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AN EXPLORATION OF THE FREQUENCY, ANTECEDENTS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMPLAINING IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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KELLI JEAN K. ASADA

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE FREQUENCY, ANTECEDENTS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMPLAINING IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

By

Kelli Jean K. Asada

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATION OF THE FREQUENCY, ANTECEDENTS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMPLAINING IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

By

Kelli Jean K. Asada

Although complaining is a common form of communication, few studies have investigated the variables associated with it or the effects that complaining has on interpersonal relationships. In Study 1 ($N = 173$) the frequency of interpersonal complaints was estimated and correlates of complaining were explored. In Study 2 ($N = 152$) the effects of perceptions of complaining propensity on liking was investigated along with perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining. Diary and questionnaire methods were utilized in Study 1, and a social relations model analysis was conducted in Study 2. Results suggest that the Complaining Propensity Scale, narcissism, and message design logic are not associated with the number of complaints expressed and that perceptions of a target's complaining propensity are not related to ratings of liking for the target. Results show perceiver, target, and relationship variance in ratings of complaining propensity. In addition, there is self-other agreement and generalized meta-accuracy in perceptions of complaining propensity.

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

There has been a recent increase in research on what Kowalski and colleagues (Kowalski, 1997, 2001; Kowalski, Walker, Wilkinson, Queen, & Sharpe, 2003) refer to as aversive interpersonal behaviors. These aversive interpersonal behaviors, mundane behaviors that people are exposed to on a regular basis such as lying, teasing, arrogance, and complaining, occur frequently in relationships with family members, friends, and romantic partners and can cause tension within these relationships. This paper focuses on one such behavior: complaining.

People complain for a number of reasons including to bring about the change of an undesirable state, for emotional release, to solicit sympathy and understanding, to convey favorable personal attributes, and to elicit social comparison information (Alicke et al., 1992; Kowalski, 1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). In addition to these desirable outcomes, however, complaining can also result in negative interpersonal consequences for the complainer (Kowalski, 1996, 2002, 2003). Complaining has the potential to become what Cunningham and his colleagues (Cunningham, Barbee, & Druen, 1997) label a social allergen. Social allergens are relatively minor obnoxious behaviors that can cause major negative emotional reactions in others. They are defined as "behavior[s] or situation[s] created by another person that may be seen as unpleasant, but not as strongly aversive, to objective observers" (Cunningham et al., 1997, p. 191). Repeated exposure to social allergens may produce a social allergy, "a reaction of hypersensitive disgust or annoyance to a social allergen" (Cunningham et al., 1997, p. 191).

Kowalski (1996) presented a theoretical model of complaining and discussed several functions, antecedents, and consequences of complaining, but few studies have

been designed to test the model and examine the antecedents and consequences of complaining. Another largely unexplored topic is variation in the way people perceive their own and other people's complaining behavior. The purpose of the proposed research is to explore a few of the antecedents and consequences of complaining and to examine perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining among acquainted people.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Complaining

Alicke and his colleagues (1992) argued that "complaints imply or state explicitly that an object, state of affairs, institution, or event falls below the complainer's hopes or expectations" (pp. 286-287). According to their conceptualization, complaining can be distinguished from ordinary criticism in that complaining is an expression of internal feelings of dissatisfaction whereas criticism involves objective, dispassionate observations about an object, event, state of affairs, or institution (Alicke et al., 1992). For example, if Sam's romantic partner Molly said, "You forgot our anniversary," the statement would be considered a complaint because Molly was disappointed that Sam did not remember their anniversary. If a friend of Sam's said, "You forgot your anniversary," the statement would be considered a criticism because he or she was not personally affected by Sam's forgetfulness.

Kowalski (1996) points out, however, that people sometimes complain when they are not dissatisfied. For example, a person who is perfectly healthy may complain about feeling sick to gain attention or sympathy or to get out of performing an undesirable task. Kowalski therefore defines a complaint as "an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both" (1996, p. 180). Criticisms, in contrast, are negative appraisals that are not voiced to achieve personal goals. From Kowalski's perspective, in the above example Molly complained as a means of venting her frustration (intrapsychic goal) or to change Sam's behavior (interpersonal goal) whereas Sam's friend's utterance was not voiced to achieve an intrapsychic or interpersonal goal.

The motivation to achieve interpersonal goals is related to fulfilling interpersonal needs. Schutz (1958) argued that people have three interpersonal needs: the needs for inclusion, control, and affection. The need for inclusion refers to a desire for social contact, a sense of belonging to a group. The need for control is the need to be able to influence other people and be influenced by others. The need for affection refers to the desire to give and receive friendship and love. People establish and maintain interpersonal relationships to satisfy these needs. Complaining may satisfy one's need for control if it results in a change in an unsatisfactory state, and it may serve as a bonding activity if people complain about a common source of dissatisfaction, thereby satisfying the needs for inclusion and affection. Excessive complaining, however, may make it difficult for complainers to satisfy their needs for inclusion and affection. People may develop social allergies to complaining and avoid complainers. The exclusion and accompanying lack of affection may result in loneliness and depression in the complainer if the needs for inclusion and affection are moderate to strong.

Kowalski (1996) proposed a theoretical model of complaining (see Figure 1). She argued that self-focus is "the key factory underlying complaining behavior" (p. 192). It prompts people to evaluate their current and desired states and become aware of discrepancies between them. If their current state fails to meet their expectations the person experiences dissatisfaction. If the dissatisfaction experienced exceeds the person's dissatisfaction threshold, the person then assesses the utility of complaining. If they conclude that complaining will help them achieve their desired state, the complaining threshold is exceeded and they will complain. Kowalski (1996) argued that dissatisfaction is sufficient but not necessary for complaining to occur. As stated previously, people who

are not dissatisfied with their current state may still complain if they believe that complaining will result in desirable outcomes. In this situation, the complainer's dissatisfaction threshold has not been exceeded, but his or her complaining threshold has been exceeded so he or she expresses a complaint.

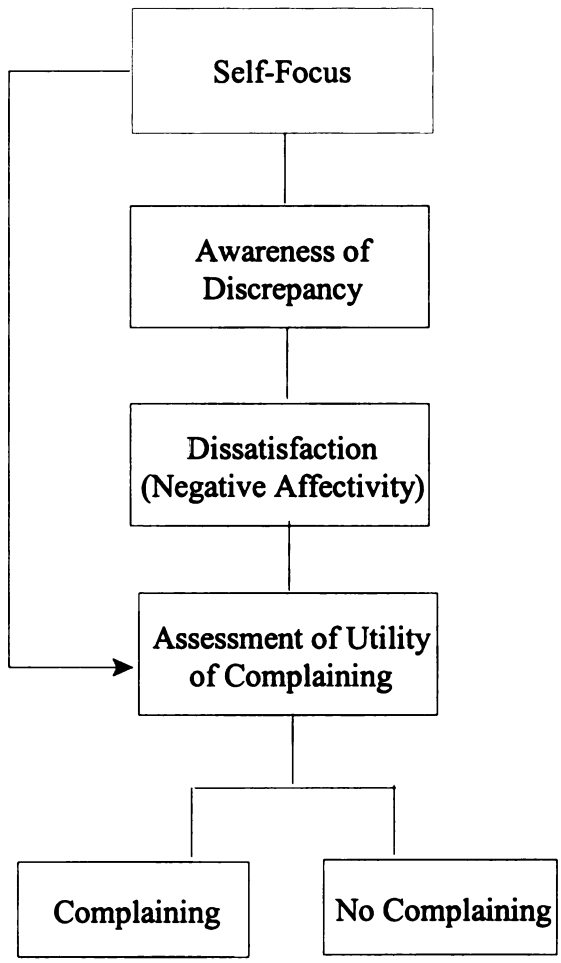

Figure 1. Kowalski's theoretical model of complaining.

Complaints are expressed for the purpose of achieving one's desired state which means achieving an intrapersonal goal such as experiencing catharsis and/or interpersonal

goals such as conveying desirable aspects of oneself to others, saving face, and getting another person to change their behavior (Kowalski, 1996). Complaining can help one achieve both intrapsychic and interpersonal goals simultaneously. For example, if a person complains to his or her roommate because the roommate left a mess in the kitchen, the complainer may feel better after venting, and the complaint may induce the roommate to clean the kitchen.

Individual differences in a person's likelihood of complaining exist, so Cantrell and Kowalski (1994) developed a scale to measure a person's tendency to complain and then tested the validity of that scale. High scores on the Complaining Propensity Scale indicate that one complains frequently, and low scores on the measure indicate that one complains infrequently. The scale validation study revealed that complaining propensity was positively correlated with self-esteem, private self-consciousness, emotionality, and impulsivity and was negatively correlated with embarrassability, fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, and agreeableness (Cantrell & Kowalski, 1994). A stepwise multiple regression analysis revealed that agreeableness, self-esteem, emotionality, and neuroticism accounted for 30% of the variance in complaining propensity (Cantrell & Kowalski, 1994).

Types of Complaints

Several researchers have developed typologies of complaints. Alicke and his colleagues (1992) suggest that there are two general types of complaints: instrumental complaints and noninstrumental complaints. Instrumental complaints are expressed for the purpose of changing an undesirable state. For example, a person may complain to his or her romantic partner that they are not spending enough time together in order to get the

romantic partner to pay more attention to him or her. Noninstrumental complaints are not expected to change the current undesirable state but, rather, are expressed to provide emotional release for the complainer or to solicit sympathy and understanding from listeners. Complaints about bad weather or traffic are typical noninstrumental complaints.

Alicke et al. (1992) identified eight major categories of complaints. *Attitude and emotional expression* complaints are global statements about a target that ascribe relatively enduring attributes to the target. *Behavioral* complaints include complaints about specific or general behaviors enacted by the target. *Physical state* complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction with a physical condition of a person or the state of the environment. The category of *obligations* includes complaints about not fulfilling or not wanting to fulfill commitments. The *disappointment* category includes complaints about service, products, or events falling below expected standards. Complaints about *falling below achievement expectations* refer to complaints concerning one's failure to perform at desired levels on a task. *Obstacles to goal attainment* complaints express frustration over blocked goals. Finally, *desire for change* complaints include a wish for things to be different from the way they currently are.

Alicke and colleagues (1992) acknowledged that some complaints can fall into more than one category. For example, the statement, "My thighs are so fat," is a physical state complaint which can also be considered an attitude expression, and the statement, "I failed my communication exam," is a falling below achievement expectations complaint which can also be considered a behavioral complaint. Alicke and colleagues placed complaints of this nature in the more specific category.

Boxer (1993) also described two different types of complaints in her speech-act research: direct complaints and indirect complaints. Direct complaints are leveled at the person responsible for the perceived offense. In contrast, indirect complaints, which were the focus of her study, are expressions of dissatisfaction about oneself or someone or something that is not present, and the addressee is not held responsible for the dissatisfaction. Boxer categorized indirect complaints into three types: self, other, and situation. *Self* indirect complaints are complaints in which speakers express negative evaluations about themselves. Speakers may denigrate their own behavior, ability, or characteristics. *Other* indirect complaints focus on the behavior, ability, or characteristics of another party. *Situation* indirect complaints can be divided into two sub-categories: personal and impersonal. Situation indirect complaints with *personal* focus involve problems that the speaker encounters. These complaints differ from self indirect complaints in that they do not focus on a shortcoming or characteristic of the speaker. Situation indirect complaints with *impersonal* focus have more global significance such as a situation created by the media or science and technology.

Alberts (1988, 1989) presented a taxonomy of romantic couples' complaints which were expressed as reproaches made in response to some undesirable act committed or desirable act omitted. *Behavioral* complaints are complaints about actions done or not done, whereas *performance* complaints concern how an action is performed rather than whether it was done. *Personal characteristic* complaints are complaints about the whole person, their personality, attitudes, emotional nature, or belief system, and *personal appearance* complaints criticize the partner's appearance. Finally, *complaints about*

complaining concern the manner in which the partner complaints (e.g., content, frequency, etc.).

Cupach and Carson (2002) also examined complaints directed at the recipient of the complaint. They coded friends' and romantic couples' complaints into three categories: dispositional, relational, and behavioral/physical appearance complaints. *Dispositional* complaints are relatively global and stable and focus on flawed personality characteristics. *Relational* complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction with some aspect of the relationship such as the amount of time the partners spend together or the level of intimacy in the relationship. *Behavioral/physical appearance* complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction with specific behaviors, attitudes, or physical appearance.

The typologies developed by these researchers vary in their focus and levels of specificity, and there is considerable overlap among the typologies. Rather than creating a new typology, Kowalski (1996) describes the functions of complaints. Complaining can serve a cathartic function by allowing people to vent their frustrations and dissatisfactions. It can also serve self-presentational functions such as allowing people to save face or convey desirable attributes of themselves to others. In addition, complaining can be used to obtain social comparison information to validate and support for one's thoughts and feelings. Finally, complaints can serve as calls for remedial action, getting the offending party to either engage in desired behaviors or stop performing undesired behaviors.

Responses to Complaints

Alicke and colleagues (1992) identified six types of responses to complaints: agreement with the complainer's statement, disagreement with the complainer's

statement, attempts to resolve the problem, sympathetic responses, noncommittal responses, and no responses. Similarly, Boxer (1993) reported that people responded to indirect complaints by agreeing or commiserating with the complainer, contradicting the complaint, giving advice or lecturing, and giving no response or switching topics. In addition, she reported that people sometimes responded with questions that encouraged the complainer to elaborate on the complaint or with joking and teasing. Alberts' (1988, 1989) taxonomy of couples' responses to complaints included justifications/excuses, denial (disagreement with the complainer or refusal to change), agreement, countercomplaints, and ignoring or failing to respond verbally to the complaint.

The responses to complaints include both positive and negative reactions which suggests that complaining is not an inherently aversive behavior. In fact, the most common response to complaints in both the Alicke et al. and the Boxer studies was agreement and/or commiseration. These findings suggest that if the listener can empathize with the complainer they are more likely to give positive responses to the complaint. Responses to complaints may also vary as a function of the listener's perceptions of how frequently the complainer expresses their dissatisfaction. Excessive complaining can be perceived as aversive and elicit negative responses from listeners (Kowalski, 1996, 2002) whereas infrequent complaining may be perceived as more acceptable. The controllability of the subject of the complaint may also influence the way that people respond to the complaint. Hearing complaints about an uncontrollable situation may be frustrating for the listener if they think that voicing such complaints is pointless. For example, hearing complaints about a third party may annoy a listener if they believe that the complainer should direct the complaint at the guilty party rather than

express it to someone who has no control over the situation. In addition, listening to complaints about something that can be controlled by the complainer may be frustrating because the listener may wonder why the complainer does not do something to improve the situation.

The Present Research

Little research has been conducted to determine which variables predispose a person to be a chronic complainer. The purpose of Study 1 is to estimate how many times people complain in a day and examine three personality traits that are expected to be related to complaining. Much of the research on the interpersonal consequences of conversational complaints has focused on instrumental complaints, complaints directed at the source of the complainer's dissatisfaction (e.g., Alberts, 1988; Alberts & Driscoll, 1992; Cupach & Carson, 2002). Alicke et al. (1992) reported, however, that 75% of the complaints expressed by their participants were noninstrumental in nature. Little is known about how noninstrumental complaints impact complainers and their relationships with others. For example, it is plausible that noninstrumental complaining affects relationship satisfaction in that it may be perceived as a social allergen, or it may be an enjoyable shared activity. Study 2 is an investigation of the relationship between complaining propensity and liking as well as an examination of perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining.

STUDY 1

Prevalence of Complaining

Complaining is thought to be a prevalent form of communication (Alicke et al., 1992; Kowalski, 1996, 2002, 2003). This belief, however, appears to be based more on personal experience than on empirical evidence. The only study that provides data about the frequency of complaints was conducted by Alicke and colleagues (1992) who reported that their participants complained an average of 4.32 times per day. This may be a conservative estimate of the actual prevalence of complaining. Participants in the Alicke et al. study logged each of their complaints, but participants in a preliminary investigation (Asada, 2004) counted the number of *interactions* that they had in which they complained to another person at least once rather than counting each complaint. Participants reported an average of 9.21 interactions in which they complained. Because it is possible that participants voiced more than one complaint per interaction, the actual number of times people complain per day is likely higher than the Alicke et al. study suggests. This expectation is supported by the fact that indirect complaints were found in almost every one of the 426 social conversations recorded by Boxer (1993). Thus, one goal of Study 1 is to gather additional data on the frequency of complaining (RQ1).

Antecedents of Complaining

A second goal of Study 1 is to examine the antecedents of complaining. Cantrell and Kowalski's (1994) Complaining Propensity Scale is intended to measure a person's likelihood of complaining, however, no data have been collected which demonstrate that the scale predicts actual complaining behavior. If the Complaining Propensity Scale is a valid measure of one's tendency to complain, scores on the scale are expected to be

positively related to the number of complaints expressed in the average day. It is therefore hypothesized that there will be a positive correlation between complaining propensity and the number of complaints expressed in a day (H1).

Another likely antecedent of complaining is narcissism. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994), the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder include a grandiose view of the self, a sense of entitlement, arrogant or haughty behavior or attitudes, and the tendency to exploit others. These characteristics may increase a person's likelihood of complaining. People who believe that they deserve special treatment or who believe that they are superior to others are expected to experience dissatisfaction more readily than people who do not have such beliefs. Consistent with this reasoning, in a 14-day diary study people high in narcissism reported a higher number of transgressions committed against them than did people low in narcissism (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003). In addition, people who exploit others may complain in order to get others to do what they want them to do. It is therefore hypothesized that narcissism will be positively related to the number of complaints expressed in a day (H2).

Message design logic, (O'Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987), is a third probable antecedent to complaining. Message design logics are message producers' implicit theories of how communication should be structured to facilitate the achievement of communicative goals. The number and type of communicative goals a message producer pursues varies from situation to situation. Message design logic does not have much of an effect on message attributes when message producers either lack clear goals

or have one dominant goal. When a message producer has multiple competing goals, however, message design logic has a greater influence on the attributes of the message that he or she produces in order to achieve these goals.

O'Keefe (1988) describes three different message design logics: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical. The fundamental principle of the *expressive* message design logic is that, "language is a medium for expressing thoughts and feelings" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84). People who are this message design logic express their internal thoughts and feelings clearly and honestly with little editing of the message out of concern for the listener's face. The speaker essentially "dumps" their current mental state onto listeners (O'Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). Expressive messages contain no references to the future accomplishment of the immediate task (O'Keefe, 1990). People who are expressive reason that the only job that a message can accomplish is communicating one's inner state.

The fundamental principle of the *conventional* message design logic is that, "communication is a game played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 86). People who are this message design logic believe that their goals should be achieved within the boundaries of socially appropriate behavior. Whereas the expressive message design logic dictates, "express what you think," the conventional message design logic dictates, "say what needs to be said in order to secure the desired response in the present context." Conventional messages reference the immediate task to be accomplished and point out the message target's obligation to perform the task. People who are conventional create messages that point out features of the context that justify their demanding the performance of future goal-

related actions (O'Keefe, 1990). Conventional messages may also contain references to negative consequences that may be incurred if the desired actions are not performed.

The fundamental principle of the *rhetorical* message design logic is that, "communication is the creation and negotiation of social selves and situations" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87). People who are this message design logic strive to create the desired context with the messages they produce by reframing the situation. Rhetorical messages involve perspective-taking and the negotiation of explicit solutions and specific desired outcomes for both interactants.

Of the three message design logics described by O'Keefe, the expressive message design logic in particular is expected to be related to complaining behavior. Complaining is a way to express one's internal state of dissatisfaction. If expressives readily communicate their internal thoughts and feelings with little concern for the thoughts and feelings of others they are likely to complain when they are dissatisfied. It is therefore hypothesized that the expressive message design logic will express more complaints than the conventional or rhetorical message design logics (H3).

Method

Participants

Participants were 173 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large university in the Midwest. The sample was 68.2% female (n = 118) and 29.5% male (n = 51), and the mean age of the participants was 21.90 (SD = 3.79). The majority of participants were white or Caucasian (72.8%) followed by black or African American (11.6%), Asian or Asian American (8.1%), other (3.5%), and Hispanic or Latino (1.7%). Four participants did not report their sex, age, and ethnicity.

Procedures

Participants completed an in-class survey composed of Kowalski and Cantrell's (1994) Complaining Propensity Scale, a measure of narcissism, and demographic questions. They also wrote a message in response to a hypothetical scenario. The messages were later classified as characterizing one of three message design logics (O'Keefe, 1988, 1990; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). Finally, participants kept a complaint diary in which they recorded all of the complaints that they expressed in one day and provided information about the circumstances surrounding each complaint.

Measures

Complaining propensity. Cantrell and Kowalski's (1994) Complaining Propensity Scale, a 14-item, 7-point measure (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), was used to assess participants' propensity to complain (see Appendix A).[1] The scale was subjected to item analyses and confirmatory factor analysis (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982) which revealed that two items decreased the internal consistency of the scale. These items were therefore deleted. The responses to the remaining 12 items were averaged to yield a total score with higher scores indicating greater complaining propensity ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = .91$). Complaining propensity was slightly negatively skewed.

Narcissism. Three dimensions of narcissism were assessed with an 20-item, 7-point Likert-type measure (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) that was constructed for use in a previous study (Lee, 2004; see Appendix B). Item analyses and confirmatory factor analysis revealed that eight items decreased the internal consistency of their respective subscales so these items were deleted. Entitlement was measured with five items ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.12$, $\alpha = .82$), exhibitionism was measured with four items

($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.67$, $\alpha = .81$), and grandiosity was measured with three items ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .90$). Entitlement was negatively skewed, exhibitionism was slightly negatively skewed, and grandiosity was positively skewed.

Message design logic. Following O'Keefe & McCornack (1987) and O'Keefe (1988), participants read a scenario in which they were the leader of a group who had to deal with a member who was not completing the tasks assigned to him. They were then instructed to write a message they would use in the situation described (see Appendix C). Three participants did not write messages and two participants did not produce useable messages so only 168 messages were obtained. To establish intercoder reliability two independent coders read 40 of the messages and classified the messages as representing either the expressive, conventional, or rhetorical message design logic.[2] Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Agreement between coders was 95%, $\kappa = .93$. The remaining messages were coded by one coder. Thirty messages were classified as expressive (17.9%), 111 were classified as conventional (66.1%), and 27 were classified as rhetorical (16.1%).

Complaint log. Participants kept a diary in which they recorded each complaint that they expressed in one day. They were instructed to record the complaint immediately after the conversation in which it arose ended and to try to reproduce the original wording of the complaint as closely as possible. They were also asked to indicate to whom they complained, their reasons for expressing the complaint, what happened immediately before they complained, and how the person to which they complained responded to the complaint (see Appendix D).

Results

Research Question 1 asked how frequently people complained in a day. A total of 837 complaints were reported. Participants expressed an average of 4.84 complaints in one day ($SD = 2.40$, range = 1-11). Women reported complaining slightly more often than men ($M_{women} = 5.01$, $SD = 2.51$, $M_{men} = 4.43$, $SD = 2.03$), but the difference in the number of complaints expressed was not statistically significant, $t(167) = 1.45$, *ns*.

Table 1

Correlations between Number of Complaints, Complaining Propensity, and Narcissism

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Number of Complaints	-----				
2. Complaining Propensity	.07	-----			
3. Entitlement	.06	.18*	-----		
4. Exhibitionism	.06	.35**	.52**	-----	
5. Grandiosity	.02	.24**	.48**	.40**	-----

Note. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Correlation analyses were conducted to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. Correlations are presented in Table 1. It was hypothesized that complaining propensity would be positively correlated with the number of complaints expressed in a day (H1). The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. There was no relationship between scores on the Complaining Propensity Scale and the number of complaints reported by the participants, $r(171) = .07$, *ns*. The scatterplot for this correlation was inspected for a nonlinear relationship, but none was observed.

It was also hypothesized that the three dimensions of narcissism would be positively related to the number of complaints expressed in a day (H2). The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. Entitlement, exhibitionism, and grandiosity were not related to the number of complaints expressed. The correlations were .06, .06., and .02, respectively, and none were statistically significant. The scatterplots for these correlations were also inspected for nonlinear relationships, but none were observed.

Because the predictors were highly intercorrelated, a regression analysis was conducted with the main effects and all of the interaction effects entered as predictors of the number of complaints expressed. The results indicated that when controlling for the intercorrelation among the predictors there was still no relationship between the variables. There was also no evidence of interactions between the predictors.

Finally, it was hypothesized that the expressive message design logic would express more complaints than the conventional or rhetorical message design logics (H3). Contrast weights (2, -1, -1) were assigned to the groups, and a contrast test was conducted to test this hypothesis. The analysis revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups in the number of complaints expressed, $F < 1$. The mean number of complaints reported by expressives, conventionals, and rhetoricals were 5.17 ($SD = 2.77$), 4.77 ($SD = 2.37$), and 5.04 ($SD = 2.24$), respectively.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to estimate the prevalence of complaining and to examine three potential predictors of complaining behavior. It was predicted that complaining propensity and three dimensions of narcissism would be positively related to complaining behavior and that the expressive message design logic would complain more

than the conventional and rhetorical message design logics. Participants reported expressing an average of 4.84 complaints in a day, but the data were not consistent with any of the hypotheses.

There was no difference in the number of complaints expressed by the expressive message design logic and the number of complaints expressed by the conventional or rhetorical message design logics. One possible explanation for this finding is that message design logic is more likely to predict variance in the *wording* of the complaints rather than in the number of complaints expressed. O'Keefe (1988, 1990; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987) argued that variation in messages is particularly likely in regulative situations, situations in which one person needs to control or correct the behavior of another. In this type of situation message producers often have competing goals (e.g., efficiently changing the person's behavior while being respectful of that person). Message design logic influences the way people pursue these competing goals. This argument suggests that there would be variance in the phrasing of complaints, particularly complaints aimed at the source of the complainer's dissatisfaction as this type of complaint arises in regulative situations. Further analysis of the complaints reported in the diaries will be conducted to test this hypothesis.

It may also be that expressives and conventionals complain for different reasons: expressives may complain in order to communicate their dissatisfaction whereas conventionals may complain in order to obtain desired outcomes. If expressives perceive language as a medium for expressing their internal thoughts and feelings they are likely to express noninstrumental complaints. In contrast, conventionals perceive communication as a means for securing desired outcomes according to the rules and procedures dictated

by the present context and are thus likely to express complaints that are meant to bring about a change in the undesirable state.

There was a strong positive correlation between the three dimensions of narcissism and complaining propensity, but none of these variables was positively related to the number of complaints that participants reported expressing. One possible explanation for these results is that the complaining propensity and narcissism measures differed from the behavioral measure of complaining in their level of specificity. The complaining propensity and narcissism measures focused on general tendencies while the diary focused on the events of one day. A more general measure of complaining behavior such as a more extensive diary may correlate with the general complaining propensity and narcissism measures. Conversely, it may not be possible to predict complaining behavior with a general measure of complaining propensity because each situation varies in both the level of dissatisfaction elicited and the perceived utility of complaining. Future research will be conducted to test these hypotheses.

The lack of an observed relationship between complaining propensity and the number of complaints expressed may also suggest that the Complaining Propensity Scale predicts variables other than the frequency of complaints. For instance, scores on the scale may be related to the intensity of the complaints a person expresses. Someone who is high in complaining propensity may be more forceful in the expression of their dissatisfaction than someone who is low in complaining propensity. The scale may also be related to the duration of the complaining episode. A person who is high in complaining propensity may carry on about their dissatisfaction longer than a person who is low in complaining propensity. Additional research to test the validity of the scale will

be conducted, and the intensity and duration of complaining will also be examined in future research.

Kowalski's (1996) theoretical model of complaining offers another explanation for these results. The Complaining Propensity Scale assesses people's likelihood of expressing their dissatisfaction, but Kowalski's model describes complaining as involving a more complex process. According to the model, each time a person becomes aware of a discrepancy between their current and desired state they go through the process of assessing both their level of dissatisfaction with the discrepancy as well as the perceived utility of complaining in that situation. Dissatisfaction is sufficient but not necessary for complaining to occur. People will complain even when they are not dissatisfied if they perceive that doing so will bring about some desired outcome. They will also withhold their complaints if they believe that expressing them will not bring about a desired outcome. Measures of a person's likelihood of experiencing dissatisfaction (their dissatisfaction threshold) and of their perceptions of the general utility of complaining (their complaining threshold) may be more accurate predictors of complaining behavior than people's likelihood of expressing their dissatisfaction. A replication of this study with the proposed measures included is needed to determine if the measures predict complaining behavior.

Finally, it may also be that people are not accurate judges of their levels of complaining propensity. People may overestimate or underestimate how much they tend to complain which could account for why participants' complaining propensity scores did not correspond with the actual number of complaints they expressed. Other people may provide more accurate ratings of a person's complaining propensity. Study 2 therefore

addresses the question of whether people's self-ratings of complaining propensity correspond with other people's judgements of their complaining propensity. Perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining propensity and the relationship between perceptions of complaining propensity and ratings of liking are also explored.

STUDY 2

Consequences of Complaining

Complaining can have both negative and positive interpersonal consequences (Kowalski, 1996, 2002, 2003). Chronic complainers may elicit anger and resentment from their partners and may even be ostracized for excessive complaining (Kowalski, 1996, 2002). In particular, complainers who seek help or advice and then proceed to reject all of the advice they receive (i.e., help-rejecting complainers) are considered especially aversive (Kowalski, 2003; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). Similarly, people who frequently express noninstrumental complaints but make no attempt to change the dissatisfying situation are perceived negatively (Kowalski, 1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). It is not surprising, then, that behaviors such as complaining, ignoring advice, and complaining again as well as being frequently critical were among the social allergens documented by Cunningham et al. (1997). Complaints can also be perceived as face threats (Cupach & Carson, 2002) in that complaints can communicate disregard for the target and the relationship, especially when expressed in public.

Complaining may also be beneficial in interpersonal relationships. According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships tends to increase gradually as relationships become more intimate. In the early stages of a relationship people exchange superficial information and explore potential conversational topics. They tend to avoid disclosing information that will make them vulnerable or cause them to be seen in a negative light. As the relationship develops people begin to disclose negatively valenced information along with positive self-disclosures and express negative emotions more freely. People trust that their partners

will accept them, flaws and all, so they no longer feel as if they need to be on their best behavior. It is at this point that there may be an increase in the number of complaints expressed to the relational partner because people feel that they do not have to withhold relational irritations. Consistent with this possibility, Roloff and Solomon (2002) reported a positive association between relational commitment and the willingness to express relational complaints. It is therefore plausible that complaining may communicate relational intimacy because it conveys trust that one's partner will respond to the complaints in a supportive, nonjudgmental fashion (Kowalski, 2002).

Complaints serve the added function of providing listeners with information about the complainer's opinions of people and issues. According to Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory, decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking so complaining that reduces the listener's uncertainty about the complainer is expected to increase their liking of the complainer. Complaining can reduce uncertainty in initial interactions. Complaints can serve as a social lubricant or ice breaker to make it easier for people to start conversations (Kowalski, 2002) and can be used to establish rapport or solidarity between interactants (Boxer, 1993). A recent meta-analysis (AhYun, 2002) revealed that there is a strong positive association between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction. This effect is weakened when actual interaction is involved, but as interaction time increases, at least up to 30 minutes, the effect of attitude similarity on interpersonal attraction increases. AhYun's results suggest that if people discover that they share feelings of dissatisfaction with a target and proceed to complain about the target together, this joint activity can have a bonding effect.

Complaining can also reduce uncertainty in established relationships. Siegert and Stamp (1994) investigated romantic partners' first big fight, "an episode of conflict during which partners recall discussing for the first time certain feelings, doubts, disappointments, expectations, ideals and/or assessments about their relationship" (p. 345). They found that although the first big fight was a traumatic experience, it reduced uncertainty about the relationship for couples whose relationship survived the fight. The fight resulted in clarification of the couples' feelings for each other as well as greater awareness of their interdependence.

In sum, complaining can be perceived as aversive if it is excessive, if the complainer is considered to be "all talk and no action" or if it is perceived as a face threat, but it can also convey relational intimacy and reduce uncertainty, thereby increasing liking of the complainer. Thus, the question of how perceptions of a person's complaining propensity affects liking of that person was posed (RQ2).

Interpersonal Perception

The Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) allows for the estimation of how much of the variance in interpersonal perception is due to the perceiver, target, and relationship effects. *Perceiver effects* measure the tendency for a person to rate others similarly. *Target effects* measure the extent to which people agree in their ratings of a particular person. *Relationship effects* measure the amount of variance which is due to the unique relationship between dyad members after controlling for their perceiver and target effects. To illustrate, suppose that in a group composed of Alex, Beth, and Dan, each person rates the others' complaining propensity. A perceiver effect would indicate that people's ratings of others' propensity to complain is consistent across

all targets. For instance, Alex may rate Beth and Dan as frequent complainers, but Beth may rate Alex and Dan as infrequent complainers. A target effect would indicate that people tend to agree about a specific target's propensity to complain. For example, Alex and Beth might agree that Dan rarely complains. A relationship effect reflects the unique impression a person has of a particular partner after controlling for that person's perceiver effect and their partner's target effect. Thus, Alex might rate Beth as high in complaining propensity because of his idiosyncratic relationship with Beth. The SRM examines the variance in perceiver, target, and relationship effects.

There are two basic SRM designs: block and round-robin (Kenny, 1994). In the block design, a group of people is split into two subgroups, and each person rates everyone in the other subgroup. This design requires a minimum of four people total, two in each subgroup. In the round-robin design, each person rates everyone in the group. Self-ratings are often included when measuring interpersonal perception variables such as liking or agreeableness. This design also requires a minimum of four people per group. Regardless of the design used, the variance in ratings is partitioned into perceiver, target, and relationship variance.

Kowalski (1996) suggested that individual-difference variables such as negative affect, agreeableness, locus of control, extraversion, and self-presentational concerns may moderate the frequency of complaining. If these variables do moderate complaining behavior, it follows that some people will complain more than others and thus perceivers would have similar impressions of them. Put another way, it is hypothesized that there will be target variance in ratings of complaining propensity (H4).

Kowalski and Erickson (1997) argued that "complaining may be regarded as aversive when people are indiscriminant in selecting a listener and seem oblivious to the impressions they are creating through their constant whining and griping" (p. 97). Kowalski (1996) suggested that people may strategically tailor their complaints to the perceived values and preferences of their audiences in order to avoid the possibility of creating undesirable impressions. In other words, people try to find a sympathetic audience to which to complain when they are dissatisfied. For example, an employee would be unlikely to complain to his or her employer about having too much work but would be more likely to complain to a similarly burdened co-worker. Tailoring complaints to specific partners should result in people having unique perceptions of their partners. Thus, it is hypothesized that there will be relationship variance in ratings of complaining propensity (H5).

Reciprocity

The SRM also allows researchers to measure two types of reciprocity. Dyadic reciprocity indicates that members of a dyad perceive each other similarly. Applied to complaining propensity, if Alex sees Beth as a frequent complainer, Beth sees Alex as a frequent complainer. Generalized reciprocity indicates that a person perceives others as others perceive him or her, so if Beth rates everyone as low in complaining propensity, everyone sees her as an infrequent complainer. Complaints from one person often elicit complaints from others (Kowalski, 1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). Kowalski offers three explanations for the contagiousness of complaining. First, hearing another person's complaints may cause the listener to think about their own dissatisfaction and which can cause the listener to complain. Second, hearing another person's complaints may induce

dysphoria in the listener, stimulating him or her to complain. Finally, people who listen to complaints may feel the urge to outdo the complainer by expressing a bigger complaint. If complaining elicits complaints from others and people tailor their complaints to specific partners, then it is likely that two dyad members' unique ratings of each other's complaining propensity will be correlated. Thus, it is hypothesized that there will be dyadic reciprocity of ratings of complaining propensity (H6).

Accuracy and Meta-accuracy

SRM analyses can assess the correspondence between people's views of themselves and other people's views of them by examining self-other agreement. For instance, if Dan thinks that he rarely complains, do others also think that he rarely complains? SRM analyses can also address the question of how accurate people are at judging how others view them. There are two types of meta-accuracy. Generalized meta-accuracy refers to the extent to which people know how they are perceived by others in general (does Dan know how people generally perceive his complaining?), and dyadic meta-accuracy refers to the extent to which people know how particular others perceive them (does Dan know how Beth perceives his complaining?).

Kowalski and Erickson (1997) claim that the majority of complaints expressed on a daily basis are expressed mindlessly. This suggests that complaining may be so common that people may not be aware of just how much they complain. People who are forced to listen to the complaints, however, may be all too aware of others' propensity to complain. Thus, the proposed research will address the questions of whether people see their own complaining propensity the way that other people see their complaining propensity (RQ3), whether people are able to judge accurately how other people in

general perceive their complaining propensity (RQ4), and whether people are able to judge accurately how particular partners perceive their complaining propensity (RQ5).

Method

Participants

One hundred fifty two undergraduate students (90 females, 60 males, and two who did not report their sex) composing 38 groups of four participated in the study. The average length of acquaintance for participants was 6.14 months (SD = 19.91). The data were collected four months into the semester, and the majority of the participants (92.6%) reported having known their group members for four months or less indicating that they had not been acquainted prior to the class. There were two all-male groups, eight all-female groups, and 26 mixed-sex groups. (The composition of two groups could not be determined because two participants did not report their sex.) The mean age of the sample was 20.59 (SD = 1.78). The majority of participants were white or Caucasian (78.3%) followed by black or African American (10.5%), Asian or Asian American (3.9%), other (2.6%), and Hispanic or Latino (2.0%). Four participants did not report their ethnicity.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from an introductory-level communication class and were offered extra credit for their participation. Participants worked together on a group project for the class. The project was the same for all groups. Each person provided self-ratings, ratings of each group member, and estimations of each group members' perceptions of them on the propensity to complain and liking. A round-robin SRM analysis was conducted to examine perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining propensity and liking among group members.

Measures

Complaining propensity. Kowalski's (2003) 14-item Complaining Propensity Scale which was described in Study 1 was used to assess participants' propensity to complain. The responses to the 14 items were averaged to yield a complaining propensity score with higher scores indicating a greater propensity to complain. Participants rated themselves as being higher in complaining propensity ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.00$) than others ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(37) = 2.52$, $p < .05$. Chronbach's alpha for the scale was .91. Participants also estimated their group members' perceptions of their complaining propensity. The mean for metaperceptions of complaining propensity was 4.14 ($SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .90$).

Liking. A five-item, 7-point Likert-type measure (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) of liking was constructed for use in this study (see Appendix E). The responses to the five items were averaged to yield a liking score with higher scores indicating greater liking. Participants' self-ratings of liking ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 0.89$) did not differ from their ratings of others' liking ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(37) = 0.13$, *ns*. Chronbach's alpha for the scale was .95. Participants also estimated how much each of their group members liked them. The mean for metaperceptions of liking was 5.61 ($SD = 0.99$, $\alpha = .94$).

Results

Tests of Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1 asked if perceptions of a person's complaining propensity affects liking for that person. The correlation between target effects of complaining propensity and target effects of liking was examined to address this question. There was

no relationship between perceptions of complaining propensity and liking, $r(37) = .02$, *ns*. The scatterplot for the correlation was examined for a nonlinear relationship, but none was observed.

Table 2

Variance Partitioning and Reciprocity Correlations

	Variance			Reciprocity[a]	
Variable	Perceiver	Target	Relationship + Error	Generalized	Dyadic
Complaining Propensity	.26*	.34*	.41	.01	.05
Liking	.30*	.11*	.59	-.38	.40
Metaperceptions of Complaining Propensity	.85*	.00	.15	.45	.13
Metaperceptions of Liking	.56*	.00	.44	.00	.42*

Note. * $p < .05$.

[a]The reciprocity correlations are disattenuated correlations, thus it is possible to obtain large correlations that are not statistically significant.

It was hypothesized that there would be target variance (H4) and relationship variance (H5) in ratings of complaining propensity. The relative variance partitioning was examined to test these hypotheses. Table 2 presents the variance partitioning results. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, statistically significant target variance in ratings of complaining propensity was observed. Statistically significant perceiver variance in ratings of complaining propensity was observed as well.

Relationship variance in ratings of complaining propensity was also observed, but because measurement error is included in the estimate of relationship variance, a second analysis was conducted in which the complaining propensity items were treated as indicators on a scale rather than a single construct. The variance was then partitioned into stable and unstable variance. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, relationship variance accounted for 15.7% of the stable variance in ratings of complaining propensity.[2]

Hypothesis 6, which predicted that there would be dyadic reciprocity of ratings of complaining propensity, was tested by assessing the correlation between dyad members' relationship effects for complaining propensity. There was no dyadic reciprocity of complaining propensity ratings, $r(37) = .05$, *ns*. Members of dyads did not perceive each other's complaining propensity similarly.

Research Question 3 asked if people see their own complaining propensity the way that other people their complaining propensity. In other words, is there self-other agreement on perceptions of complaining propensity? Self-other agreement was assessed by correlating self-ratings of complaining propensity with target effects of complaining propensity. People's self-ratings of complaining propensity were positively related to other people's ratings of their complaining propensity, $r(113) = .48, p < .05$.

Research Question 4 asked if people are able to judge accurately the way that others in general perceive their complaining propensity. In other words, is there generalized meta-accuracy about other people's perceptions of one's own complaining propensity? Generalized meta-accuracy was assessed by examining the correlation between target effects in perceptions of complaining propensity (how people generally view the person) and a person's perceiver effects in metaperceptions of complaining

propensity (how the person thinks others generally see him or her). The data suggest that there is generalized meta-accuracy for perceptions of complaining propensity, $r(37) = .52$, $p < .01$.

Research Question 5 asked if people are able to judge accurately the way that particular partners perceive their complaining propensity. In other words, is there dyadic meta-accuracy for perceptions of complaining propensity? Dyadic meta-accuracy was assessed by examining the correlation between relationship effects in perceptions of complaining propensity (the unique perception one person has of their partner, controlling for that person's perceiver effect and their partner's target effect) and relationship effects in metaperceptions of complaining propensity (the unique perception one person has of how their partner sees them, controlling for that person's perceiver effect and their partner's target effect). The data suggest that there is no dyadic meta-accuracy for complaining propensity, $r(37) = .00$, *ns*.

Supplemental Analyses

Table 2 presents the variance partitioning and reciprocity correlations for liking and metaperceptions of liking. Statistically significant perceiver and target variance in liking were also observed. Participants tended to report similar levels of liking for each of their group members, and they agreed on how much they liked particular targets. In addition, a substantial amount of relationship variance in liking was observed. Relationship variance accounted for 49.7% of the stable variance in liking ratings. There was no generalized or dyadic reciprocity of liking.

Perceiver variance in metaperceptions of liking was also observed indicating that participants believed that others have similar judgements of them. A substantial amount

of relationship variance in metaperceptions of liking was observed as well. Relationship variance accounted for 34.4% of the stable variance in metaperceptions of liking. The data also revealed dyadic reciprocity in metaperceptions of liking. Participants' judgements of particular others' liking for them were positively correlated such that if Alex thought that Beth liked him a great deal, Beth also thought that Alex liked her a great deal.

Participants were not able to judge accurately at rates significantly greater than chance how much others in general liked them, $r(37) = .16$, *ns*. They were, however, able to judge accurately how much specific others liked them, $r(37) = .44$, $p < .01$. Statistically significant self-other agreement on ratings of liking was not observed, $r(113) = .31$, *ns*.[4]

Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to investigate the relationship between judgements of complaining propensity and liking and to examine perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining. Research questions regarding the relationship between perceptions of complaining propensity and liking as well as accuracy and meta-accuracy in judgements of complaining propensity were posed. In addition, it was hypothesized that there would be target and relationship variance in ratings of complaining propensity and that there would be dyadic reciprocity of ratings of complaining propensity. A social relations model analysis was conducted to address these research questions and hypotheses.

It was previously suggested that complaining can have both positive and negative consequences. Chronic and help-rejecting complainers may be perceived as aversive, and direct complaints may be seen as face threats, but complaints may also communicate relational intimacy and reduce uncertainty in relationships, thereby increasing liking for

the complainer. These data suggest, however, that there is no relationship between perceptions of a person's complaining propensity and liking for that person. Liking was high regardless of the target's complaining propensity. It may be that only extremely high levels of complaining propensity are considered aversive. Future research is needed to determine the range of acceptable levels of complaining propensity and see if people who exceed the accepted levels are disliked.

The nature of a person's complaints rather than their tendency to complain might also affect how much other people like them. According to Heider's (1958) balance theory, two people who share a negative attitude toward a stimulus can develop positive attitudes toward each other, thus creating a balanced state. Consistent with balance theory, AhYun's (2002) meta-analysis revealed a positive association between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction. It is plausible that many of the complaints expressed to group members concerned the class or the group project, and having a common source of dissatisfaction about which to complain may have increased liking among group members regardless of how frequently they expressed their dissatisfaction. Complaints that did not concern a common source of dissatisfaction, however, could decrease liking of the complainer if the complaints created a state of imbalance. In addition, it is plausible that a single complaint directed at one's group members could result in dislike for the complainer. Information about the types of complaints expressed to group members is needed to test this hypothesis.

Kenny and DePaulo's (1993) review of eight SRM studies suggested that for both personality traits and liking people are better at determining how others generally view them than they are at determining how particular others view them. The review also

suggested that people are more accurate at determining how much particular others like them than they are at determining how particular others judge their personality traits. The results of this study were consistent with Kenny and DePaulo's findings. Participants were able to judge accurately how others in general perceived their complaining propensity, but participants' judgements of how particular others perceived their complaining propensity were not accurate. Conversely, participants were able to judge accurately how much particular others liked them but were unable to judge accurately how much others generally liked them. People may be more motivated to judge accurately how much specific others like them because being liked by highly valued others is more important than being liked by less valued others. If a person is able to determine how much a specific other likes him or her then he or she is better equipped to determine the amount of maintenance their relationship requires to keep it at a satisfactory level. Because of the lack of extremely high ratings of complaining propensity and because ratings of liking was generally high, however, additional research is needed to determine if these findings extend to people who complain more frequently and are less liked than those included in this study.

The data were consistent with the hypotheses that there would be target and relationship variance in ratings of complaining propensity. There was consensus among participants when rating the complaining propensity of particular targets, and participants also developed idiosyncratic views of particular targets. These findings suggest that although people tend to tailor their complaining to particular partners there is still some consistency in their complaining behavior across partners. In addition, participants rated their group members as being similar in levels of complaining propensity which suggests

that people are not particularly discriminating when judging the complaining propensity of others. It is plausible that participants in this study perceived their group members as more similar to each other because they did not know each other particularly well. Having knowledge about the unique characteristics of one's group members can result in unique perceptions of them which, in turn, would increase relationship effects and decrease perceiver effects. Further research is needed, however, to determine if relationship effects are greater and perceiver effects are less pronounced in well-acquainted groups.

Kowalski (1996; Kowalski & Erickson, 1997) argued that complaints from one person often elicit complaints from others. The hypothesized dyadic reciprocity of ratings of complaining propensity, however, was not observed which suggests that people do not consistently elicit similar levels of complaints from particular others. In addition, generalized reciprocity was not observed, suggesting that complaints from one person do not consistently elicit complaints from others in general. It is also plausible, however, that there is reciprocity in complaining behavior, but complaints that are voiced in response to other complaints may not always be perceived as complaints. For example, if a person agrees with and adds to the original complaint his or her utterance could be defined as a complaint, but it may be perceived only as a statement of agreement. To illustrate, if Alex says, "Dan is so inconsiderate! He borrowed my notes and didn't give them back to me until the day of the exam!" and Beth replies, "Yeah, he borrowed my notes once, and when he returned them they were covered with coffee stains!" Alex may not perceive Beth's utterance as a complaint. If this type of exchange was common in this study and the responses were perceived as statements of agreement rather than complaints then reciprocity of ratings of complaining propensity would not be observed. It is also

plausible that certain types of complaints are more likely to elicit complaints in return. For instance, if Alex tells Dan that it was inconsiderate of him to keep his notes until the day of the exam, Dan might respond with a complaint of his own about Alex. Participants in this study may not have expressed many complaints that were directed at the source of their dissatisfaction so few complaint-countercomplaint exchanges may have occurred. Future research is needed to determine what variables influence the way that people generally respond to complaints as well as how they respond to complaints from particular others.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Interpersonal complaining is believed to be a prevalent form of communication that has the potential to damage as well as benefit relationships, but few studies have investigated the antecedents and consequences of complaining. The purpose of this research was to examine three personality traits that were expected to be related to complaining behavior, to investigate the relationship between complaining propensity and liking, and to examine perceptions and metaperceptions of complaining among acquainted people. The results from Study 1 called into question the validity of the Complaining Propensity Scale. The scale was created to measure a person's likelihood of complaining. Although it had good face validity and internal consistency, it did not predict the number of complaints expressed. It did, however, correlate positively with the three dimensions of narcissism, which were also unrelated to the number of complaints expressed. The results from Study 1 also called into question people's ability to judge accurately their tendency to complain. The results from Study 2, however, indicate that participants' self-ratings of complaining propensity corresponded with other people's ratings of their complaining propensity. It is therefore unlikely that the lack of a relationship between complaining propensity scores and the number of complaints expressed in Study 1 is due to participants having inaccurate perceptions of their complaining propensity. Taken together, these results, suggest that the Complaining Propensity Scale is a valid measure and that the diary method is not a valid way of measuring complaining propensity. An observational study in which people are brought into the laboratory and their complaining behavior is coded may be a more valid behavioral measure of complaining propensity.

It is still unclear what variables predict complaining behavior. None of the variables measured in Study 1 were related to the number of complaints reported by the participants, but the results of Study 2 suggest that some people do complain more than others. These individual differences may be due to personality traits, but it may be necessary to use more accurate measures of both the traits and complaining behavior before the relationship can be observed. One potential predictor of complaining that must be explored is optimism. The way that a person views the world is likely to influence how frequently he or she complains. If a person tends to look for the good in every situation and anticipates the best possible outcomes he or she will be unlikely to complain. If, however, a person focuses on the negative aspects of every situation and anticipates the worst possible outcomes he or she will be highly likely to complain. In addition to personality traits, situational characteristics may influence a person's likelihood of complaining. For instance, a person may be more likely to complain if he or she is prompted (e.g., if someone asks if anything is wrong) than if no prompt is given if the complainer may perceive the prompt as permission to express his or her dissatisfaction. There may also be an interaction between personality traits and characteristics of the situation that motivate people to complain. For example, someone who enjoys being the center of attention may frequently complain to groups of people but may rarely complain to individuals. Further research must be conducted to determine the antecedents of complaining behavior.

Kowalski (1996) argued that dissatisfaction is sufficient but not necessary for complaining and points out that people sometimes complain when they are not dissatisfied. For example, she states that a healthy person may complain about feeling

sick to gain sympathy or attention or to get out of performing an undesirable task. In both of these situations, however, although the complainer is not dissatisfied with the state of his or her health, he or she is dissatisfied with a feature of the situation (e.g., others are not paying a sufficient amount of attention to him or her or he or she is unhappy about having to perform a disliked task). It appears, then, that people may complain about a *subject* with which they are not dissatisfied so that they may change a dissatisfying *situation*. Future research is needed to examine the frequency and effects of this type of complaint in interpersonal relationships.

Kowalski (1996) also argued that people will complain even if they do not perceive a discrepancy between their current and ideal states if they perceive that the utility of complaining is high. The perception that expressing dissatisfaction will result in the attainment of a desired outcome suggests, however, that the complainer does perceive a discrepancy between his or her current and ideal states. If a person is motivated to obtain a desired outcome this motivation implies that he or she is aware of a discrepancy between his or her current and desired states and is experiencing some amount of dissatisfaction with the discrepancy. It appears, then, that awareness of a discrepancy between the current and desired states must precede the assessment of the utility of complaining. Future research might modify Kowalski's model along these lines.

In addition, different types of people may go through different processes when they complain. For instance, the expressives in Study 1 may not have assessed the utility of complaining before expressing their dissatisfaction. For them, experiencing dissatisfaction may have been sufficient to trigger complaining. In contrast, the conventionals in Study 1 may have gone through a process similar to the one described in

Kowalski's model but with the additional step of determining how socially acceptable complaining is in the given context before deciding to express their dissatisfaction. It is plausible that the number and type of complaints expressed vary depending on which process complainers go through and the number and type of complaints expressed can influence liking for complainers. Future research is needed to explore these alternate models of complaining as well as the consequences associated with the models.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is the reliance on self-report data. Participants were asked to record all of their complaints for one day. In a preliminary investigation (Asada, 2004) participants reported an average of 9.21 interactions in which they complained at least once. Participants in the Alicke et al. (1992) study and in Study 1 recorded each complaint they expressed yet they reported roughly half as many complaints. In the Asada study participants merely counted the number of complaints they expressed and provided no additional information about the complaint or the circumstances surrounding the complaint. In both the Alicke et al. study and the current study far more information was requested (e.g., their actual complaints, their reasons for complaining, who they complained to, and how people responded to their complaints). It is plausible that participants in both of these studies only recorded what they believed was a sufficient number of complaints rather than recording all of their complaints for the day. Future research that does not rely solely on diary methods is needed to provide more accurate estimates of the prevalence of complaining.

A second limitation of this research is that participants' liking for their group members in Study 2 was uniformly high. This restriction in range may have attenuated the

relationship between perceptions of complaining propensity and liking. Future studies that include participants who dislike each other as well as participants who like each other is needed before any conclusions about the relationship between liking and complaining can be made.

Finally, Miller and Steinberg's (1975) definition of interpersonal communication states that people engage in interpersonal communication when they base their predictions about communication outcomes on a psychological rather than cultural or sociological level of analysis. In other words, predictions about communication outcomes are based on knowledge of one's partner's unique characteristics rather than general knowledge of the cultural or sociological groups he or she belongs to. In Study 2, however, the participants were likely using the sociological level of analysis to predict their communication outcomes. The majority of participants had not been acquainted prior to the class and may not have had much interaction outside of the class. It is also unlikely that their relationships with their group members continued after the class ended. It is plausible that their perceptions of each other may have been different if they had more opportunities to interact with each other. Their behaviors may also have been different had they anticipated having an extended relationship with their group members. For these participants, the knowledge that they were all students in the same class may have been sufficient for them to engage in successful interactions with each other. They may not have felt the need to reduce uncertainty further and engage in interpersonal communication. Additional research with groups of people who are better acquainted such as friends, family members, and co-workers is needed to determine if these results

extend to people who have more intimate relationships and who anticipate future interaction with each other in a context other than that of working on a class project.

Directions for Future Research

The lack of dyadic reciprocity for complaining propensity ratings in Study 2 indicates that dyad members did not perceive each other's complaining propensity similarly. One implication of this finding is that dyads are composed of complainers and listeners and raises the question of whether some people are complaint magnets. It may be that some people are more willing to listen to complaints than others or that they are more likely to provide the desired response whether it's giving sympathy or advice or validating the complainer's feelings. It is likely that personality traits such as empathy influence the way that people receive and respond to complaints. Future research is needed to investigate whether certain types of people are sought out by complainers.

Another avenue for future research involves a closer examination of the interaction between the sender and receiver of the complaint. Some complaints are expressed spontaneously whereas others are expressed in response to questions or are provoked by the actions of the receiver. It is plausible that unsolicited complaints may be perceived differently than complaints expressed in response to an inquiry about how one's day was. It is also likely that people respond differently to complaints aimed at them than to complaints about a third party. Focusing on the entire conversation in which a complaint is expressed rather than on what was said or done immediately before and immediately after the complaint will provide a more complete picture of the functions of complaining as well as the impact it has on interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, the existing typologies of complaints vary in their focus and levels of specificity. Boxer's (1993) categorization, which only includes complaints about someone or something other than the recipient, is perhaps too broad because it does not allow researchers to distinguish various sources of dissatisfaction within the categories of self and other. Alicke and colleagues' (1992) categories of falling below expectations, obstacles to goal attainment, and desire for change are perhaps too specific in that altogether they only accounted for less than 12% of the complaints recorded. The types of complaints described by Alberts (1988, 1989) and Cupach and Carson (2002), complaints directed at the source of the complainer's dissatisfaction, can also be applied to oneself or to a third party. In addition, there is considerable overlap among the typologies. One way to resolve these concerns is by consolidating the many types of complaints into fewer categories. It may be sufficient to group them into complaints about oneself, complaints directed at the source of one's dissatisfaction, complaints about a third party (a single person, group, or entity), and complaints about one's physical environment or situation, and complaints about products, services, or events. Table 3 contains a summary of existing typologies and the proposed new typology. The complaints can then be classified as global or specific. Future research may determine whether broader characterizations of complaints such as the one proposed are useful or if specific categories such as Alicke et al.'s are necessary.

Table 3

Summary of Complaint Typologies from Previous Research and Proposed New Typology

Author(s)	Categories of Complaints
Alberts (1988, 1989)	1. Behavioral: complaints about actions done or not done 2. Performance: complaints about how an action is performed rather than whether it's done 3. Personal characteristic: complaints about the whole person, their personality, attitudes, emotional nature, or belief system 4. Personal appearance: complaints about the partner's appearance 5. Complaints about complaining: complaints about the manner in which the partner complains
Alicke et al. (1992)	1. Attitude and emotional expression: global statements that ascribe relatively enduring attributes to the target 2. Behavioral: complaints about specific or general behaviors enacted by the target 3. Physical state: complaints about a person's physical condition or the state of the environment 4. Obligations: complaints about not fulfilling or not wanting to fulfill commitments 5. Disappointment: complaints about service, products, or events falling below expected standards 6. Falling below achievement expectations: complaints about failure to perform at desired levels on a task 7. Obstacles to goal attainment: complaints over blocked goals 8. Desire for change: a wish for things to be different from the way they currently are
Boxer (1993)	1. Direct: complaints leveled at the person responsible for the perceived offense 2. Self indirect: negative evaluations of oneself 3. Other indirect: complaints about the behavior, ability, or characteristics of another party 4. Situation indirect (personal): complaints about problems the speaker encounters 5. Situation indirect (impersonal): complaints about globally significant problems

Table 3 (cont'd)

Author(s)	Categories of Complaints
Cupach & Carson (2002)	1. Dispositional: global, stable complaints that focus on the partner's flawed personality characteristics 2. Relational: complaints about unsatisfying aspects of the relationship 3. Behavioral/physical appearance: complaints about the partner's specific behaviors, attitudes, or physical appearance
Proposed typology	1. Self: complaints about one's physical state, behavior, attitudes, obligations, or personal situation (includes Alicke et al.'s 1-4, 6, and 8, and Boxer's 2 and 4) 2. Offender-directed: complaints directed at the source of dissatisfaction; complaints about their physical state, behavior, attitudes, or obligations (includes Alberts' 1-5, Alicke et al's 1-4, and 6-8, Boxer's 1, and Cupach & Carson's 1 and 3) 3. Third party: complaints about the physical state, behavior, attitudes, or obligations of another person, group, or entity (includes Alicke et al's 1-4 and 6-8 and Boxer's 3) 4. Environment/situation: complaints about one's physical environment, dissatisfying aspects of a relationship (not about the self or partner), or globally significant problems (includes Alicke's 3, Boxer's 5, and Cupach & Carson's 2) 5. Disappointment: complaints about service, products, or events falling below expected standards (Alicke's 5)

Conclusion

Complaining is a form of communication that serves a variety of functions. It allows people to bring about changes in their environments and as well as in their internal states. This research suggests that people vary in their tendency to complain, but much more research is needed to determine whether variables such as personality traits of the complainer or listener affect complaining behavior. This research also suggests that although complaining may cause short-term annoyance at times, it does not necessarily result in long-lasting dislike for the complainer. Being able to judge accurately how other

people view one's complaining propensity and being selective in who one complains to may allow people to avoid triggering social allergies in others. There were limitations to this research; however, the future research suggested here will address these limitations and provide additional information about the antecedents and consequences of interpersonal complaining.

Footnotes

[1]The original scale uses a 5-point response format with "not at all characteristic of me" and "extremely characteristic of me" as the anchors, but a 7-point response format and anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" was used in this study to be consistent with the other measures used in this study.

[2]Messages were coded according to the standards articulated by O'Keefe (1988, 1990; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987).

[3]There is no significance test for the amount of stable variance accounted for by relationship variance. When the average covariance of the relationship effects of the complaining propensity items was determined, however, the average *t*-value with 37 degrees of freedom was 3.10 which is statistically significant ($p < .01$). This test suggests that the amount of stable variance accounted for by relationship variance is greater than would be expected by chance alone.

[4]The correlations presented are disattenuated correlations, thus it is possible to obtain large correlations that are not statistically significant.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Complaining Propensity Scale

Please read each statement and rate how much you agree or disagree with the statement using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neutral
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

_____1.* Whenever I am dissatisfied, I readily express it to other people.

_____2.* I frequently express dissatisfaction with the behavior of others.

_____3.* I don't usually vent my frustrations or dissatisfactions. (R)

_____4. When people annoy me, I tell them.

_____5.* I seldom inform others that I am disappointed. (R)

_____6.* I usually keep my discontent a secret. (R)

_____7. When someone does something to make me feel bad, I am likely to inform that person of my displeasure.

_____8.* I tend to complain a great deal.

_____9.* I seldom state my dissatisfaction with the behavior of others. (R)

_____10.* I generally don't say much when I am dissatisfied. (R)

_____11.* I usually vent my dissatisfaction.

_____12.* I keep my dissatisfactions to myself. (R)

_____13.* When I am unhappy or upset, I usually keep it to myself. (R)

_____14.* When people or events don't meet my expectations, I usually communicate my dissatisfaction.

Note. (R) indicates reverse-scored items. * indicates items retained for analysis.

APPENDIX B

Narcissism Measure

Please read each statement and rate how much you agree or disagree with the statement using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neutral
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

____1.* I deserve praise and recognition from others.

____2.* I feel I am entitled to favorable treatment from others.

____3.* I am resentful when others don't treat me well.

____4.* I consider myself to be a deserving person.

____5.* I have a sense of entitlement.

____6. I get uncomfortable when it seems I am getting special treatment. (R)

____7. I want to be treated just like everyone else. (R)

____8.* I enjoy being the center of attention.

____9.* I sometimes "show off" to other people.

____10.* I like talking about my self.

____11.* I like people to pay attention to me.

____12. I am a modest person. (R)

____13. I am uncomfortable being the center of attention. (R)

____14.* Deep down, I think I am better than most other people.

____15. I am more successful than most of my friends.

____16.* I often feel a sense of superiority over others.

____17. Other people often envy me.

____18.* I am better than most other people.

____19. I am really kind of an average person. (R)

____20. I often daydream about doing great things.

Note. (R) indicates reverse-scored items. * indicates items retained for analysis.

APPENDIX C

Message Design Logic Message Production Activity

Imagine that you have been assigned to a group project in one of your classes. The class is in your major, and it is important to you that you get a good grade in this class. Your final grade will depend to a great extent on how well the group project turns out. You were assigned to your group by the instructor, who also designated you to be the leader of your group. Each person will receive two grades for the project: an overall grade to the group based on the overall quality of the project report and an individual grade based on each person's contribution to group effort. Your duties as group leader will include telling the instructor what grade you think each individual in the group deserves based on their individual contributions.

One group member (whose name is Joe) has been causing some problems. Joe seldom makes it to group meetings on time and entirely skipped one meeting without even calling anyone in advance to let the group know. When Joe missed that meeting, two of the group members wanted you to have the instructor remove Joe from your group, but another member persuaded the group to give him another chance. At the next meeting Joe arrived late but apologized for missing the previous meeting and mentioned something about family problems. Joe did volunteer to do all the background research on one important aspect of the group's topic, saying he had a special interest in that part of the project.

The group project is due next week. The group planned to put together the final draft of its report at a meeting scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. Joe calls you up today and says he doesn't have his library research done and can't get it finished before the meeting. He says he just needs more time.

Write down ***exactly*** what you would say to Joe in response to this situation.

APPENDIX D

Complaint Log

Instructions:

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with an object, person, event, or situation. Some people rarely complain, and others complain quite frequently. For this study, you will keep track of your complaints for one day. Record only the complaints expressed in face-to-face or telephone conversations (do not count the complaints expressed via email, text message, or instant messaging). Record each complaint as soon as possible after the conversation is over, and try to use the same wording that you used in the original complaint. For every complaint you record, you must also indicate who you complained to, what the person said or did directly before you complained to them, your reason for complaining, and what they said or did in response to your complaint. If you complained to more than one person please indicate everyone that you complained to, and if you had more than one reason for complaining please indicate them all. Finally, if you run out of pages, please continue to log your complaints using your own paper. Thank you for your participation.

1. What was your specific complaint (i.e., what did you say)? _____

_____

_____

_____

2. Who did you complain to? Circle all that apply: Romantic partner Friend

   Acquaintance Stranger Family member Co-worker

   Service provider (e.g., waiter, doctor, etc.) Other: _____

3. What, if anything, did the person say or do immediately before you complained?

_____

_____

_____

4. Why did you complain to this person? Circle all that apply: To vent frustration

   To seek advice To change their attitude or behavior To avoid blame

   To seek sympathy To seek information To get attention

   Other (specify): _____

5. What did the person say or do in response to the complaint? Circle all that apply:

   Agree with you Disagree with you Justify or make excuses Give advice

   Give sympathy Ignore the complaint

   Make a complaint of their own (specify): _____

   Other (specify): _____

APPENDIX E

Liking Measure

Please read each statement and rate how much you agree or disagree with the statement using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neutral
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

_____ 1. I enjoy talking with _____.

_____ 2. _____ is pleasant to be around.

_____ 3. I enjoy spending time with _____.

_____ 4. _____ is a likeable person.

_____ 5. I could be friends with _____.

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