

**Hurt Feelings:**

**The Role of Receivers' Personality in Emotional Reactions to Others' Words**

Stephanus Badenhorst, Eleni Seyoum, Erika Nguyen, and April Bleske-Rechek

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Author Note

Stephanus Badenhorst, Behavior Analysis, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephanus Badenhorst, Psychology Department, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI 54702. E-mail: badenhsh8487@uwec.edu

## **Abstract**

The current study aims to determine how much consensus there is among perceivers about the perceived harmfulness of different types of statements. In the spring of 2019, we asked students on the UWEC campus to write down what other individuals have asked them or said to them that they thought were either intentionally or unintentionally hurtful. In addition to those intentionally hurtful and unintentionally hurtful statements, we generated a (baseline) set of clearly positive statements. In the fall of 2019, we randomly assigned 452 participants to one of three rating tasks. Participants assigned to Version 1 rated how hurt each statement made them feel (0=Not hurt at all, 100=Extremely hurt). Participants who get Version 2 rated how anxious each statement made them feel (0=not anxious at all, 100=Extremely anxious). Participants who get Version 3 rated the intent of the person's statement (0=They are NOT trying to be hurtful, 100=They are definitely trying to be hurtful). After rating the statements, participants completed a Words Can Harm questionnaire (Bellet et al., 2018) in which they rated their level of agreement with 10 statements focused on the idea that words, in general, can cause emotional harm. Results from the study showed strong consensus among participants in their reactions to the positive statements but far less consensus for the intentionally and unintentionally hurtful statements. Personality was important: participants who scored high in alienation and stress reaction perceived more hurt, anxiety, and intent to harm in the statements they read

*Keywords:* microaggressions, conversation, hurt, anxiety, intent.

## Introduction

Microaggressions were first introduced to the broader discipline of psychology in the context of race relations and defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Over the past decade, awareness of microaggressions has increased and use of the term “microaggression” has spread beyond race into many domains, including gender and sexuality (Lilienfeld, 2017). In some universities, administrators and faculty distribute lists of words and phrases that students and staff are asked to refrain from using out of concern for their presumed harmful effects (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Despite the good intentions of individuals on the frontlines of the microaggression movement, the research program on microaggressions has not provided (a) clear operational definitions of the microaggression construct; (b) rigorous evidence for the claim that microaggressions cause psychological harm to those who perceive themselves as micro-aggressed against; or (c) evidence that individuals agree about what types of statements are – and are not – harmful (Lilienfeld, 2017). Concern in American society about the potential harm of subtle slights and insults introduces the need for systematic data on *who* feels hurt by *what* types of statements. Thus, labeling too many things as a “microaggression” could backfire by essentially leading people not only to interpret ambiguous statements as harmful but also to self-censor (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

Our lab (alongside other labs around the country; see Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018) is beginning a series of studies to address Lilienfeld’s concerns about the microaggressions construct. In our first study, the aim was to illustrate that a clear operationalization of the term is necessary by showing, experimentally, that priming individuals to perceive others’ words as harmful will lead them to perceive others’ words as harmful as well as to report a lower likelihood of using those words themselves. Through a survey, participants were asked to rate several ambiguous and benign statements and questions (e.g., “What do you like to watch on Netflix?”). Half of the participants rated the statements on harmfulness (1= Harmless, 7=Harmful), and the other half rated the statements on their likelihood of using each of the statement (1=I am unlikely, 7=I am likely). Before rating the statements, however, participants were randomly given one of three versions of a set of introductory sentences. In the *control* condition, participants received an embedded phrase that read “in our everyday interactions with various people, we say and ask all kinds of things.” In the *unintentional harm*, the phrase read “in our everyday interactions with various people, we sometimes say and ask things that are not meant to be harmful but that actually can be harmful and can create a

hostile environment.” In the *intentional harm* condition, participants read “in our everyday interactions with various people, we sometimes say and ask things that are intended to be harmful and create a hostile environment.” The idea was to prime participants about harm before they read each statement and reported how harmful they perceived it to be. At the end of the questionnaire, participants completed a personality inventory to assess whether negative emotionality is related to individual differences in the degree to which people perceive various statements as harmful. Results from the study demonstrated the effects of priming participants, as the participants who were primed with the idea that people say unintentionally harmful words perceived the ambiguous statements as more harmful than those who were not primed at all. (However, those who were primed with the idea that people say intentionally harmful words did not differ from those who were not primed at all.) Notably, we also found that in the “unintentionally harmful” prime condition, participants who were higher in negative emotionality perceived ambiguous statements as more harmful. These results are consistent with Lilienfeld’s concern that telling those who already view themselves and others in a negative to look out for more hurtful things people say might exacerbate unnecessarily such a trend to perceive the negative in others’ words.

To extend this work, then, the objective of the current research is to determine if there is any consensus about what other people perceive as harmful when it comes to the things that people say to one another. We also want to determine whether people’s perceptions of harm in statements – including those nominated by others as statements that are not meant to be harmful -- are related to their level of negative emotionality.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Research Participation System (SONA), which is run by the Psychology Department but open to students across campus. Standard implied consent processes were followed. A total of 571 students participated. Of that initial sample, 115 participants were excluded for spending less than five minutes in the survey, a time we deemed necessary to give if participants were reading the materials and questions. An additional four participants were also excluded from the study because they completed less than 40% of the items. The final sample of participants totaled 452 participants: 150 participants provided *Anxious* ratings, 150 provided *Hurt* ratings, and 152 participants provided *Likelihood of Intention to Hurt* ratings.

## Materials

**Survey preparation.** The research team first collected examples of statements that might hurt. During the spring of 2019, members of the team approached students on campus at the University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire and asked them to list either (a) things others had said to the them or that they had said to others that were *intentionally* harmful, or (b) things others had said to the them or that they had said to others that were *unintentionally* harmful. Three researchers then independently categorized the statements into content domains. The three researchers collectively agreed on 16 content domains, as listed in Table 1. For the purpose of shortening the survey and for subsequent data collection, one statement that had been nominated as intentionally hurtful and one statement that had been nominated as unintentionally hurtful were chosen from each domain. In addition to the intentional and unintentional statements, researchers generated statements that would be perceived as positive. In total, the survey consisted of 48 statements, three statements from each of 16 domains, one positive statement, one unintentionally hurtful statement, and one intentionally hurtful statement.

**Three Surveys.** The research team then constructed a questionnaire that was comprised of the 48 statements (16 domains with three types of statements for each domain), a brief personality inventory, and a brief attitude scale.

Participants were randomly assigned to one version of the statements portion of the questionnaire. For the first version, participants reported how hurt they would feel if someone said each of the statements to them (0= Not hurt at all hurtful, 100= Extremely hurt). Internal consistency was strong for all three types of statements (Intentional  $\alpha = .92$ , Unintentional  $\alpha = .89$ , and Positive  $\alpha = .94$ ). In other words, a participant who felt hurt in response to one intentionally hurtful statement was highly likely to also feel hurt in response to other intentionally hurtful statements. If a participant felt hurt in response to one unintentionally hurtful statement, they were highly likely to also feel hurt in response to other unintentionally hurtful statements. And, if a participant felt hurt in response to one of the positive statements, they were highly like to feel hurt in response to the other positive statements, as well.

In the second version, participants rated how anxious they would feel if someone if someone said each of the statements to them (0= Not anxious at all anxious, 100= Extremely Anxious). The internal consistencies were strong for all three types of statements (Intentional  $\alpha = .93$ , Unintentional  $\alpha = .90$ , and Positive  $\alpha = .92$ ). In other words, a participant who felt anxious in response to one intentionally hurtful statement was highly likely to also feel

**Table 1**

<u>Domain</u>	<u>Intentional</u>	<u>Unintentional</u>	<u>Positive</u>
<b>Personality</b>	All you care about is yourself.	You think too much about what other people think of you.	You are very selfless.
<b>General Ineptitude</b>	You will never be able to do that.	You finally did it.	Great job.
<b>Intelligence</b>	Why are you so dumb?	You don't know that?	Only you could have answered a hard question like that.
<b>Health/Sickness</b>	You look ill.	You should see a doctor.	You are so lively.
<b>Body</b>	You are fat.	You should exercise more.	You are in really good shape.
<b>Clothes/Fashion</b>	I would never wear that.	That is different from what you usually wear.	I like the style of clothes you wear.
<b>Face</b>	Your teeth are crooked.	You should try Invisalign.	I love your smile.
<b>Hair</b>	Your hair looks awful.	Your hair is something else today.	Your hair looks so healthy.
<b>Attractiveness</b>	You're ugly.	You're getting to be so pretty.	You are good-looking.
<b>Habits/Behaviors</b>	You have no life.	You are not living the college experience.	You are so outgoing.
<b>Hygiene</b>	You smell.	You should shower.	You smell so good.
<b>Dating failure</b>	Why would anyone ever date you?	You have to be desirable to get a date.	Anyone would want to date you.
<b>Social Belonging</b>	No one wants to be your friend.	(Making friends might be a struggle for you.)	You're a great friend.
<b>Social Choices</b>	Your friends are lame.	I don't know why you are friends with them.	You have such great friends.
<b>Minimizing</b>	Stop making a big deal out of it.	It was just a joke.	Your feelings are definitely valid.
<b>Personal Insults</b>	Couldn't you just be normal?	(Can you just be cool this one time?)	You are so cool.

*16 content domains with three types of statements for each domain: Intentionally hurtful, unintentionally hurtful, and positive.*

anxious in response to other intentionally hurtful statements. If a participant felt anxious in response to one unintentionally hurtful statement, they were highly likely to also feel anxious in response to other unintentionally

hurtful statements. And, if a participant felt anxious in response to one of the positive statements, they were highly likely to feel anxious in response to the other positive statements, as well.

Participants who were assigned to the third version rated how likely it was that the person who said the statements was trying to be hurtful (0= They are NOT trying to be hurtful, 100= They are DEFINITELY trying to be hurtful). Internal consistencies were again high for all three types of statements (Intentional  $\alpha = .85$ , Unintentional  $\alpha = .86$ , and Positive  $\alpha = .80$ ). In other words, a participant who felt that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to one intentionally hurtful statement was highly likely to also feel that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to other intentionally hurtful statements. If a participant felt that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to one unintentionally hurtful statement, they were highly likely to also feel that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to other unintentionally hurtful statements. And, if a participant felt that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to one of the positive statements, they were highly likely to feel that the person saying the statements was trying to be hurtful in response to the other positive statements.

**Words Can Harm Scale.** All participants, regardless of dependent variable being measured, completed a 10-item Words Can Harm Scale (Bellet e al., 2018) that assessed the degree to which participants perceived harm in things that they read and how harmful what they read could be to others. Participants rated their agreement on a 100-point scale (0= strongly disagree, 100= strongly agree). The Words Can Harm scale had strong internal reliability in each subsample (Hurt sample  $\alpha = .89$ , Anxious sample  $\alpha = .88$ , and Intent ample  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Negative Emotionality Scale.** All Participants also completed a 15-item questionnaire to assess their negative emotionality. The negative emotionality scale used had three facets: aggression, alienation, and stress reaction. The anger facet was not included in the final analysis due to weak internal consistency (Hurt,  $\alpha = .46$ , Anxious,  $\alpha = .40$ , and Intent,  $\alpha = .50$ ). The other two facets were both included. Internal consistency was strong for stress reaction across conditions (Hurt,  $\alpha = .75$ , Anxious,  $\alpha = .62$ , and Intent,  $\alpha = .72$ ). Internal consistency was also strong for alienation (Hurt,  $\alpha = .75$ , Anxious,  $\alpha = .66$ , and Intent,  $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Demographics.** As a final section of the questionnaire, all participants reported their age, gender, area of study, and political orientation.

## Results

**Version 1.** Over 90% of participants rated the *positive* statements ( $M= 2.45$ ,  $SD= 7.70$ ) as not at all hurtful, suggesting strong consensus that these statements are perceived as not hurtful at all (see Figure 2.1). Overall, participants rated the *intentionally* hurtful statements ( $M= 57.90$ ,  $SD= 20.39$ ) as moderately hurtful, but the histogram in Figure 2.2 shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how hurt they felt by the statements. Overall, participants rated the *unintentionally* hurtful statements ( $M= 39.30$ ,  $SD= 17.39$ ) as somewhat hurtful. Figure 2.3 shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how hurt they felt by the statements.

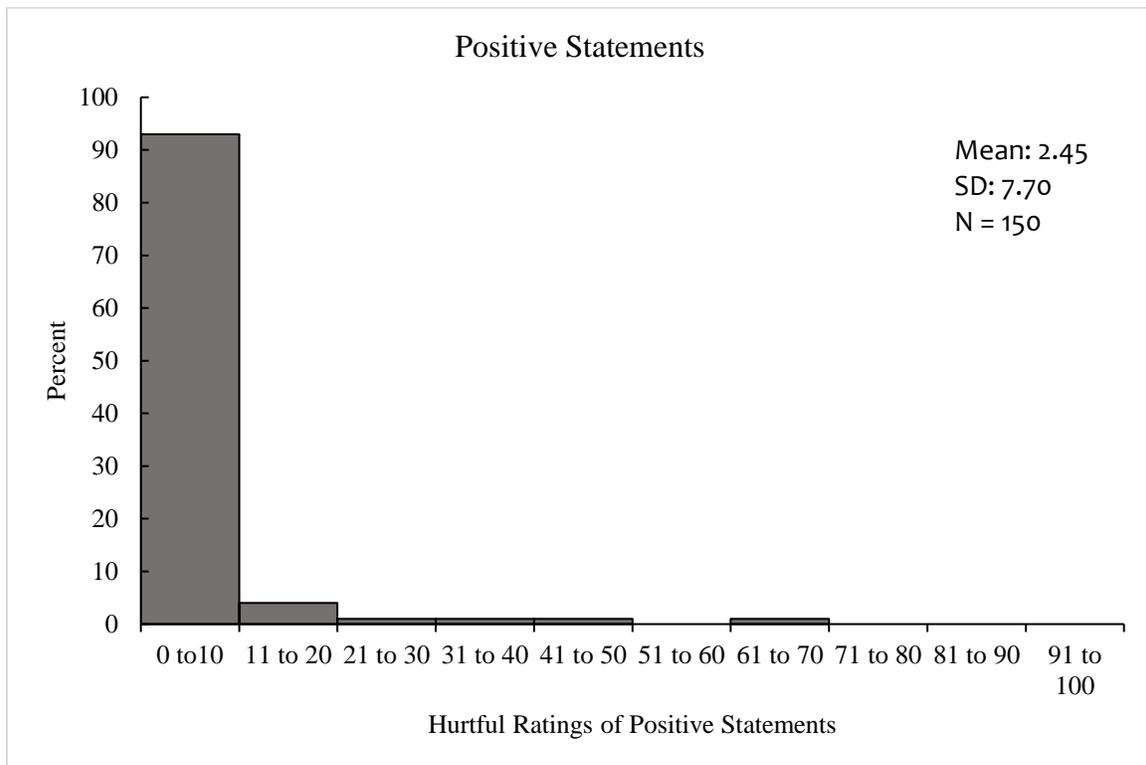


Figure 1.1: Hurt ratings in response to the positive statements

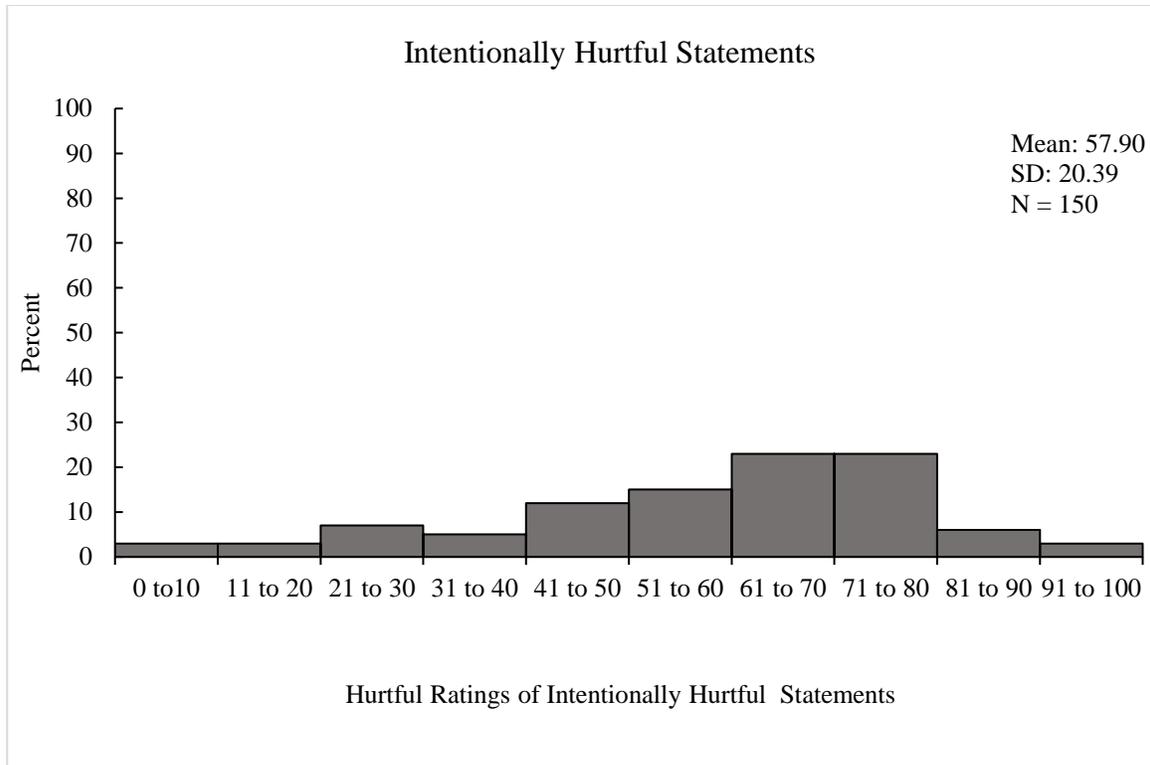


Figure 1.2: Hurt ratings in response to the intentionally hurtful statements.

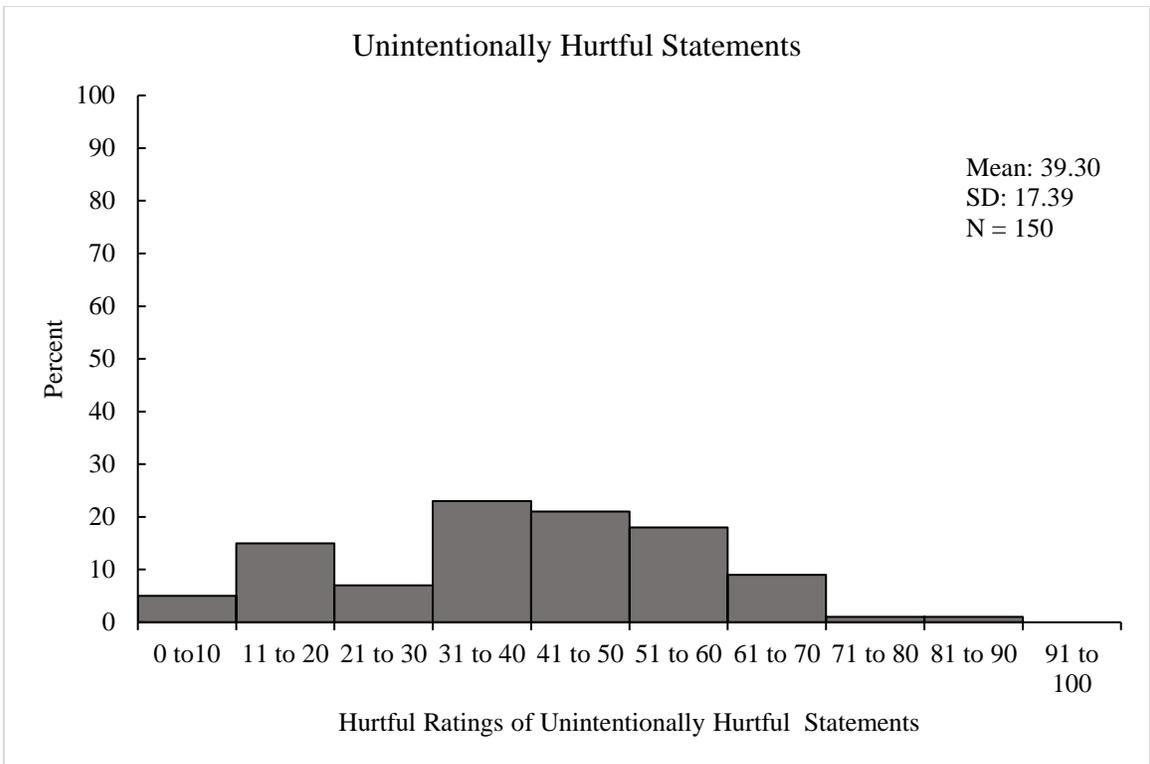


Figure 1.3: Hurt ratings in response to the unintentionally hurtful statements.

Table 2 shows correlations between the participants personality traits and how **hurt** they reported feeling in response to the statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants hurt ratings of the intentionally hurtful statements and their stress reaction scores ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in stress reaction (anxiety) tended to report feeling *more* hurt by the intentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' hurt ratings of the unintentionally hurtful statements and their stress reaction scores ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in stress reaction (anxiety) tended to report feeling *more* hurt by the unintentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was also found between participants' hurt ratings of the intentionally hurtful statements and their words can harm score ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in their belief that words can harm also tended to report feeling more hurt by the intentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' hurt ratings of the unintentionally hurtful statements and their words can harm score ( $p = .017$ ). Alienation (feeling ostracized and victimized by others) was related to feeling hurt by positive statements ( $p = .017$ ). There were no statistically significant correlations between participants' perceptions of hurt in response to the positive statements and their stress reaction scores, or their words can harm scores. There was also no statistically significant correlation between participants' perceptions of hurt in response to either the intentional or unintentional statements and their alienation scores.

**Table 2**

	<b>Positive Statements</b>	<b>Intentionally Hurtful Statements</b>	<b>Unintentionally Hurtful Statements</b>
<b>Stress Reaction</b>	$r = -.01$ 95% CI [.14, .43]	$r = .33^{***}$ 95% CI [.18, .47]	$r = .29^{***}$ 95% CI [.14, .43]
<b>Alienation</b>	$r = .19^*$ 95% CI [.04, .34]	$r = .05$ 95% CI [-.11, .21]	$r = .14$ 95% CI [-.02, .29]
<b>Words can Harm</b>	$r = -.13$ 95% CI [-.30, .05]	$r = .33^{***}$ 95% CI [.18, .47]	$r = .29^{***}$ 95% CI [.14, .43]

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Correlations between participants perceptions of hurt felt on each of the three different statements and their response to the negative emotionality facets and the words can harm scale.

**Version 2.** Over 2/3 of participants reported that positive statements ( $M= 9.82, SD= 12.58$ ) did not make them feel anxious at all. There was substantial consensus across participants that positive statements do not cause anxiety (see Figure 3.1). Overall, participants felt moderately-to-very anxious by the intentionally hurtful statements ( $M= 58.89, SD= 20.07$ ). The histogram in Figure 3.2 shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how anxious they felt by the statements. Overall, participants felt moderately anxious by the unintentionally hurtful statements ( $M= 48.40, SD= 18.21$ ). The histogram in Figure 3.3 shows substantial variability in responses across participants. That is, there was not strong consensus among participants in how anxious they felt by the statements.

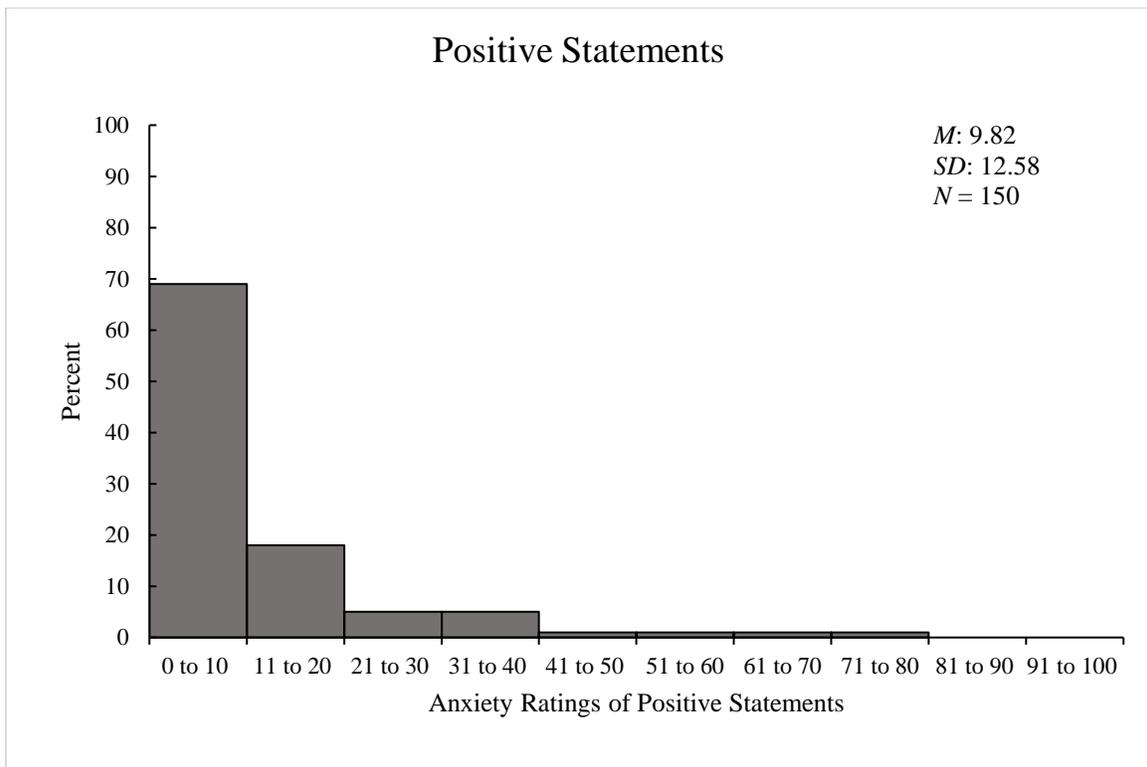


Figure 2.1: Anxious ratings in response to the positive statements.

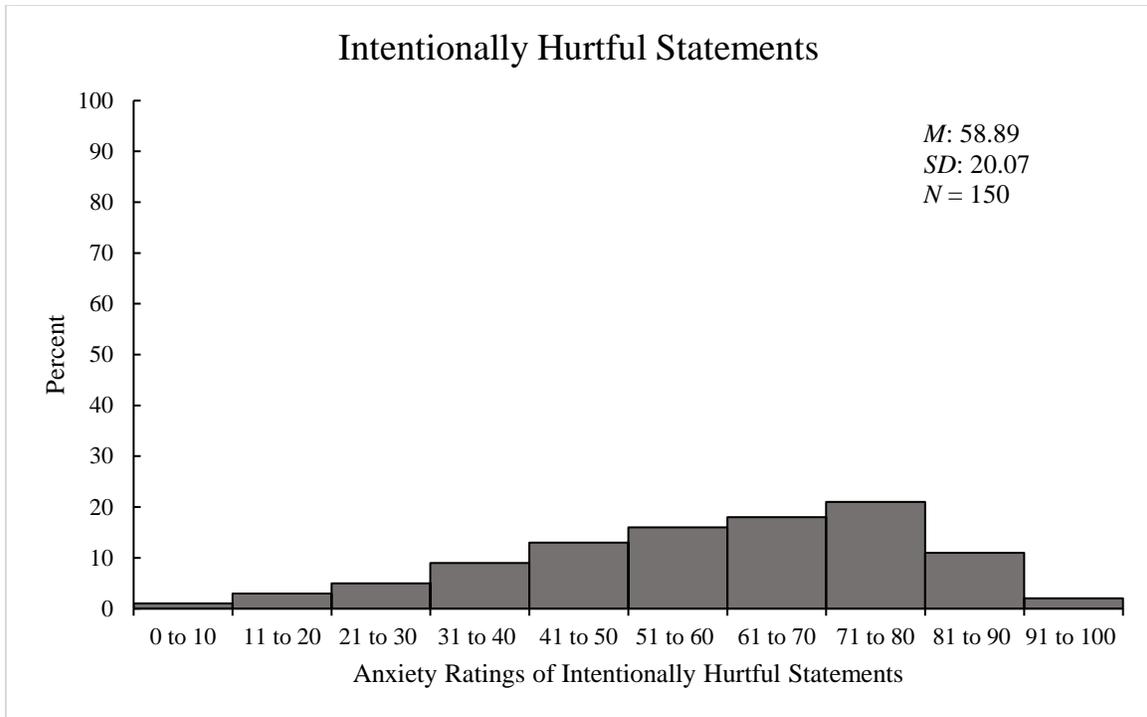


Figure 2.2: Anxious rating in response to the intentionally hurtful statements.

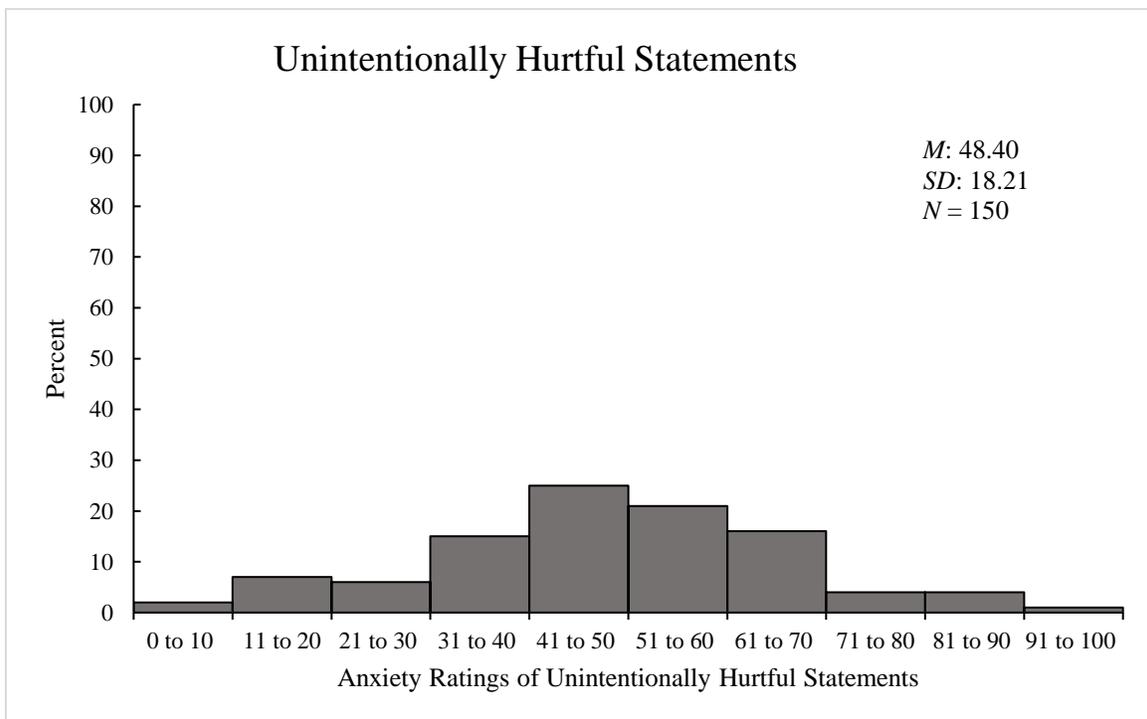


Figure 2.3: Participants rating on how anxious the unintentionally hurtful statements made them feel varied a lot from one participant to another with most participants ratings of the statements falling around the indifferent point.

Table 3 below shows correlations between participants personality traits and how anxious they reported feeling in response to the statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' anxious ratings of the intentionally hurtful statements and their stress reaction scores ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in stress reaction (anxiety) tended to report feeling *more* anxious by the intentionally hurtful statements. unintentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' anxious ratings of the unintentionally hurtful statements and their stress reaction scores, ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in belief that words can harm tended to report feeling more anxious by the unintentionally harmful statements. A statistically significant correlation was also found between participants' anxious ratings of the positive statements and their alienation scores ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in alienation also tended to report feeling more anxious in response to the positive statements. A statistically significant correlation was also found between participants' ratings of the unintentionally harmful statements and their alienation scores ( $p = .006$ ). That is, individuals who scored higher in alienation also tended to report feeling more anxious in response to the

**Table 3**

	<b>Positive Statements</b>	<b>Intentionally Hurtful Statements</b>	<b>Unintentionally Hurtful Statements</b>
<b>Stress Reaction</b>	$r=.10$ 95% CI [-.06, .26]	$r=.31^{***}$ 95% CI [.16, .45]	$r= .34^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .48]
<b>Alienation</b>	$r=.37^{***}$ 95% CI [.22, .50]	$r= .11$ 95% CI [-.05, .27]	$r= .23^*$ 95% CI [.07, .38]
<b>Words can Harm</b>	$r= -.03$ 95% CI [-.02, .15]	$r= .23^*$ 95% CI [.06, .39]	$r= .23^*$ 95% CI [.06, .39]

*Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Correlations between participant's perceptions of anxiety felt with each of the three different statements and their response to the negative emotionality facets and the words can harm scale.*

unintentionally harmful statements. There were no statistically significant correlations between participants felt anxiety in response to the positive statements and their scores of either stress reaction or words can harm. No statistically significant correlation was found between participant's perception of anxiety felt in response to the intentionally harmful statements and the alienation score.

**Version 3.** In response to the positive statements ( $M= 4.57, SD= 6.36$ ), nearly 90% felt that they were not at all likely to be delivered with intent to harm, suggesting a general consensus across participants that positive statements do not betray an intent to harm (see Figure 3.1). Overall, participants rated the intentionally hurtful statements ( $M= 75.65, SD= 12.58$ ) as very likely to be delivered with the intent to be hurtful. The histogram in Figure 3.2 shows that there was some consensus among participants in the intent they perceived in the statements. Overall, participants rated the unintentionally hurtful statements ( $M= 48.47, SD= 14.63$ ) as moderately likely to be delivered with the intent to be hurtful. The histogram in Figure 3.3 shows some consensus (but less than above) among participants in the intent they perceived in the statements.

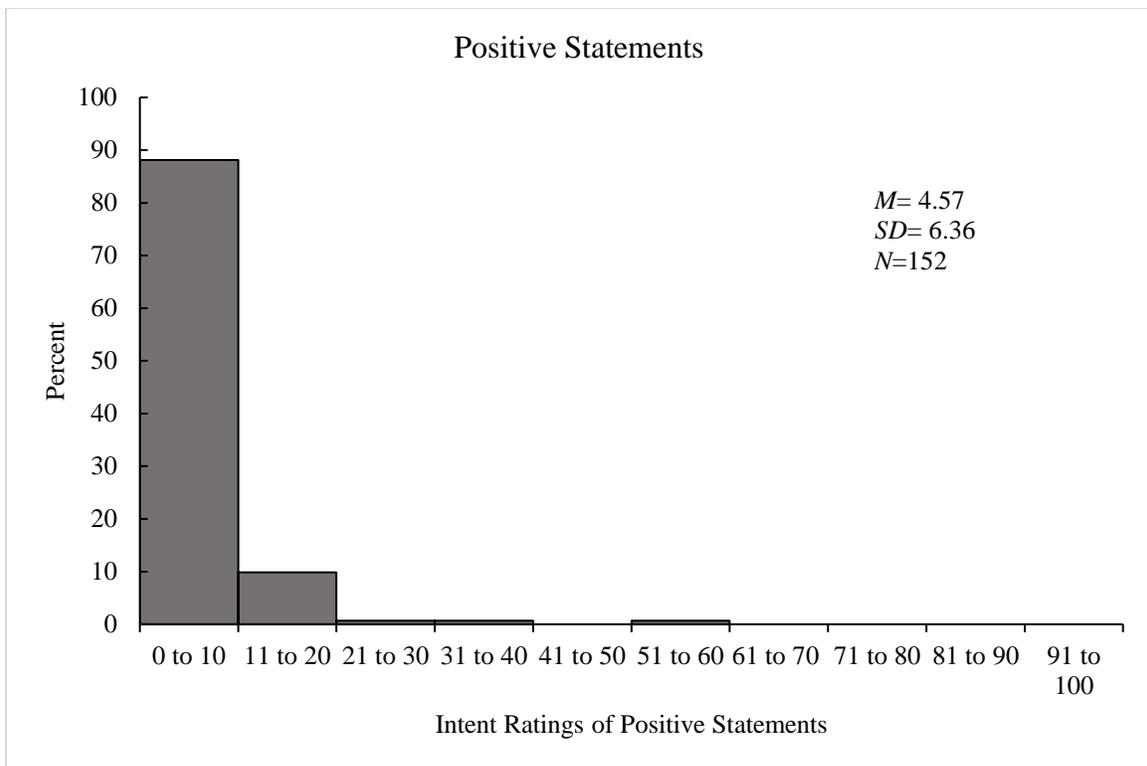


Figure 3.1: Intent ratings in response to positive statements.

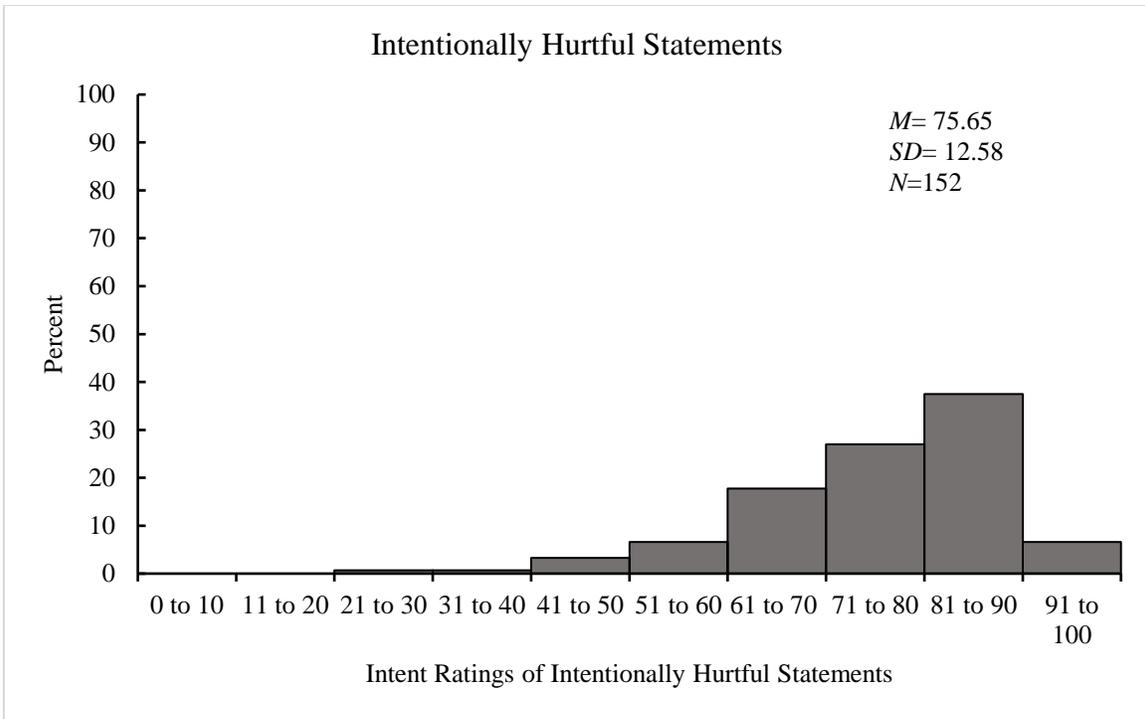


Figure 3.2: Intent ratings in response to intentionally hurtful statements.

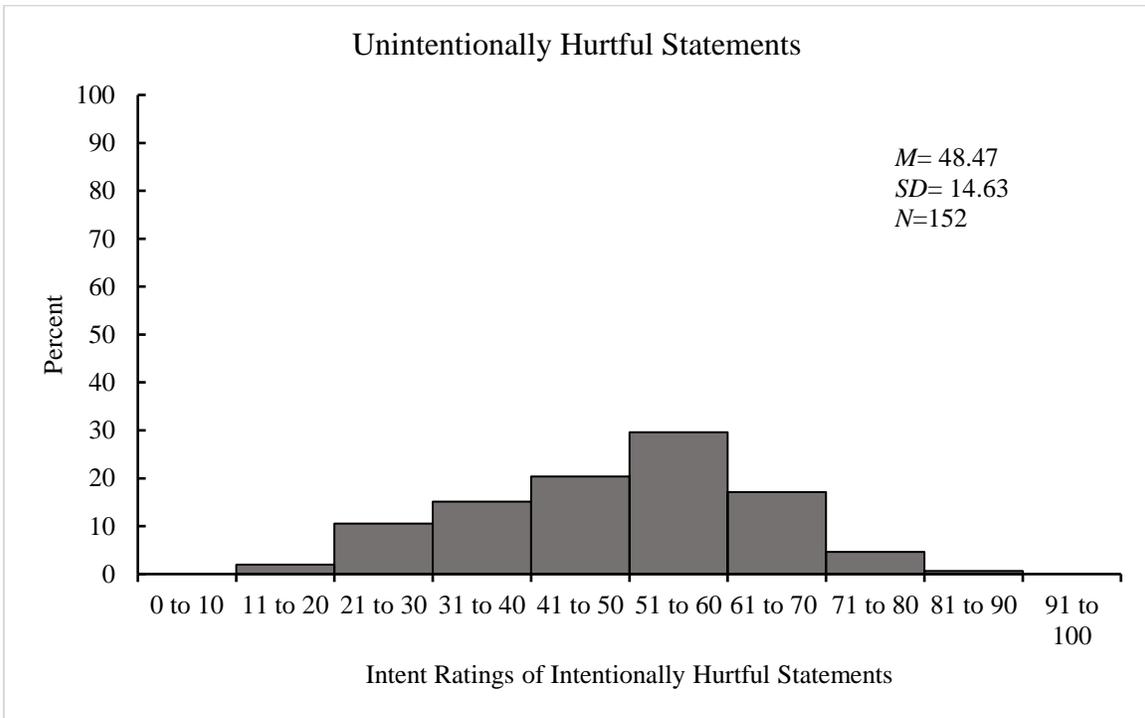


Figure 3.3: Intent ratings in response to unintentionally hurtful statements.

Table 4 shows correlations between participants' personality traits and their rating of how likely the deliverer of the statement was intending to be hurtful. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' perception of the likelihood that the person saying the statement was trying to be hurtful in response to the intentionally hurtful statements and their words can harm scale ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in belief that words can harm tended to perceive greater likelihood of hurtful intent in response to the intentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was also found between participants' perception of how likely that the person saying the statement was trying to be hurtful in response to the unintentionally hurtful statements and their words can harm scale ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who scored higher in belief that words can harm tended to perceive greater likelihood of hurtful intent in response to the unintentionally hurtful statements. A statistically significant correlation was found between participants' alienation scores and their rating of perceiving intent to hurt from the person saying the statement and their response to the positive statements ( $p = .013$ ). No statistically significant correlations were found between participants' stress reaction scores and the ratings of the

**Table 4**

	<b>Positive Statements</b>	<b>Intentionally Hurtful Statements</b>	<b>Unintentionally Hurtful Statements</b>
<b>Stress Reaction</b>	$r=.11$ 95% CI [-.05, .26]	$r=.11$ 95% CI [-.05, .27]	$r=.08$ 95% CI [-.08, .24]
<b>Alienation</b>	$r=.20^*$ 95% CI [.04, .35]	$r=.06$ 95% CI [-.10, .22]	$r=.12$ 95% CI [-.04, .28]
<b>Words can Harm</b>	$r=.02$ 95% CI [-.16, .19]	$r=.35^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .49]	$r=.35^{***}$ 95% CI [.19, .49]

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Correlations between participant's perceptions of the intent of the person say the statement on each of the three different statements and their response to the negative emotionality facets and the words can harm scale.

likelihood that the person saying the statement is trying to be hurtful in response to either the intentionally or unintentionally hurtful statements.

### **Discussion**

We designed this study to determine whether there is any consensus about what other people perceive as harmful when it comes to the things that people say to one another. We found, as expected, clear consensus that *positive* statements are perceived as not hurtful or intended to be hurtful. However, we found far less consensus in participants' reactions to intentionally and unintentionally hurtful statements. Our findings reinforce Lilienfeld's suggestion that the microaggression construct is, at this point, ambiguously defined. That is, it is an open concept, and until it can be measured with tools demonstrating both reliability and validity, we should be using it with caution. Thus, before administrators identify a statement as harmful, we suggest they provide evidence that individuals across a wide span of contexts and individual identities perceive it as harmful.

A second objective of this research was to determine whether individual differences in personality traits are linked to how people react to others' words. Indeed, our participants showed strong internal consistency in their ratings from one statement to the next, such that we were justified in aggregating each participant's responses to the 16 positive statements, the 16 intentionally hurtful statements, and the 16 unintentionally hurtful statements.. Further, participants' aggregate scores were, indeed, related to their level of negative emotionality (neuroticism). People higher in stress reaction (trait anxiety) consistently reacted more negatively to the hurtful statements, whether they had been nominated as intentionally hurtful or not... Although some things people say are undoubtedly hurtful, our findings imply that there is also the complicating factor that some people are more likely than others to perceive relatively innocuous statements as hurtful. Notably, we specifically used statements in our study that stayed away from group identity variables such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and class, and thus we perhaps gave ourselves a conservative test of the possibility that individual differences would relate to people's reactions to the statements. If "microaggressions" are subtle insults and snubs, some people may be far more likely than others to perceive themselves as being victims of microaggressions, no matter whether the context is one tied to group identity or not. As others have noted, people who perceive themselves as microaggressed against also are more likely to struggle with mental health concerns like depression and anxiety. Although the data are observational, one common reason offered for link is that microaggressions *cause* mental health issues. Our data raise the alternative possibility that

negative emotionality is a third variable that may lead to both (1) perceiving oneself as receiving microaggressions and (2) struggling with mental health. Plenty of studies have documented ties between negative emotionality and psychological well-being; the current data have just provided documentation of the tie between negative emotionality and reacting negatively to statements nominated precisely because they were not meant to harm. In conclusion, given the lack of clear consensus about how hurtful various statements are, and the link between negative emotionality and perceiving statements as hurtful, we encourage systematic research that will carefully work toward operationalizing and testing the microaggressions construct. In the meantime, we worry that delivering (mandatory) microaggressions workshops across the academic and corporate world may have unintended consequences. Microaggression workshops have been incorporated into regular business without rigorous testing of their consequences. We await randomized controlled studies that randomly assign people to attend (or not attend) a microaggressions workshop, and then compare workshop attendees' and non-attendees' attitudes about the power of words to be hurtful and cause harm. If attendees in such studies perceive words as more powerful and hurtful after the workshop than non-attendees do, what would that mean, exactly? And how would that have increased perception of words as harmful play out in their subsequent outlook on other people and in their behavior and interactions with others? In the context of our data, we worry that the explosion of the microaggressions construct may have some unintended iatrogenic effects.

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