in interactions with strangers and acquaintances” (MacGeorge, et al., 2008, p.150), this thesis only partially tested this claim by focusing on strangers, not acquaintances. There may be a difference between strangers and acquaintances and their evaluations of a conversational partner who offers advice. This difference may be attributed to concerns in the problem disclosure. Hecht (1984) observes, “it is likely that openness and disclosure are issues for acquaintances because they have not established and developed their friendship” (p. 213), and this statement should likely be extended to strangers as well. By focusing only on initial interactions, this thesis did not capture the potential differences between strangers and acquaintances or how advice may impact evaluations of an acquaintance or a developing friendship.

### **Opportunities for Future Research**

As stated in Chapter 1, the theoretical landscape is teeming with opportunities for advice research. The research question and hypotheses explored in this thesis should be considered preliminary in their exploration of the relationship between naturally occurring advice messages and evaluations of supportiveness. These data can, and should, be combined into one or more of the research studies outlined below, accompanying future research as a pilot study or stand alone study based on the specific research questions. There are two main areas for future research based on the thesis: the first area focuses on continuing research on advice, while the second area

focuses instead on the context of the troubles talk conversation between strangers and acquaintances.

**Advice research.** One obvious possible area for future advice research is actual lab manipulation of advice messages as a response to problem disclosure in initial interactions. While employing a related research paradigm (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), a similar study may wish to use trained confederates who either (a) offer only instrumental support in response to problem disclosure, or (b) offer only emotional support, controlling for the wide variety of responses offered in the naturalistic setting employed in the current study. Additionally, whether part of this envisioned laboratory study or part of another study focused on advice received from strangers, measures need to be included to capture a participant's recollection of specific advice messages. The inclusion of statements that prime participants to recognize the respondent as an advice giver may invite participants to specifically recall statements of advice offered when completing the evaluation of a conversational partner, and in this type of design, there is an opportunity to compare these results to a subgroup that was not primed to think about advice prior to the interaction.

Other research opportunities exist that would compliment and expand on the results presented in this thesis. First, one study may wish to compare the frequency of advice offered in troubles talk conversations between strangers to the frequency of advice offered in troubles talk conversations between friends utilizing the same experimental design. Even if the same measures are utilized, there may be differences between the perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness of advice when comparing friends to strangers. No matter which research paradigm is employed (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), there is a need to develop studies informed by the dual process theory of supportive message outcomes (Bodie & Burleson, 2008).

This theory has been applied in past research to advice (e.g., Feng & MacGeorge, 2010) and emotional support (e.g., Bodie, Burlison & Jones, 2012) in past research, but it should be continued to be included in advice studies as appropriate to research questions and hypotheses.

**Relationship research.** While the examination of advice given to strangers was theoretically interesting for specific advice research, the context of an initial interaction where troubles talk occurs and creates an environment of enacted support may generate future studies focused on the intersection of advice and the development of relationships. One possibility for future study is to examine how advice influences relational development. Future studies may wish to examine the presence of advice in subsequent troubles talk conversations between acquaintances and how the continued use of advice influences evaluations and perceived relational development. Due to the time and costs associated with laboratory studies, a similar study could instead use diary methods similar to those commonly utilized by Duck (1991; 1998) in general relationship research. A diary study could focus on reporting (a) advice messages from one identified acquaintance over an extended period of time, or (b) all instances of advice from strangers and acquaintances with measures focused on the participant's evaluation of the interlocutor's place in the individual's social network or role as future support provider. In either case, longitudinal data associated with the relationship development process would be captured. This longitudinal data is important to understanding how supportive interactions, evaluations of these interactions, and the presence advice may shape and influence relational development.

## **Conclusion**

By advancing empirical research supporting the occurrence of advice in initial interactions, this thesis expands previous research. Advice does occur in initial interactions and is offered in response to the disclosure of less serious problem. The influence of advice on

evaluations of the respondent's supportiveness needs further consideration as the relationship between advice and the outcome measures of helpfulness, sensitivity, supportiveness and the desire for future interaction is not linear, suggesting the need to consider the mediating role of other variables or expand the range of advice responses. The lack of supported hypotheses does not mean that this study did not contribute to the larger theoretical conversation focused on advice in supportive interactions: the results of this thesis have complimented previous findings focused on the natural occurrence of advice in conversations, furthered the understanding of the problem characteristic of seriousness, as well as provided a great foundation for future advice studies in the naturalistic research paradigm (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Scholarship on supportive communication, including advice messages, has flourished since the emergence of supportive communication as distinct from the larger field of social support. Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith and Sarason (1994) explain what it means to study support as communication:

For us, it means studying the *messages* through which people both seek and express support; studying the *interactions* in which supportive messages are produced and interpreted; and studying the *relationships* that are created by and contextualize the supportive interactions in which people engage. (p. xviii, italics in original).

In this thesis, I have been inspired by this answer to what it means to study supportive communication, as well as the authors' subsequent contributions to the field. By studying advice messages in troubles talk conversations between strangers, my goal is to contribute to the scholarly conversation on messages, interactions, and relationships in advice research and supportive communication research.

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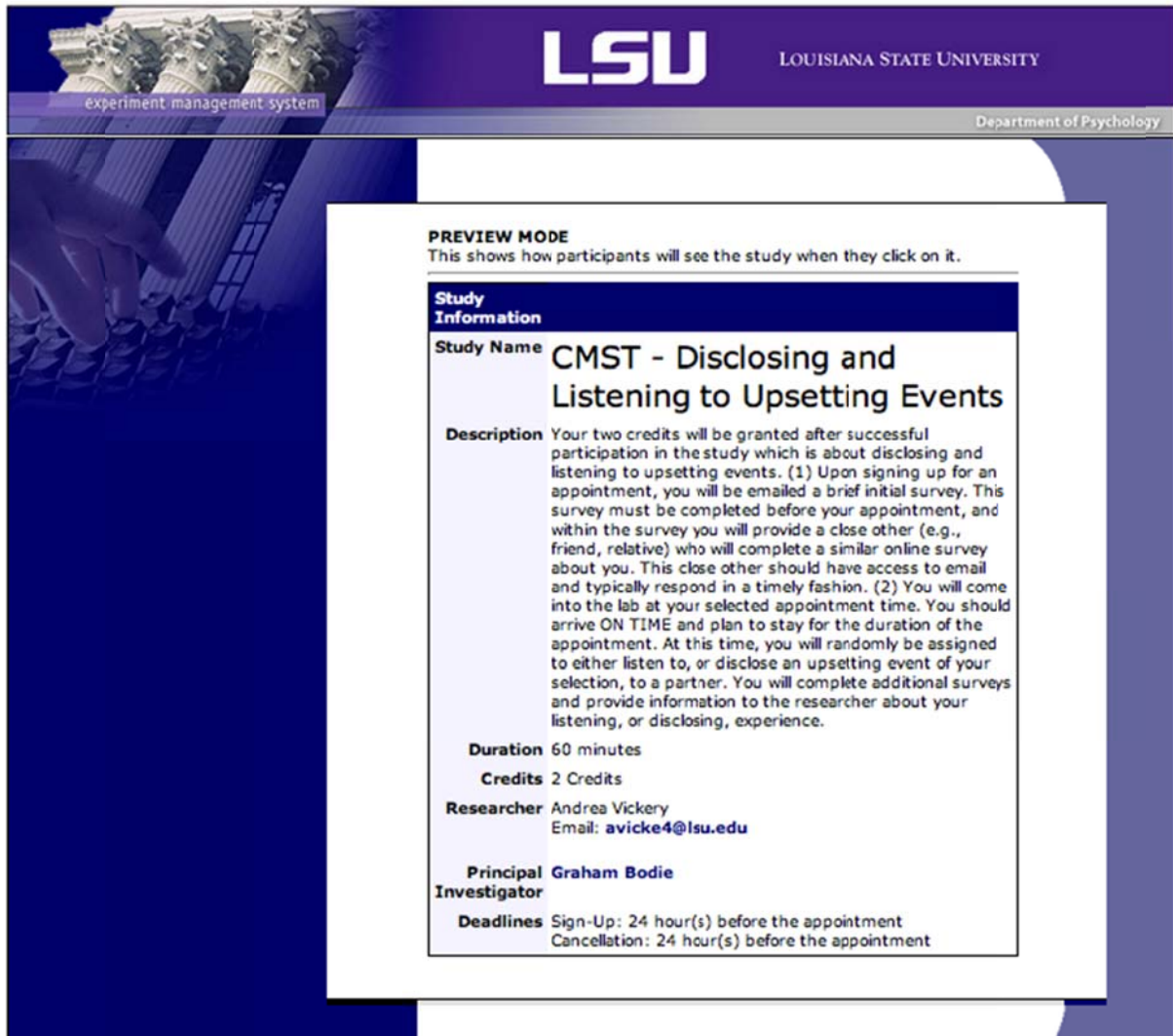
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## Appendix A: Study Information for Participants



The screenshot displays the LSU experiment management system interface. At the top, the LSU logo and 'LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY' are visible, along with the 'Department of Psychology' label. The main content area is titled 'PREVIEW MODE' and includes a sub-header 'Study Information'. The study details are as follows:

Study Information	
<b>Study Name</b>	<b>CMST - Disclosing and Listening to Upsetting Events</b>
<b>Description</b>	Your two credits will be granted after successful participation in the study which is about disclosing and listening to upsetting events. (1) Upon signing up for an appointment, you will be emailed a brief initial survey. This survey must be completed before your appointment, and within the survey you will provide a close other (e.g., friend, relative) who will complete a similar online survey about you. This close other should have access to email and typically respond in a timely fashion. (2) You will come into the lab at your selected appointment time. You should arrive ON TIME and plan to stay for the duration of the appointment. At this time, you will randomly be assigned to either listen to, or disclose an upsetting event of your selection, to a partner. You will complete additional surveys and provide information to the researcher about your listening, or disclosing, experience.
<b>Duration</b>	60 minutes
<b>Credits</b>	2 Credits
<b>Researcher</b>	Andrea Vickery Email: <a href="mailto:avicke4@lsu.edu">avicke4@lsu.edu</a>
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	Graham Bodie
<b>Deadlines</b>	Sign-Up: 24 hour(s) before the appointment Cancellation: 24 hour(s) before the appointment

## **Appendix B: Study Email**

Dear student,

Thank you for signing up for the research credit entitled “Disclosing and Listening to Upsetting Events.” Upon successful completion, you will earn two (2) research credits for your participation in this study.

Before your scheduled timeslot, please complete the survey that can be found here:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TSXL7SM>

This survey should take around 20 minutes.

Please note that in this survey we will ask you to provide us with the name & contact information (email address and phone number) of a close other. This participant must be:

- a. Over 18 years of age
- b. Be willing to complete a similar online survey, and
- c. Is someone who knows you well (close friend, family member, significant other, etc).

We will contact this close other and ask him/her to complete an online survey of their perceptions about you. All answers will be kept confidential. You may wish to consider a close other that frequently checks their emails and is likely to respond in a timely fashion to our request. We also recommend that you inform this person that they will be receiving this email so it does not get accidentally deleted.

Should you have any further questions, please reply to this email and I will answer them.

Thank you,

Andrea J. Vickery  
Researcher

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### Consent Form

**Study Approved By:**  
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman  
Institutional Review Board  
Louisiana State University  
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall  
225-578-8692 | [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb)  
Approval Expires: 11-30-2011

1. Study Title: **Disclosing and Listening to Upsetting Events**
2. Performance Site: Communication Studies Matchbox Interaction Lab
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,  
M-Th, 10:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m.  
Dr. Graham Bodie, 225-578-6683 ([gbodie@lsu.edu](mailto:gbodie@lsu.edu))
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to investigate how people disclose about and listen to recent stressful events.
5. Subject Inclusion: Since stressful events are a normal part of the college student's experience, all students qualify for inclusion.
6. Number of subjects: 180
7. Study Procedures: The study will be conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of 20 minutes of online surveys, for which consent was already ascertained. In this second phase, participants will be assigned to either talk about a recent stressful event or to listen to someone disclose a recent stressful event. The conversation will take approximately 10 minutes, after which participants will be asked to fill out questionnaires about the conversation. The total time for this phase is approximately 40 minutes.
8. Benefits: Subjects will earn two research participation credits toward their CMST course grade. After the study is completed, interested participants will also be given access to information that might help them cope better with problems. Those interested should notify the research assistant of their interest.
9. Risks: The only study risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information obtained from the interviews or surveys. However, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. First, your name will not be included on any of the survey material. Instead, each participant will be identified only by a number. These numbers will only be associated with names in a separate file; once we have matched all data obtained from each participant that file will be destroyed and never associated with data. All data files will be kept in a secure and locked office on a secure computer to which only the principle investigator has access.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures:  
The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, [irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu), [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb). I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Selected Study Measures

### **Part 1: Disclosing a personal event**

In the space provided below please identify two (2) emotionally distressful events that you have experienced in the past 30 days **THAT YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE DISCLOSING TO YOUR CONVERSATIONAL PARTNER**. Only a brief description is necessary.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Please recall each of these two events now and indicate the extent to which each of these events was emotionally distressful, i.e., upsetting, disappointing, and saddening to you.**

<b><u>Event 1</u></b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not at all						very emotionally
	emotionally distressing						distressing
<hr/>							
<b><u>Event 2</u></b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not at all						very emotionally
	emotionally distressing						distressing

### **Part 2: Evaluating your conversational partner**

Now, please think about the conversation that you just had with the other participant. Think about the things that your conversational partner said and did, and evaluate his or her behaviors.

Each numbered item consists of *pairs* of terms, with the numbers 1-7 in between. For example:

**Derogatory                      1    2    3    4    5    6    7                      Complimentary**

Each pair of terms describes contradictory characteristics—that is, your partner cannot be both derogatory and complimentary. The numbers between each pair of terms form a scale between the two extremes. You are to choose a number which most accurately describes your feelings about your conversational partner. For example, if you think your partner was very derogatory,



you would choose 1. If you think that your partner was slightly complimentary, you might choose 6. If you think your partner was somewhat derogatory and somewhat complimentary, you would choose 4.

Read through each of the following pairs below and circle one number for each pair.

**To what extent do you think that the behavior of your conversational partner was...**<sup>11</sup>

1. Supportive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unsupportive
2. Sensitive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Insensitive
3. Encouraging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Discouraging
4. Reassuring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Upsetting
5. Generous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Selfish
6. Understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Misunderstanding
7. Normal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Weird
8. Compassionate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Heartless
9. Useful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Useless
10. Phony	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Genuine
11. Considerate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Inconsiderate
12. Knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Ignorant
13. Unrealistic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Realistic
14. Spontaneous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Deliberate
15. Unnatural	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Natural
16. Honest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dishonest
17. Helpful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Hurtful
18. Sincere	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cheesy
19. Distressing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Comforting
20. Trustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Not trustworthy

85. To what extent would you like to interact more with your conversational partner in the future?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

---

<sup>11</sup> There are 8 additional items referenced that are not from the original scale. These items are numbers 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, and 20.

## Appendix E: Study Script

### I. All participants, upon individual arrival:

*We will be using B17 (the room closest to the stairs; the interaction room) as the meeting room. The door to B16 (the observation room) should be closed and participants should be seated at a chair located at the round table in the far corner.*

#### Actions:

- Prep all material prior to any participant arriving
  - o Have one consent form on a clipboard at each chair
  - o Have a Listener pre-conversation packet on the table in the interaction room
  - o Have a “Part 1” form on the table in the observation room
  - o Make sure all material has the correct participant number on each page!!!
- Greet each participant and make sure s/he is in the right place
- Ensure each participant has completed the online portion of the study
  - o If so, tell him/her to have a seat in one of the chairs
  - o If not, inform him/her that they have failed to qualify for the study, they can complete the survey & sign up for a future timeslot but will be marked “unexcused” from this timeslot.
- Have qualified participants read and sign a consent form

### II. Assigning roles:

(3 min)

#### To the Participants:

“Thank you again for your participation today. My name is [state your name]; and this is [introduce partner], why don’t y’all introduce yourself to each other.”

*[Give them time to introduce themselves. Remember names!]*

“Now, just to confirm: you both have completed your initial survey, right? Great. We can begin.”

“To make sure that I cover everything I will read from this script now. Let me first outline the three parts of the study that were covered in your consent form:

1. In the first part of the study you will be asked to fill out a brief packet of information
2. In the second part of the study you will be asked to talk about a personal event. The conversation will be videotaped and will last five minutes.
3. In the final part of the study you will be asked to evaluate the conversation as well as your conversational partner.

Does that sound fine with you guys?”

### Assigning Roles

“Before we begin, I want to randomly assign you your roles for the conversation, that is who will be the one who gets to pick the topic and talk about it and who gets to respond.”

*[ACTIVE LISTENING CONDITION: Approach the confederate and have him/her choose one slip from a container. The confederate will know to choose the GREEN slip which putatively randomly assigns him/her to be the LISTENER.]*

*[NORMAL LISTENING CONDITION: Approach the person who sits in the left chair and have him/her choose one slip from a container. GREEN = LISTENER; PINK = DISCLOSER]*

*[MAKE SURE to check off who is the Listener and who is the Discloser!!!!]*

“Let me please see the slip. OK, so you (*turn to Discloser – PINK SLIP*) will talk about a topic and you (*turn to Listener – GREEN SLIP*) will respond. How exactly that works we talk about in a minute, but is that fine with you guys?”

*[If the GREEN SLIP is to your left side, ask participants to switch seats now.]*

- “Before we do that, I need for you guys to switch seats because my talker always sits to the left and my responder always sits to the right. With 180 dyads, I try to have some order on the video tapes.”

“Okay. Just for now, we will be separating you both while you fill out some individual paperwork; this should take you no more than ten minutes. Why don’t you [*turn to Discloser*] come with me.”

### **III. Pre-Conversation Packets**

**(10 min)**

#### **Actions:**

- Separate participants
  - o Discloser should come into B16 (the observation room).
  - o The Listener stays in the interaction room, seated in his/her chair.

#### **Discloser instructions - A**

“Please take a moment to fill out this form that helps you identify the topic that you will disclose.”

*[While Discloser is filling out Part I, go into the interaction room and hand the Listener his/her packet. If it is an Active Listener, hand him/her the reminder sheet].*

#### **Listener instructions**

“Your role in the upcoming conversation will be to listen and respond as you normally would in a conversation about emotionally distressing events with your friends. Before you do that we’d like you to complete a few scales about yourself and your communication styles.”

*[Go back to Discloser. When s/he finishes Part I. Once finished, preferably choose an event with numbers 4 and above but below 6 circled. If multiple events meet this criterion, choose the one that most closely resembles an academic stressor.]*

#### Discloser instructions – B

“Let me see. OK, why don’t you go ahead and talk about this event (*highlight the selected event*). Please go ahead now and fill out the other questionnaires having this event on your mind, and these questionnaires will also get you thinking more about the selected event so that you are then ready to talk about it.

#### **IV. Conversation:**

**(7 min)**

##### Actions:

- Bring participants back together
- Take all paperwork

##### For the Participants:

“Let’s go ahead and prepare for that five minute conversation. Now, (*Discloser name*), why don’t you get ready to talk about the event that you and I identified. Talk about what happened and what made this particular event so distressing, how the event made you feel, and why it’s still painful/distressing now. Take your time and make sure to provide your conversational partner, (*Listener name*) here, with as much information as is necessary and as you feel comfortable disclosing, all right?

And you, (*Listener name*), you want to go ahead and respond as you normally would respond in a conversation about emotionally distressing events with your friends. So this is just a regular conversation meaning that, (*Listener name*), you talk too; it is just that we focus on (*discloser’s name*) topic. Any questions?

I’m going to leave and get some equipment set up. Feel free to get to know each other first, just don’t talk about the distressing event quite yet. You can begin that conversation as soon as I knock on wall. I will knock on the wall when the five minutes are over so you know when I will be coming back in the room.

*[Leave the room and indicate the beginning of the conversation after 1 minute.  
After five minutes, knock on the door then enter to indicate the end of the conversation.]*

##### **Actions:**

- Ensure equipment is RECORDING – the file name should be the dyad number (e.g., 001, 002)
- Knock on wall after exactly 1 minute

While the conversation is going, prep all post-conversation materials

- Make sure participant numbers are on all packet pages
- Place Post-Conversation – D packet on observation room computer desk

## V. Post-Conversation

(25 min)

*[After 5 minutes, knock on interaction room. Pause 3 seconds and enter.]*

### To Participants:

“We are now almost done with this study, thank you both again for participating. *[Turn to Discloser]*, please follow me and bring your belongings.”

“*[Turn to Listener]*, you’ll remain here.

### Actions:

- Listener stays to complete post packet and two tests (RCQ, IPT)
- Discloser follows researcher into observation room
- One person stays with listener to assist in completing packet and tests

### To Discloser

“We are interested in learning more about your thoughts and feelings that occurred during your experience talking about the event. First, we would like you to fill out this packet *[post-conversation – D already on desk]*.

*[While Discloser completes packet, get the video ready and the Thought Form]*

*[Once finished with packet]*: “Now, we will be playing back a recording on this computer screen *[have Discloser sit at observation computer]*. While you watch, we would like you to think about how you just evaluated the conversation, your feelings, and your conversational partner. As you watch, please pause the tape at any point where you had a specific reaction or judgment of what the listener said or did. Please note the time and your reaction on the form here *[show Discloser it has a front and back]*.”

*[Make sure Discloser knows how to play, pause, and resume the video. Stay in the room to help him/her.]*

### To Listener

“We are interested in learning more about your thoughts and feelings that occurred during your experience listening and responding to your conversational partner. First, we would like you to fill out this packet *[post-conversation – L]*.

*[While Discloser completes packet, get RCQ ready]*

### RCQ Instructions

“This next questionnaire [*hand Listener RCQ*] asks you to describe two people whom you know. Please read the directions on the first page and let me know if you have questions.”

[*once finished with first page*]

“Okay, you can turn the page, and I’ll give you five minutes.”

[*Start timer. Once five minutes is over...*]

“Okay, turn the page, and you’ll have five minutes to describe the other individual.”

### IPT Instructions

“This last task is on the computer [*have participant sit at computer*]. For this task you will be asked to watch several short video clips and answer a question about each. All the instructions will appear on the screen, and the form is here [*show form*]. If you have questions, let me know.”

## **VI. Debriefing**

### Actions:

- Thank participants, debrief them
- Inform participants that research participation system will be updated as soon as their close other completes the survey.
- Gather all post-conversation packets

### Debriefing

“Thank you for your participation today. Please follow up with your close other to ensure they complete that quick survey, as soon as that’s done your research credit will be granted. Since talking about and listening to stressful events can be a stressful experience we have taken the liberty to compile information about the Student Health Center if you need it. If you would like further information about this study, please let me know now, and I can provide your email address to the principle investigator. If not, you may go.”



## Mental Health Service

### Welcome to LSU's Mental Health Service

#### Clinical Consultation

A Clinical Consultation, which is your first in-person appointment with the Mental Health Service, can be obtained by calling us at: 225-578-8774.

The Purpose of this 30-minute confidential appointment is to assess each individual's specific needs. During the consultation a mental health clinician will offer recommendations and help you create a plan to address your concerns. Typically these plans will include referrals to professional services in/or outside the LSU system.

## Emergencies

### MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCIES

It is recommended that students call the clinic to schedule for a **Clinical Consultation**. However, LSU Mental Health Service has counselors available for emergencies during regular clinic hours.

#### FAQs about Emergencies

Q: What constitutes an Emergency? A: Typically emergencies involve traumatic and life-threatening situations, such as suicide and sexual assaults.

Q: What should I do if I have an emergency? A: If your situation becomes urgent, or if a medical emergency arises immediately do one of the following:

- Call Mental Health Service at (225) 578-8774 during **clinic hours**. A mental health clinician can talk with you about the urgent situation and plan your next step with you.
- Call the LSU crisis hotline "The Phone" at (225) 924-5781. Trained counselors are available 24 hours per day to talk with you.
- Go to a local hospital emergency room. In Baton Rouge we suggest going to the COPE Team (225) 765-6565 at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital, 5000 Hennessey Blvd.
- Call 911.

## Location

Located on the corner of Infirmary Road and Chimes Street.

## General Hours of Operation

### Fall & Spring Semesters

- Monday – Friday 8am - 5pm
- Saturday *[Medical Clinics & Pharmacy only]* 8am - 11:30am

### Summer Semester

- Monday - Friday 8am - 4:15pm
- Saturday Closed

The Mental Health Service is located on the second floor of the Student Health Center. The Student Health Center is located at the corner of Infirmary Road and Chimes Street, across from the School of Music.



Louisiana State University

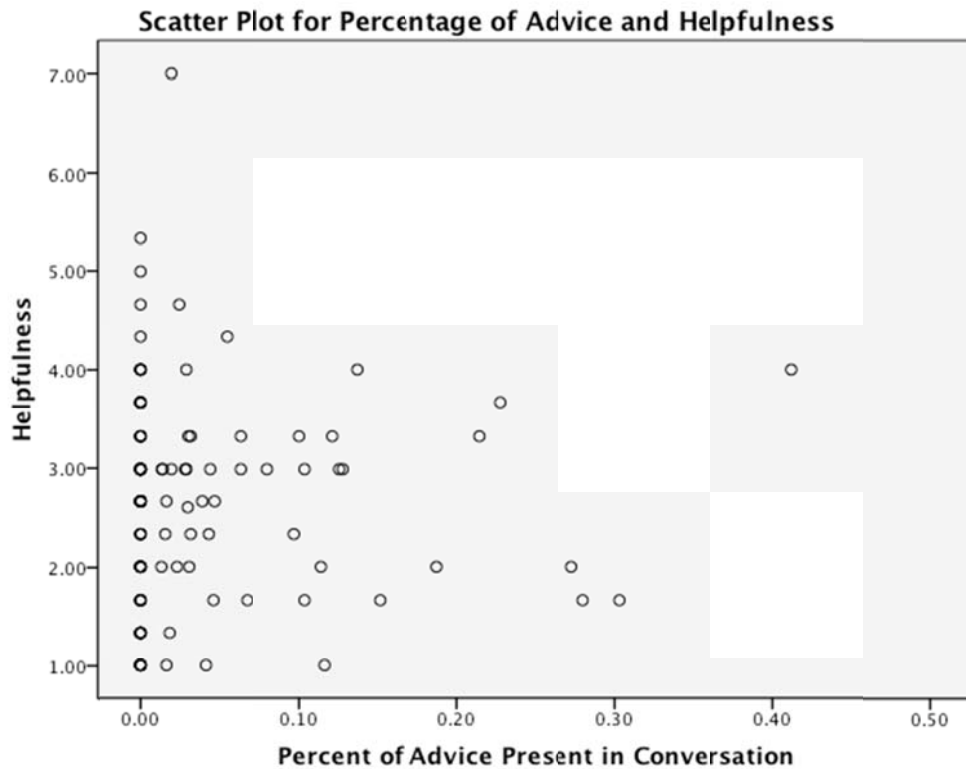
Room 250 Student Health Center

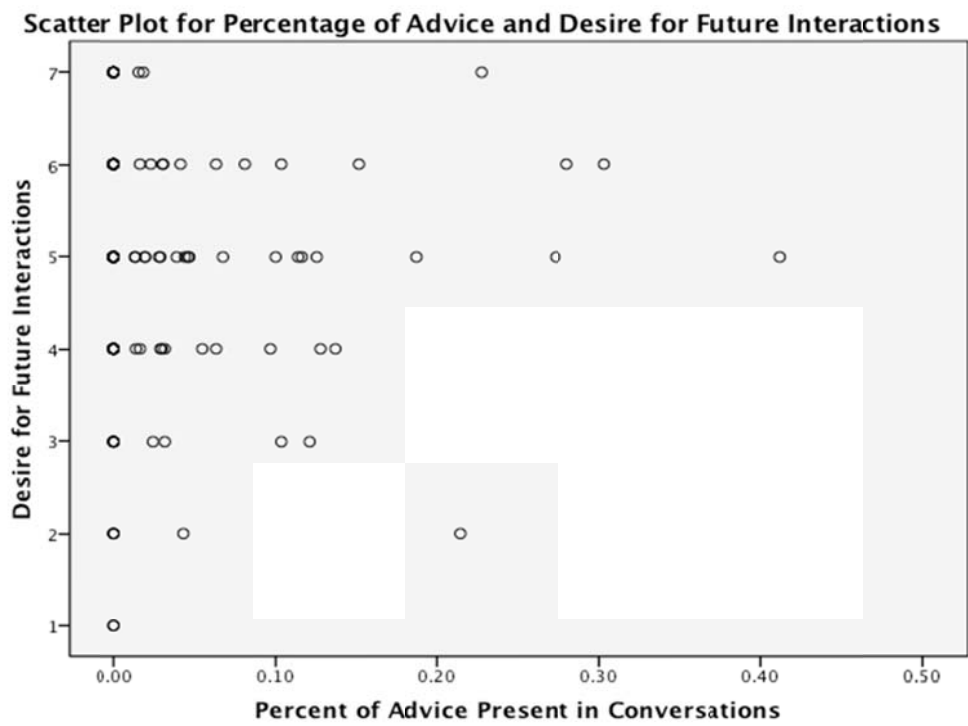
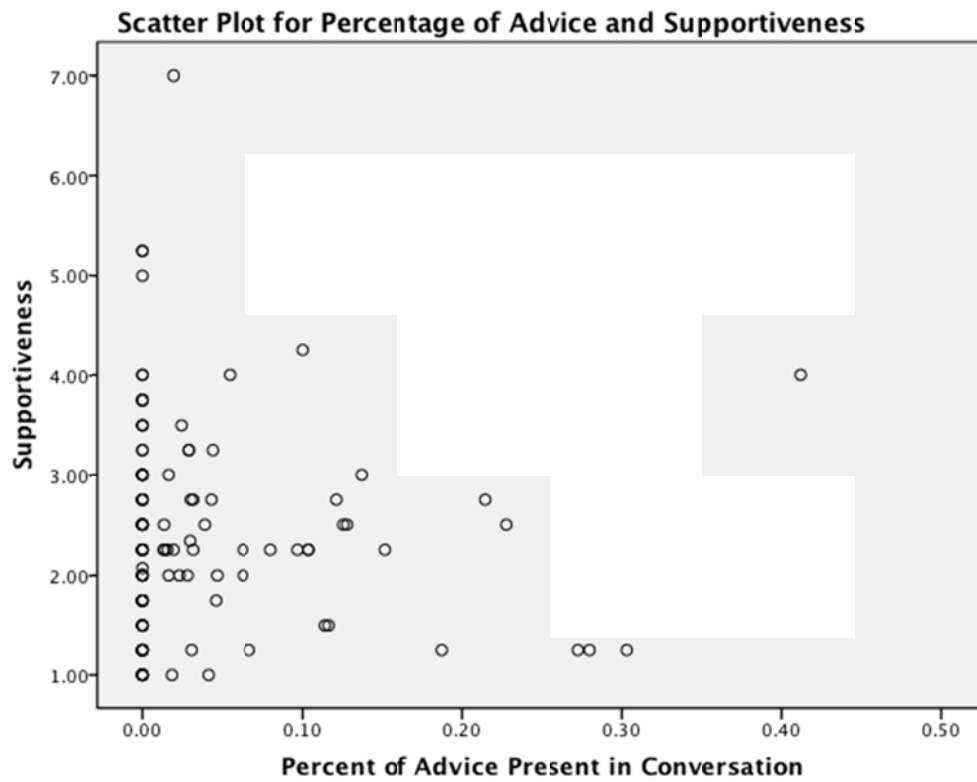
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

Phone: 225-578-8774 Fax: 225-578-1147



## Appendix G: Scatter Plots





### Appendix H: Summary Regression Statistics

Dependent Variable	Model Fit Statistics	b <sup>*</sup>	β	t	sig <sup>**</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>
Helpfulness (H2)	$F(1, 123) = .123, p < .727$	.481 (1.373)	.032	.350	<i>ns</i> (.727)	.001
Sensitivity (H2)	$F(1, 123) = 1.189, p < .278$	1.375 (1.261)	.098	1.090	<i>ns</i> (.278)	.010
Supportiveness (H2)	$F(1, 123) = 0.10, p < .921$	-0.131 (1.316)	-.009	-0.100	<i>ns</i> (.921)	.000
Desire for Future Interactions (H3)	$F(1, 123) = .000, p < .986$	.030 (1.746)	.002	.017	<i>ns</i> (.986)	.000

*Notes.* For all models, Independent Variable was Percent of Advice in Conversation and  $N = 125$ . <sup>\*</sup>The standard errors are presented in parentheses below the unstandardized regression coefficient. <sup>\*\*</sup>The exact p-values are presented in parentheses.

## **Vita**

Andrea was born in August of 1983 in Colorado, and her family moved to Minnesota in the summer of 1984. After 12 years, her family relocated to California, where she attended Aliso Niguel High School. Her mother reminded her to mention her awards and accolades in the music program, including the John Phillips Sousa award (thank you, Mom!). After high school, she attended nearby Chapman University, earning a degree in Business Administration. While at Chapman, she studied abroad in Salzburg, Austria, with classes counting towards her Germanic Studies minor. She also earned a minor in Communication Studies after an amazing Interpersonal Communication course. She was also involved in Alpha Kappa Psi, Rho Chi chapter, during her time at Chapman University.

After graduation, Andrea worked for five years in the mortgage banking industry. It was during this time she saw the importance of understanding individual differences and communicative behaviors. She applied to graduate school with the support of her husband, her parents, her best friend, and some important professors. Zachary, Andrea, Mr. Marvin the rabbit, and Sugar Magnolia the papillon arrived in Louisiana in the summer of 2010. Through her coursework at Louisiana State University, Andrea has developed a deeper interest in the study of listening, supportive communication, and Imagined Interactions, and maintains membership in NCA, ILA, and IARR.

Andrea will start her doctoral coursework in August of 2012 at Louisiana State University. She looks forward to this next step in her education, and plans to stay active researching and learning about interpersonal communication.