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# Raising an Issue in a Relationship: I'll Tell You What's Wrong, But Only If I Think It Will Help

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Raising an issue in a relationship:

I'll tell you what's wrong, but only if I think it will help

by

Megan H. McCarthy

B. A., Brock University, 2005

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Psychology/Faculty of Science

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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### Abstract

When we become dissatisfied with the actions of a close partner, we face a decision: to disclose our concerns to the other person (voice), or to instead remain silent. Past research suggests that degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance are not important predictors of this decision, however, research on communication in relationships points to the potential importance of outcome expectancies. Previous research has primarily focused on expectancies for relationship outcomes, however, and has yet to consider the relative contribution of expectancies for instrumental outcomes. Four studies assessed the hypothesis that instrumental expectancies are most important for *how much* a person voices, while relational expectancies are most important for the *manner* of voice. In Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to think of a relational dissatisfaction that they were considering disclosing to the other person. Participants rated their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the issue, and their expected consequences of voice for relational and instrumental outcomes. Participants also rated their intentions to voice, and in Study 2, one week later, reported how much they actually did voice. In Study 3, participants described daily dissatisfactions with a roommate at the end of each day, and rated their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the issue, their retrospective expectancies for relational and instrumental outcomes, and how much they voiced. In Study 4, participants followed the same procedure as Studies 1 and 2, but they also rated their intentions and behavior for 2 different styles of voice: positive voice and negative voice. Expectancies for instrumental outcomes emerged as the sole unique predictor of general voice intentions and behavior across all studies. Expectancies for relationship outcomes, however, differentiated between positive and negative voice. Thus, when

participants thought voice would solve the problem they were more likely to speak up in general. However, when they thought the other person would respond positively to the discussion they were more likely to voice in a friendly, constructive manner, and less likely to voice in a hostile, destructive manner.

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*(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens; only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands*

*- e.e. cummings*



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### **Literature Review**

Experiences of dissatisfaction are a natural and inevitable consequence of being in a close relationship with another person whose habits, decisions, and personality do not always fit with what we want for ourselves. Despite the fact that close others engage in behaviours that negatively affect our moods and emotions, research suggests we do not always confront them with our grievances. People's hesitancy to speak up when dissatisfied has been observed in relationships ranging from friendship to marriage (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Sillars, 1980). When we withhold our true feelings, however, this can have negative consequences for both our ability to resolve the problem and the quality of our relationship (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Sillars, 1980; Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008). McNulty and Russell (2010) found that even negative communication predicts higher relationship satisfaction over time when dealing with important concerns, as long as it directly addresses the problem. Whether to disclose dissatisfaction to the other person (voice the concern), or to instead remain silent, is thus an important consideration when dealing with relationship problems

From one point of view, the decision should be easy. The more personal discomfort this person's behavior is causing, the stronger the motivation should be to speak up and change the status quo. In fact, research has shown that in business negotiations, the stronger the incentive to seek change, the more assertive the person will be (Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008; De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Olekalns & Smith, 2003). From this perspective, people should be most likely to speak their mind – to a business associate or close relationship partner – when they are most dissatisfied,

that is, when their self interest is most strongly on the line (Messick & McClintock, 1968). Research on close relationships, however, has failed to find strong associations between personal dissatisfaction and voice. Studies of individuals asked to recall a recent source of dissatisfaction with a romantic partner or friend, as well as studies examining longitudinal fluctuations in relational dissatisfaction and habitual responses to marital distress, have shown that the amount of dissatisfaction people feel with close others usually has no association with whether they voice that dissatisfaction (Baucom et al., 1996; Kammrath & Dweck, 2006).

One might imagine that in close relationships, relational concerns might take precedence over personal concerns. Perhaps the degree to which people love and value their relationship partners determines their willingness to voice. How love would predict voice, however, is unclear. On the one hand, people may want to keep silent to avoid upsetting their most valued relationships. On the other hand, these are precisely the relationships in which people may want to voice concerns in order to rectify problems. In fact, research has shown that positive relational attitudes, such as love and commitment, are associated with both constructive problem solving and loyal silence (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Relational attitudes clearly affect how people handle feelings of dissatisfaction, but these factors primarily influence the *friendliness* of the response, not the likelihood of expression. People who are very committed are more likely to respond in a friendly and constructive way, which includes discussing problems, but also includes saying nothing and patiently waiting for things to improve (Etcheverry & Le, 2005; Menzies-Toman & Lydon, 2005; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991; Tran & Simpson, 2009). A person can voice with friendliness

or keep silent with friendliness, and commitment is not systematically associated with one over the other (Rusbult et al., 1991).

If people are thinking of the well being of the relationship, they might alternatively look at the importance of the problem for the relationship and only voice those issues that need to be resolved for the relationship to be healthy. Indeed, this would be a good criterion for making the decision – research suggests that the avoidance of conflicts in close relationships has negative consequences for the health of the relationship (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Smith et al., 2008). There is some support for the idea that people weigh issue importance in their decision: studies indicate that problem severity can increase the likelihood of voice (Solomon & Samp, 1998). However, the association is often very small (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006; Menzies-Toman & Lydon, 2005; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986), and results across studies have been inconsistent. For example, Roloff and Solomon (2002) found that the association between importance and voice depends on levels of commitment, with only highly committed individuals withholding concerns because they were minor. Theiss and Solomon (2006), moreover, found no direct correlation between problem severity and voice. Issue importance thus does not appear to be the predominant force behind the decision to voice either.

How we can explain this apparent dissociation between the severity of a relationship problem and the decision to address it? The aforementioned research indicates that individuals may feel extremely dissatisfied about an issue in their relationship, one that may be quite serious and important, yet many are choosing to not tell their partners. And it's not because they are uncommitted to the relationship. Why,

then, are people holding back? The nature of this specific type of social dilemma may provide the answer.

A person who discloses dissatisfaction to a relationship partner relinquishes a certain degree of control over the problem and how it is resolved, creating a situation of uncertainty. Before a person voices, all options are still available to her – she can forgive her partner, discuss the problem, wait for things to improve, or neglect or leave the relationship (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Once she voices, the situation is no longer completely in her control – it is also in the control of the other person. The outcome, now largely dependent on the partner's reaction and how they deal with the problem together, can take many different directions, improving or damaging the relationship (Carrère & Gottman, 1999; Gottman, 1979; Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980). From this perspective it is not surprising that people often hold back: Remaining silent is a form of risk avoidance. In this particular dilemma, the degree of outcome uncertainty associated with raising an issue may overshadow the impetus for change.

We propose that given the risks involved in disclosing relational dissatisfaction, *expectancies* may play a particularly important role in the decision to voice. The beliefs people have about the consequences of their behavior – “If I do X, then my relationship partner will do Y” – are an influential component of social decision-making and an important predictor of interpersonal behavior (Baldwin, 1997; Baldwin & Dandeneau, 2005; Kammrath, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Such expectancies can reduce uncertainty by providing the individual with a probabilistic account of what will happen if they engage in a certain act. Research in areas such as assertiveness in negotiation,

revealing secrets, avoiding topics in conversation, and relational power dynamics suggest that beliefs and expectancies play a role in communication behaviours. For example, Ames (2008) found that assertiveness in workplace negotiations is predicted by expectancies about the outcomes of assertive behaviour. In the area of personal relationships, the decision to reveal secrets is largely dependent on perceptions of how the information may affect others, and how others' reactions may affect the self (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005). Individuals also avoid various topics in conversation due to general relationship uncertainty and concerns about damaging the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Finally, research on power dynamics in close relationships suggests that when one partner has punitive power (strong aggressive potential) or dependence power (relative lack of commitment) in a relationship, the other partner is less willing to express complaints due to expectancies for negative repercussions (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Soloman & Samp, 1998). These areas of research suggest that beliefs and expectancies are important for interpersonal communication behaviours, and should influence the decision to disclose feelings of dissatisfaction in a close relationship.

Notably, previous research has focused primarily on relational concerns – concerns about hurting the other person, evoking negative reactions, or impairing the relationship. This work suggests that, when people are deciding what to communicate in relationships, their choices are shaped by the potential for decreased communion in the relationship. Voice, however, is often conceptualized as *agentic* in nature (De Dreu et al., 2000; Rusbult et al., 1991). It involves direct action with respect to a problem, such that,



when people voice, they are actively attempting to change the situation (Hagedoorn, Van Yperen, Van de Vliert, & Buunk, 1999; Rusbult et al., 1991). Indeed, Stutman and Newell (1990) found that participants' primary reported goal of confrontation was to produce change in another person's behaviour. One might imagine, then, that people's primary concern when it comes to voice is whether speaking up will be instrumental in producing the desired change. Research to date has thus largely overlooked another important type of expectancy: Instrumental expectancies. Both relational and instrumental expectancies refer to the expected outcomes of voicing relational dissatisfaction (i.e., outcome expectancies). *Relational* outcomes refer to the positive or negative reactions of the relationship partner, while *instrumental* outcomes refer to whether the underlying problem itself will be fixed or resolved.

When deciding whether to voice, individuals likely have expectancies about whether the other person will listen to them, change or stop undesirable behaviour, and work toward fixing the problem. We posit that, due to the agentic nature of voice, instrumental expectancies are the strongest and most proximal predictor of the decision to speak up. In the areas of both personal relationships and workplace behaviour, voice is conceptualized as high on the 'active' dimension of responses to dissatisfaction (Hagedoorn et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 1991). Active responses are those in which one does something about the situation, and the response has an active impact on the problem at hand. To the extent that voice represents a direct, active attempt to change a problematic situation, this decision should largely depend on beliefs about whether speaking up will be effective in producing change.

Only one study to date has looked at the role of instrumental expectancies in voicing complaints. Makoul and Roloff (1998) found that general beliefs about whether speaking up will produce change in a relationship partner was associated with the proportion of withheld complaints. Importantly, these researchers did not assess the relative contributions of both relational and instrumental expectancies, but did find a strong positive association between the two expectancy types. We expect that the two types of expectancy co-vary significantly, but we hypothesize that instrumental expectancies will prove to be stronger predictors of voice than relational expectancies. As voice is seen as an active attempt to address a problem, we expect that the decision to speak up will be most strongly predicted by beliefs about whether voice will be instrumental in changing the situation. Beliefs about how voice may affect the relationship, while still important, may be less direct predictors of this decision. Relational expectancies may be one factor that contributes to the valence of instrumental expectancies – when individuals expect the other person will respond positively to a dissatisfaction discussion, they are more likely to expect the discussion will help to fix the problem – but we expect that it is instrumental expectancies that ultimately guide voice decisions.

In the present research, we set out to test the hypothesis that the decision to voice relational dissatisfaction is primarily driven by an individual's expectancies about the consequences of doing so, more so than by degree of dissatisfaction or issue importance. In addition, we propose that instrumental expectancies will be more important for this decision than relational expectancies.

H1: Outcome expectancies will be a better predictor of voice intentions and behaviour than will degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance

H2: Instrumental expectancies will be a better predictor of voice intentions and behaviour than will relational expectancies

In Study 1, participants who were currently dissatisfied about something in a close relationship rated their intentions to voice to the person within the subsequent week. In Study 2, participants rated their voice intentions at Time 1; one week later they rated how much they actually did voice to their partners within that week. In Study 3, participants rated how much they voiced daily dissatisfactions to a roommate. In Study 4, participants rated their intentions and actual behaviour for general voice, as in Study 2, but they also made ratings about specific styles of voice – positive voice (constructive problem solving) or negative voice (yelling, criticizing). This design allowed us to separately examine the level versus style of raising a dissatisfaction with a close other. In Study 4, participants who were dissatisfied with a close other rated their intentions to voice at Time 1; one week later they rated how much they did voice within the past week.

### **Study 1**

Study 1 participants were asked to think of a current relational dissatisfaction with a close other. They first indicated how dissatisfied they felt about the situation and how important they thought the issue was. Next, they were asked about their expectancies for voice. Specifically, they reported their relational expectancies (e.g., “if you voice, how likely is it that the other person will feel negatively toward you”) and their instrumental expectancies (e.g., “if you voice, how likely is it that the problem will get fixed”). Finally, participants indicated the strength of their intentions to voice the dissatisfaction

to the person some time during the next week. We hypothesized that degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance would be null to weak predictors of the degree to which participants intended to voice their concerns, and that expectancies about the probable consequences of voice would be strong predictors of intentions to voice. Furthermore, we hypothesized that, of the two expectancy types, instrumental expectancies would be the strongest predictor.

### **Method**

**Participants.** Sixty-five participants (51 female, 11 male, 3 unidentified.  $M$  age = 18.68,  $SD$  = .90) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed the online study and were compensated with course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants logged on to the study website from their personal computers. After giving consent to participate, participants were first asked to provide demographic information. They were then asked to identify a dissatisfaction they were currently experiencing with a close other and which they had not yet decided whether to voice to the other person, and to identify the nature of their relationship with the other person. Thirty-nine participants indicated their dissatisfaction was with a friend, 7 indicated family member, 7 indicated romantic partner, and the remaining 12 indicated 'other'.<sup>1</sup> Participants described their dissatisfaction in free-response format, identifying the nature of the situation and their specific concerns. Finally, participants rated their degree of dissatisfaction, the issue importance, their voice expectancies, and their intentions to voice their concerns some time in the next week.

**Dissatisfaction and Issue Importance.** Degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance were each assessed using a single item. For degree of dissatisfaction, the item

read, “Thinking of the situation you described above, how dissatisfied are you?” For issue importance, the item read, “Thinking of the situation you described above, how important is this issue for you?” Items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*). On average, participants were highly dissatisfied ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) and indicated similarly high issue importance ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), but there was substantial variability around these means.

**Expectancies.** Participants were asked to imagine what would happen if they voiced their dissatisfaction openly to the other person, in terms of both the relationship (relational expectancies) and the problem (instrumental expectancies). All items followed the stem “If I do voice my concerns, I imagine that...”. Four items gauged the expected consequences of voice for the relationship, including “The other person would experience negative feelings” and “The other person would feel positively toward me.” Two of these items were reverse-scored and responses were averaged across the four items to create a relational expectancy score, with higher scores indicating more positive relational expectancies ( $\alpha = .92$ ). In addition, four items were designed to assess the expected consequences of voice for the problem, including “I would get what I want” and “The problem would still not get fixed.” Two of the items were reverse-scored and responses were averaged across the four items to create an instrumental expectancy score, with higher scores indicating more positive instrumental expectancies ( $\alpha = .85$ ). All items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from -3 (*absolutely unlikely*) to 3 (*extremely likely*). On average, participants expected fairly neutral instrumental outcomes ( $M = -0.37$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and mildly negative relational outcomes ( $M = -1.13$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ), with considerable variability around the means.

**Voice Intentions.** Participants completed a single-item measure of intention to voice. On a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*completely*), they indicated how much they intended to voice their concerns to the other person within the next week. On average, participants reported modest intentions to voice ( $M = 2.37, SD = 1.90$ ). Voice was defined as “[to voice your] concerns or dissatisfaction to the other person, fully or partially”.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

**Correlations with Voice.** Pearson correlations among all variables are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, and replicating previous research, neither degree of dissatisfaction nor issue importance was significantly related to voice intentions. Also as hypothesized, both types of expectancies for voice, relational and instrumental, were significantly correlated with voice intentions, indicating that participants intended to voice more when they expected the other person would respond positively to a confrontation and when they anticipated a successful resolution to the problem.

**Multiple Regression.** To examine the unique effects of our predictor variables on voice intentions, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in which voice intentions were regressed on degree of dissatisfaction, issue importance, instrumental expectancies, and relational expectancies. Again, neither degree of dissatisfaction ( $\beta = .07, ns$ ) nor issue importance ( $\beta = .16, ns$ ) was associated with voice intentions. Although each of the two expectancy variables had originally demonstrated significant positive Pearson correlations with voice, they were also significantly positively correlated with each other (Table 1). As hypothesized, the results of the multiple regression indicated that only instrumental expectancies showed a unique positive association with voice intentions, ( $\beta$

= .36,  $p = .005$ ). Controlling for instrumental expectancies, the effect of relational expectancies was no longer significant ( $\beta = .17$ , *ns*). Thus, controlling for the shared variability among predictor variables, instrumental expectancies emerged as the largest and only significant predictor of voice intentions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Discussion**

The results of Study 1 were consistent with the hypothesis that expectancies are particularly important for the decision to voice relational dissatisfaction. Participants were not deciding whether to tell their partners what was bothering them on the basis of how dissatisfied they were or how much importance they attached to the underlying issue. Rather, the sole predictors of whether participants intended to take the risk of openly voicing their dissatisfaction were the consequences they expected to result from talking about it.

These findings suggest that participants had stronger intentions to speak up and voice their dissatisfaction to a loved one both when they believed that doing so will not hurt the other person, and when they believed that doing so will help to fix the problem. Thus far, research has primarily emphasized the former – expected consequences for the relationship. Because these two expectations tend to co-occur, we can assess which is more important for the decision to voice. Our results suggest that expectancies for instrumental outcomes were the strongest predictors of the decision to voice. These findings suggest a certain degree of pragmatism involved in the decision to voice. Relational expectancies may matter for the decision to voice primarily because of their association with instrumental expectancies. That is, relational expectancies may be one of several factors that contribute to the valence of instrumental expectancies, which are the

most proximal predictor. Only instrumental expectancies had a unique association with voice, indicating that in the cases when participants expected negative relational outcomes but still believed speaking up would fix the problem, they most often chose to speak up.

### Study 2

Although Study 1 assessed *intentions* to voice, and found our predicted patterns, we were primarily interested in predicting voice *behavior*. Thus, Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend Study 1 by assessing both voice intentions and actual voice behaviour. We asked participants to describe a current relational dissatisfaction and rate their intentions to voice their dissatisfaction some time in the next week. In this study, participants reported their voice intentions prior to completing measures of our other predictor variables.<sup>4</sup> Participants then indicated their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the issue, and their relational and instrumental expectancies, as in Study 1. We followed up with participants one week after they completed the initial survey and asked how much they actually voiced their dissatisfaction to the other person in the past week.

We expected that degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance would show weak relationships with both voice intentions and voice behaviour, while relational and instrumental expectancies would positively predict voice intentions and behaviour. Furthermore, we expected that of the two expectancies, only instrumental expectancies would show a significant unique effect.

### Method



**Participants.** 185 university undergraduates (132 female, 51 male, 2 unidentified.  $M_{age} = 18.58, SD = 1.24$ ) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed the online study and were compensated with course credit. Of the original sample, 161 completed the follow up. There were no significant differences between those who did and did not complete the follow up with respect to voice intentions, degree of dissatisfaction, issue importance, or expectancies ( $ts < 1.67, ps > .10$ ).

**Procedure.** At Time 1, participants completed an online survey similar to that of Study 1. Participants logged on to the study website from their personal computers. After giving consent to participate, participants were first asked to provide demographic information. They were then asked to describe a relational dissatisfaction with a close other that was not yet voiced and to identify the nature of their relationship with the other person. Ninety nine participants indicated they were dissatisfied with a friend, 44 indicated a family member, 37 indicated a romantic partner, and the remaining 5 participants indicated 'other'. They subsequently rated their intentions to voice their concerns to the other person, their degree of dissatisfaction about the situation, the importance of the issue, and their voice expectancies. After completing the survey, participants submitted their responses. At Time 2, one week later, participants were emailed a single follow up question to assess the degree to which they actually voiced their concerns.

**Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, and Expectancies.** Degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance were each assessed using a single item rated on a scale ranging from 0 to 6, as in Study 1. On average, participants reported a high degree of dissatisfaction ( $M = 4.21, SD = 1.24$ ) and high issue importance ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.45$ ).

Relational expectancies and instrumental expectancies were each assessed with the same four items<sup>5</sup> used in Study 1, on scales ranging from -3 to 3. Alphas were .89 and .91, respectively. On average, participants expected fairly neutral relational outcomes ( $M = -0.43$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) and instrumental outcomes ( $M = -0.15$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ).

**Voice intentions and actual voice.** At Time 1, participants reported their intentions to voice their relational dissatisfaction within the next week, rated on a scale from 0 to 6, as in Study 1. On average, participants indicated modest intentions to voice ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ). At Time 2, participants reported how much they actually voiced their relational dissatisfaction within the past week, rated on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*completely*). On average, participants reported engaging in a similar level of voice ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) as they had intended ( $t(162) = -1.37$ , *ns*), but there was wide variability in whether participants voiced more or less than they had planned ( $SD$  of the intention-behaviour difference score = 1.87).

## Results

**Voice intentions: Correlations and regression.** Pearson correlations between the variables are presented in Table 2. As expected, neither degree of dissatisfaction nor issue importance was significantly correlated with voice intentions. Also as hypothesized, both relational and instrumental expectancies demonstrated significant positive associations with intentions to voice.

Voice intentions were regressed on degree of dissatisfaction, issue importance, relational expectancies, and instrumental expectancies. Again, neither degree of dissatisfaction ( $\beta = -.02$ , *ns*) nor issue importance ( $\beta = .15$ , *ns*) was associated with voice intentions. Both relational and instrumental expectancies had originally demonstrated

significant positive Pearson correlations with voice intentions, and, as hypothesized, were significantly positively correlated with each other (Table 2). However, replicating Study 1, when we controlled for their shared variance, positive instrumental expectancies were associated with stronger intentions to voice, ( $\beta = .34, p < .001$ ), whereas relational expectancies were not significantly related to voice intentions, ( $\beta = .01, ns$ ).

**Actual voice: Correlations and regression.** Results for actual voice behaviour were consistent with the patterns observed for intentions to voice. Neither degree of dissatisfaction nor issue importance was significantly correlated with how much participants actually voiced their concerns. Both expectancy variables, however, demonstrated significant positive correlations with voice behaviour (Table 2).

Voice behaviour ratings were regressed on degree of dissatisfaction, issue importance, and relational and instrumental expectancies. Voice behaviour was not predicted by degree of dissatisfaction, ( $\beta = .00, ns$ ) or by issue importance, ( $\beta = .10, ns$ ). Although both relational and instrumental expectancies were originally significantly positively correlated with voice behaviour, when we controlled for their shared variance only instrumental expectancies remained significant; participants were significantly more likely to voice when they had positive instrumental expectancies ( $\beta = .19, p = .03$ ), but not when they had positive relational expectancies, ( $\beta = .16, ns$ ), although this difference was slight.

## **Discussion**

The results of Study 2 replicate and extend those of Study 1, demonstrating the importance of expectancies for voice behaviour as well as voice intentions. Taken together, the findings of these studies indicate that when participants were experiencing

problems in a relationship, the amount of dissatisfaction they felt and the importance of the problem were not as important as expectancies in the decision to speak up.

Participants were most likely to voice their dissatisfaction when they believed that their loved one would not feel negatively about the disclosure, and when they believed doing so would help to resolve the problem. Moreover, the results of these studies converge to indicate that, of these two beliefs, anticipated outcomes for the problem itself were most important for the decision to voice.

### **Study 3**

The results of Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate the importance of instrumental expectancies in predicting voice. However, both of these studies focused on dissatisfactions that participants had been experiencing prior to the study and had not yet decided whether to voice. It is possible that the decision to speak up more immediately following a close other's dissatisfying behaviour may depend on other factors. Thus, Study 3 was conducted to test our findings using an alternate methodology. In this diary study, participants were contacted twice a week for four weeks and asked about their interactions with their roommate on that particular day. When their roommate had behaved in a dissatisfying manner, participants were asked to rate their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the problem, how much they voiced their concerns on that day, and their retrospective relational and instrumental expectancies for voice.

We predicted that dissatisfaction and issue importance would be weakly related to voice behaviour. We again hypothesized that both relational and instrumental expectancies would predict the decision to voice, but that only instrumental expectancies would have a unique significant effect.

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** 103 participants (65 female, 34 male, 4 unidentified,  $M$  age = 18.73,  $SD$  = 1.05) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed the online study and were compensated with course credit. All participants reported on same-sex roommates (among those who provided gender information). Participants had known their roommates for a median of 7 months (range = 3 months-20 years).

For a period of four weeks, participants were contacted twice a week to complete a short survey in the evening. Participants were emailed a survey link every Wednesday and Sunday, which they completed from their personal computers. Overall, participants completed an average of 5.63 diary entries ( $SD$  = 1.82). For each survey, participants were asked to report whether their roommate had said or done anything that day which displeased them, and if so, to describe the event. They then rated their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the event, the degree to which they voiced their concerns, and their retrospective expectancies for voice. Participants were also asked to report whether their roommate had said or done anything that pleased them, and if so, to describe the event and respond to follow-up questions. This portion of the study was not relevant to the current research and will not be discussed further.

Of the original sample, 37 participants (26 female, 9 male, 2 unidentified) reported being dissatisfied with their roommate's behaviour at least once during the period of the study. The data from these 37 participants are what will be analyzed. Twenty five participants provided a single dissatisfaction report, 9 participants provided 2 dissatisfaction reports, and 3 participants provided 3 dissatisfaction reports. They

completed an average of 5.49 diary entries ( $SD = 1.98$ ) and had known their roommates for a median of 9 months (range = 3 months-12 years).

**Degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance.** In an evening dissatisfaction report, participants completed single item measures designed to assess their degree of dissatisfaction with their roommate and the importance of their roommate's dissatisfying behaviour. For degree of dissatisfaction, participants were asked to rate "How dissatisfied did you feel" on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all dissatisfied*) to 6 (*very dissatisfied*). For issue importance, participants were asked to rate "How major or significant was this displeasing behaviour" on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*very minor*) to 6 (*very major*). On average, participants reported high dissatisfaction ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) and moderate issue importance ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ).

**Voice behaviour.** Participants completed a single item measure of the degree to which they openly voiced their concerns to their roommate. Rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*completely*), the item read, "I verbally expressed my dissatisfaction to my roommate." On average, participants reported engaging in moderate levels of voice ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ).

**Voice expectancies.** Instrumental and relational expectancies were each assessed using 2-item scales designed to gauge participants' retrospective expectancies for voice. Specifically, participants were asked to think back to the moment they first felt the dissatisfaction, and report what they had thought would happen if they talked to their roommate about it. All items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from -3 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*) and followed the stem "I imagined that after talking about it...". For relational expectancies, the items read "My roommate would experience

positive feelings” and “My roommate would feel personally hurt and rejected” ( $r = -.30$ ,  $p = .036$ ). The latter item was reverse-scored and responses were averaged across the two items to create a relational expectancy score, with higher scores indicating more positive relational expectancies. For instrumental expectancies, the items read “The problem would get fixed” and “The problem would not go away” ( $r = -.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The latter item was reverse-scored and responses were averaged across the two items to create an instrumental expectancy score, with higher scores indicating more positive instrumental expectancies. On average, participants reported fairly neutral relational expectancies ( $M = -0.01$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and instrumental expectancies ( $M = -0.65$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ).

## Results

**Correlations with voice.** Pearson correlations between the variables are presented in Table 3. As in Studies 1 and 2, neither degree of dissatisfaction nor issue importance was associated with voice. Again, both relational expectancies and instrumental expectancies demonstrated significant positive correlations with the degree to which participants voiced to their roommates.

**Multi-level regression.** To assess the independent effects of our predictor variables on voice, a multi level modeling analysis was conducted regressing voice on dissatisfaction, issue importance, relational expectancies, and instrumental expectancies. An MLM approach (Bickel, 2007) was used to adjust for multiple reports among some participants. Replicating the results of Study 2, voice behaviour was not predicted by either degree of dissatisfaction ( $\beta = .14$ , *ns*) or issue importance ( $\beta = .18$ , *ns*). Although both expectancy variables had demonstrated significant positive Pearson correlations with voice behaviour, they were also positively correlated with each other (Table 3).

When we controlled for their shared variance only instrumental expectancies remained a significant predictor of voice ( $\beta = .34, p = .03$ ). Relational expectancies no longer predicted the degree to which participants voiced their concerns to their roommate ( $\beta = .18, ns$ ).

### **Discussion**

The results of Study 3 replicate those of Studies 1 and 2 using an alternate methodology. Our previous studies focused on dissatisfactions that had been unvoiced for at least some time. However, sometimes individuals may speak up immediately following another's dissatisfying behaviour. Thus, Study 3 employed a diary approach, assessing decisions to voice daily dissatisfactions to a roommate. The findings indicated that, even for more immediate decisions to voice, degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance were relatively unimportant. Only the expected consequences of speaking up seemed to matter for this decision, and it was the expected consequences for resolving the problem that carried the majority of the weight for the decision to voice. However, retrospective reports of expectancies may also be biased by what actually happened in the interaction.

### **Study 4**

The results of the previous studies highlight the importance of expectancies in predicting voice intentions and behaviour. However, thus far we assessed only how *much* individuals disclosed their dissatisfaction to their close other. For that decision, our findings suggest instrumental expectancies – practical beliefs about whether speaking up will resolve the problem – are most important. Voice, however, can take various forms which differ in the degree to which they are positive versus negative (Hagedoorn et al., 1999). For example, one can calmly and constructively raise the issue for discussion, or



one can aggressively and destructively express anger or criticism. What, then, predicts the manner of the disclosure?

We propose that relational expectancies – beliefs about how speaking up may affect a loved one – will be important for *how* one raises the issue. Voice is primarily an agentic, active attempt to change the situation at hand (Hagedoorn et al., 1999). People most commonly report that their goal of confrontation is to influence the other person's behaviour (Stutman & Newell, 1990). Thus, it is not surprising that this behaviour is predicted primarily by instrumental concerns, such as whether the problem will be fixed. The friendliness of the interaction, however, is fundamentally relational in nature, and may be predicted by relational concerns, such as how the other person will feel and how the relationship will be affected. Rusbult et al. (1991) found that constructive responses to dissatisfaction, including both constructive voice and loyal silence, are predicted by relationship qualities and concerns. When people feel lower relational concerns, such as concerns for the other person's feelings or the future of the relationship, they respond less constructively than those who maintain such concerns. In addition, to the extent that people feel more satisfied, committed, and invested in a relationship, they are more likely to respond constructively to dissatisfactions. We expect that when individuals hold positive relational expectancies – beliefs that the other person will respond positively to a dissatisfaction discussion – they should be more likely to voice in a positive, constructive manner, and less likely to voice in a negative, destructive manner.

Study 4 was conducted to determine which factors predict level of voice, versus style of voice. We hypothesized that instrumental expectancies would predict level of voice (higher voice of all kinds, both positive and negative), whereas relational

expectancies would not predict the level of voice, but would predict the style.<sup>6</sup> We again asked participants to identify and describe a relational dissatisfaction they were currently experiencing with a close other. Participants rated their intentions to voice (in general, in a positive manner, and in a negative manner), their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the issue, and their voice expectancies. One week later, we followed up with participants and asked how much they actually voiced their dissatisfaction in the past week (in general, in a positive manner, and in a negative manner).

### **Method**

**Participants.** 183 university undergraduates (118 female, 64 male, 1 unidentified.  $M$  age = 18.93,  $SD$  = 1.95) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed the online study and were compensated with course credit. Of the original sample, 147 completed the follow up. There was no significant difference between those who did and did not complete the follow up with respect to degree of dissatisfaction,  $t(180) = .09$ , *ns*; however, participants who completed the follow up reported lower issue importance ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than those who did not ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(180) = 2.13$ ,  $p = .035$ . Nevertheless, there were no significant differences between the two groups for any other study variables, including general voice intentions, positive voice intentions, negative voice intentions, degree of dissatisfaction, or expectancies ( $ts < 1.46$ ,  $ps > .14$ ). Moreover, a comparison of the means suggests a relatively minor difference in reported issue importance between the two groups, and the mean issue importance for both groups was comparable to that reported in previous samples.

**Procedure.** At Time 1, participants logged onto their personal computers and completed an online survey similar to those completed in Studies 1 and 2. After giving

consent to participate, participants were asked to provide demographic information and to identify and describe a relational dissatisfaction they were currently experiencing with a close other.<sup>7</sup> They were also asked to indicate the nature of their relationship with the other person. Seventy-nine participants indicated they were dissatisfied with a romantic partner, 55 indicated a friend, 47 indicated a family member, and the remaining 2 participants indicated 'other'. Participants then reported their intentions to voice sometime within the next week (in general, in a positive manner, and in a negative manner) and rated their degree of dissatisfaction, the importance of the issue, and their voice expectancies. The order of the voice intentions, situational variables (dissatisfaction and issue importance), and expectancy scales were counterbalanced. After completing this survey, participants submitted their responses. At Time 2, one week later, participants were emailed four follow up questions to assess the degree to which they actually voiced their concerns (in general, in a positive manner, and in a negative manner).

**Dissatisfaction and issue importance.** Participants completed 2-item measures of both degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance. All items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*). For degree of dissatisfaction participants were asked "How dissatisfied are you?" and "How displeased are you about this situation?" ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ). Responses were averaged across the items to create a dissatisfaction score, with higher scores representing greater dissatisfaction. For issue importance participants were asked "How important is this issue for you?" and "How serious is this problem?" ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ). Responses were averaged to create an issue importance score, with higher scores representing greater issue importance. Two-item

scales were used for both of these variables in this study to improve the reliability and validity of these measures. On average, participants reported moderate dissatisfaction ( $M = 3.26, SD = 1.48$ ) and issue importance ( $M = 3.49, SD = 1.49$ ).

**Voice expectancies.** Instrumental expectancies and relational expectancies were each assessed with the same four items used in Studies 1 and 2, on scales ranging from -3 to 3. Alphas were .71 and .77 respectively. On average, participants expected neutral instrumental outcomes ( $M = 0.34, SD = 1.20$ ) and relational outcomes ( $M = 0.26, SD = 1.19$ ).

**Voice intentions.** At Time 1, participants rated their intentions to voice their dissatisfaction within the next week in general, in a positive way, and in a negative way. Two items were designed to assess the extent to which participants planned to speak up in general, including “How much will you tell the other person about your dissatisfaction?” and “How much will you hold back and keep your dissatisfaction to yourself?” ( $r = -.57, p < .001$ ). The latter item was reverse-scored and responses were averaged to create a general voice intentions score, with higher scores representing intentions to voice more. Two items were also designed to assess style of voice. Positive voice intentions were assessed with the item, “To what extent will you share and discuss your feelings with the other person in an open and constructive way?” Negative voice intentions were assessed with the item, “To what extent will you ‘tell them off’, expressing criticism or hostility directly?” ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ). The two items for style of voice were analyzed separately. All items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*completely*). On average, participants reported modest intentions to voice

in general ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) and to voice in a positive manner ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) and low intentions to voice in a negative manner ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ).

**Actual voice.** At Time 2, participants rated how much they actually voiced their dissatisfaction within the past week in general, in a positive way, and in a negative way. Participants completed 2 items to assess general voice, and 2 items to assess style of voice, on the same scales as previously. On average, participants reported engaging in slightly less general voice than they had intended ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ), however, this difference was not significant ( $t(143) = 1.64$ , *ns*). Participants also reported engaging in significantly less positive voice ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) and negative voice ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) than they had intended ( $t(141) = 3.26$ ,  $p = .001$ , and  $t(144) = 3.15$ ,  $p = .002$ , respectively). However, there was considerable variability in how much intentions differed from behaviour ( $SDs$  of intention- behaviour difference score = 1.63, 1.70, 1.71, respectively).

## Results

**General voice: Intentions and behaviour.** As in the previous studies, we first examined the correlations between degree of dissatisfaction, issue importance, expectancies, and voice. These are presented in Table 4. We then conducted multiple regressions to assess the independent effects of our predictor variables. These are presented in Table 5.

Replicating previous findings, degree of dissatisfaction was not associated with voice intentions or behaviour. In this sample, issue importance was positively associated with voice intentions; however, as in all previous studies, issue importance was not associated with voice behaviour. Consistent with our previous studies, both expectancy

variables demonstrated significant Pearson correlations with voice and with each other (Table 4). However, as expected, only instrumental expectancies showed unique positive associations with voice intentions and behaviour. When we controlled for the effects of instrumental expectancies, relational expectancies were no longer significant (Table 5).

**Styles of voice: Intentions and behaviour.** We examined the associations between our predictor variables and the qualitatively different styles of voice using Pearson correlations (Table 4) and multiple regressions (Table 5). Replicating the patterns observed for general voice, degree of dissatisfaction was not associated with positive or negative voice intentions or behaviour. Issue importance showed a unique positive association with positive voice intentions, similar to its association with general voice intentions in this sample. However, consistent with the results most commonly observed for general voice across all studies, issue importance was not associated with positive voice behaviour or negative voice intentions and behaviour. As expected, instrumental expectancies were significantly positively associated with positive and negative voice intentions and behaviour. Thus, dissatisfaction, issue importance, and instrumental expectancies showed a pattern of associations with the two styles of voice similar to their relationships with general voice.

Our key hypothesis for styles of voice concerned relational expectancies. Specifically, although relational expectancies did not uniquely predict general voice, we expected they might be important for the manner in which one chooses to speak up. Consistent with this prediction, relational expectancies demonstrated unique positive associations with both positive voice intentions and positive voice behaviour, and unique negative associations with both negative voice intentions and negative voice behaviour.

Thus, when participants believed the other person would respond positively to a conflict discussion they were more likely to raise their concerns in a friendly, constructive manner and less likely to raise their concerns in a hostile, destructive manner.

**Positive-Negative Difference: Intentions and behaviour.** To determine whether expectancies predict the difference between positive voice and negative voice, we conducted a multiple regression in which positive minus negative voice difference scores for both intentions and behaviour were regressed on dissatisfaction, importance, and expectancies (Table 5). Neither degree or dissatisfaction nor issue importance was a significant predictor of the difference between positive and negative voice. Although instrumental expectancies predicted positive and negative voice independently, they did not predict the difference between positive and negative voice. Only relational expectancies were significantly associated with the distinction between positive voice and negative voice.

## **Discussion**

The result of Study 4 replicate our previous findings for general voice, and also demonstrate the importance of relational expectancies in predicting different styles of voice. As in our previous studies, only expectancies consistently predicted the decision to voice dissatisfaction, and of the two types of expectancies, instrumental expectancies were the strongest predictor of voice. However, assessing overall levels of voice does not inform us as to the manner or style of the disclosure. Hagedoorn et al. (1999) emphasize that voice can take many different forms that differ in the degree to which they are positive and constructive versus negative and destructive. *How* one chooses to express her dissatisfaction likely has important implications for how the discussion unfolds, how

the problem is resolved or not resolved, and the quality and well-being of the relationship. Expectancies for whether speaking up would resolve the problem, while important for how much participants voiced in general, did not seem to differentiate between whether they voiced in a positive or negative manner. The sole predictors of style of voice were participants' beliefs about how the other person would respond to the discussion. When participants believed they could voice their concerns without causing negative reactions in the other person, they were more likely to calmly raise their concerns in a friendly manner and less likely to 'attack' the other person in a hostile or negative manner. These findings confirm the logical prediction that the decision to directly confront the problem at hand with active voice is dependent on practical concerns about whether a direct approach will be effective at solving the problem. Whether one chooses to confront the problem in a warm or cold manner, however, is more dependent on relational concerns about the other person's feelings and the potential impact on the quality of the relationship.

### **General Discussion**

When faced with the inevitable dissatisfactions that occur in close relationships, what compels people to voice their displeasure openly? Previous research shows that the degree of dissatisfaction people feel does not play a role in their decision to disclose (Baucom et al., 1996; Kammrath & Dweck, 2006). The seriousness of the problem also does not consistently drive people to speak up (Roloff & Solomon, 2002; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). The present research replicated these null effects and further demonstrated that the most robust predictor of voice is expectancies. Participants in four studies, when dealing with a relational dissatisfaction, formed intentions to bring the



issue up with their partner, and actually broached the issue, when they thought their close other would feel positively about the discussion and that doing so would successfully resolve the problem. Furthermore, of these two expected outcomes, it was expectancies for fixing the problem that most strongly predicted whether participants took the risk of speaking up. These findings are intriguing, as they suggest that a loved one may be quite upset with something you have done, and they will not tell you if they think it will not go well. Moreover, even if they think you will respond positively to the communication, they will keep their dissatisfaction to themselves if they think you cannot change and/or that the problem is not fixable. When a person must decide how to address relationship problems – whether to tackle them head-on with active discussion or to adopt more passive and indirect strategies – the choice seems to rest on a decision within one person that speaking up will work.

This research enhances our current understanding of responses to dissatisfaction by contributing to an understudied phenomenon (the active dimension of responses to dissatisfaction). In these studies we replicate past work demonstrating the minor role of dissatisfaction and issue importance and the stronger role of expectancies. Moreover, these findings expand on previous research by demonstrating the role of both relational and instrumental expectancies in voicing dissatisfaction. Although previous research has demonstrated the importance of relational concerns for communication behaviours, little research has directly explored the effects of expected instrumental outcomes on voice. Our research differentiates the two expectancy types and demonstrates that while instrumental expectancies are the strongest predictor of the decision to directly address problems in a relationship, relational expectancies predict the style of voice.

**Dissatisfaction and Issue Importance**

The finding that degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance are null to weak predictors of voice has several interesting implications. The results of this research suggest that individuals may not be deciding whether to confront partners about relationship problems based on the severity of the situation, despite the fact that these may be the situations people most desire to change, and which are most important to change for the health of the relationship. This finding is particularly interesting because close relationship research suggests that problem severity would be a good criterion for making the decision. McNulty and Russell (2010) found that, when partners are faced with important relationship problems, even negative direct communication is beneficial for the health of the relationship over time. Negative problem-solving behaviours such as blaming, commanding, and rejecting are associated with reduced severity of serious problems over time and subsequent increases in relationship satisfaction. Being direct and communicating the extent of dissatisfaction is important for actually getting another person to change. These positive effects are not observed when dealing with minor problems. Thus it seems a direct approach, even if negative in valence, is important when addressing important relationship issues.

Interestingly, in our data, importance was often negatively associated with both types of outcome expectancies, suggesting that participants expected negative outcomes of talking about serious problems. As negative expectancies were the strongest predictor of holding back feelings of dissatisfaction, one might imagine that people dealing with serious problems would be less likely to voice. However, despite this association between importance and expected outcomes, importance itself was not a strong negative predictor

of the decision to voice. It may be that importance is also associated with other factors that promote more voice. For example, important problems may also be those for which people are most motivated to find a resolution. To the extent that people are especially motivated to fix or solve the problem (that is, to the extent that they *value* problem resolution), they should also be more likely to speak up (Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

It could also be that individuals modify the perceived importance of problems to reduce threat, particular when problems appear irresolvable or damaging to the other person or relationship. In our data, importance was often negatively associated with both types of outcome expectancies, suggesting that participants expected negative outcomes of talking about serious problems. In the face of negative expectancies, individuals may subsequently discount the importance of serious problems so as to avoid the need to address them. Our finding in Study 4 that importance was associated only with voice intentions is consistent with this idea.

Despite the null associations between issue importance and voice in our studies, it may still be the case that the importance of the problem interacts with other features of the relationship to influence the decision to voice. For example, Roloff and Solomon (2002) found that the decision to withhold complaints was associated with issue importance only among highly committed individuals. The effects of importance may also depend on characteristics of the individual such as attachment, self-esteem, or personality. For examples, individuals who are secure in themselves and the relationship may feel it is only necessary to bring up those issues that are truly important to resolve in order for the relationship to be healthy. Those who are insecure, however, may more

likely to either indiscriminately address every issue in an attempt to perfect the relationship and achieve a sense of closeness and security, or to avoid bringing up contentious issues at all due to uncertainty and a lack of confidence. In addition, it may be that people with certain dispositional traits, such as high agreeableness, are likely to voice only the most important problems, while disagreeable people are likely to voice regardless of importance (McCarthy, Kammrath, & Friesen, 2010).

### **Voice Expectancies**

The finding that instrumental expectancies are the strongest predictor of the decision to voice is intuitive. Our findings for relational expectancies warrant further discussion, however. In the context of close relationships, it may seem surprising that relational concerns do not show unique associations with voice once instrumental expectancies have been controlled. Indeed, our findings suggest that relational concerns do matter, but that they may influence the decision to voice via their association with instrumental expectancies. That is, expecting a positive partner reaction may be one factor that contributes to expectancies for successful problem resolution, and, thereby, voice.

Our findings indicate that relational expectancies do have a unique association with the friendliness of a dissatisfaction discussion. Previous research on responses to relational dissatisfaction has not generally differentiated between qualitative differences in style of voice. Voice is usually conceptualized as an active, constructive behaviour that includes friendly discussion and cooperative problem solving (Rusbult et al., 1991). However, Hagedoorn et al. (1999) demonstrated that individuals can speak up and express their dissatisfaction in ways that are more or less friendly and constructive. For

example, one can considerably raise a concern for cooperative discussion, or one can lash out in a moment of anger and engage in yelling, criticizing, or blaming. In our studies, beliefs about whether speaking up would solve the problem did not differentiate between different styles of voice. The sole differential predictor of whether participants raised the issue in a positive, constructive manner or a negative, destructive manner was their beliefs about how the discussion would affect the loved one standing in front of them. Specifically, to the extent that participants expected the other person would not be adversely affected by the discussion, they were more likely to voice in a positive manner and less likely to voice in a negative manner.

It may seem counterintuitive that when participants expected their close other would be adversely affected by a dissatisfaction discussion they were less likely to voice in a positive manner, and more likely to voice in a negative manner. There are several possible explanations for this finding. It may be that relational expectancies are associated with other relationship variables that predict the friendliness of an interaction. Rusbult et al. (1991) found that commitment is associated with constructive responses to relational dissatisfaction, including friendly voice and friendly silence. To that extent that individuals in unsatisfying and uncommitted relationships expect negative responses from a relationship partner, it could be the quality of the relationship driving more negative communication behaviours. Another possible explanation is that individuals have a defensive reaction when they expect relationship partners to respond negatively to a discussion. For example, it may feel unfair to an individual that she cannot raise an issue without a negative partner reaction, and so she defensively lashes out at her partner. Moreover, Rusbult et al. (1991) demonstrated that the impulsive, automatic reaction to

negative partner behaviour is to behave destructively in kind. Individuals must be sufficiently motivated to inhibit their automatic destructive tendencies and instead behave constructively. An individual who already expects the interaction will not go well may not be motivated to override their automatic destructive tendencies and instead address the problem positively.

Finally, it may be that relational expectancies primarily reflect participants' accurate predictions of spirals of destructive conflict, rather than playing a causal role in positive or negative voice. That is, rather than people voicing negatively *because* they expect the other person to respond negatively, people may accurately predict that a partner will respond negatively. When the partner then does respond negatively, this causes the dissatisfied partner to behave (voice) negatively in turn. Negative voice in particular may not always be planned or intentional, but rather an 'in-the-moment' response to a negative situation. As the results of this research are correlational in nature, we cannot ascertain the potential causal role of expectancies with any certainty.

### **Sources of Expectancies**

Where do voice expectancies come from? In some instances, such expectancies must be grounded in reality. Perhaps some issues really are fixable or unfixable (at least through discussion), and perhaps some partners really are imperturbable or vulnerable to negative reactions. To the extent that expectancies come from past experience, these learned beliefs may have positive or negative consequences for the individual. For example, if an individual learns which issues typically evoke negative reactions from a partner and which issues are open to discussion and resolution, he/she can avoid unnecessary conflict and work toward addressing fixable problems. Expectancies derived

from past experience may also have negative implications for the individual, however. For example, in abusive relationships, an individual may learn that speaking up evokes aggressive reactions from a partner and does not resolve problems. To the extent that individuals learn to remain silent in such relationships, this silence may contribute to learned helplessness (Walker, 1979) and perpetuate patterns of abuse.

Sometimes, however, these expectancies might be biased. The issue might be more solvable or the partner more amenable to discussion than the person imagines when s/he chooses to keep silent. As the present data are correlational, we cannot be certain how much these expectancies stem from chronic individual differences, features of relationships, or situational factors. The data suggest, however, that further investigations of the varied sources of voice expectancies should prove useful for uncovering additional predictors of voice. It would also be useful for future research to explore what can be done to change these expectancies. At the personal level, are there interventions that can change chronic negative cognitions? At the relational level, are there things the partner can do to signal that he/she will be amenable and receptive to the discussion? There are many exciting possibilities for interesting experimental research to follow up on the present longitudinal research to explore the potential malleability of voice expectancies and to explore the potential causal role of expectancies in the decision to voice.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is important to note that our findings are limited to a specific kind of relationship: close personal relationships. The cognitive predictors of voice might be very different with strangers or acquaintances. For example, people might be more willing to translate their dissatisfaction directly into voice in less close relationships. It also remains

to be seen whether these processes would be observed in organizational or business settings. In addition, our findings did not differentiate between different kinds of dissatisfactions. It is possible that the predictors of voice may differ when dealing with chronic problems versus isolated incidents, or with different types of problems, such as dissimilar values or attitudes, dishonesty, rude or inconsiderate behaviour, or concerns such as finances or allocation of work and responsibilities (e.g., in cohabiting relationships). For example, Cloven and Roloff (1993) found a partner's power in the relationship exerts a chilling effect on the willingness to express complaints only for those complaints related to control issues. Thus, future research should systematically examine the varied types of relational dissatisfactions and their predictors.

Another important limitation of this research concerns our focus on individual reports in studying a dyadic relationship process. Characteristics of both relationship partners may interact in shaping expectancies and the negotiation of relationship problems, and disclosers and receivers may interpret the directness and tone of a dissatisfaction discussion differently. In addition, a discloser's strategy for addressing a relationship issue may be fluid over the course of a discussion in response to reactions from the other partner. It would be useful for future research to examine how the disclosure process itself unfolds in the course of a communication episode, as well as how patterns of disclosure change over time. For example, if active voice proves to be ineffective, individuals may compensate by adopting more passive, indirect strategies, such as coldness, sarcasm, or withdrawal. The use of dyadic data over time would allow a more comprehensive investigation of the complex interactional processes that shape the



discussion of relationship problems, both during the course of an interaction, and over time.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the findings of the present studies help to shed some light on what occurs beneath the surface of strained personal relationships. Research suggests that the avoidance of conflict in close relationships is typically associated with negative consequences (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Smith et al., 2008), and studies of empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993) also show that relationships fare better when people have accurate knowledge about their partner's emotions – including negative emotions (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, Davis, & Devoldre, 2008). Our research reveals, however, that people frequently fail to disclose relational dissatisfactions, even very serious ones, to their partners. Deliberate disclosure, it seems, may critically depend on a belief in the potential for positive outcomes.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Results did not vary by relationship type in this or any other study.

<sup>2</sup>This definition of voice is neutral in valence and does not specifically refer to either positive voice (Rusbult et al., 1991) or negative voice (Hagedoorn et al., 1999).

<sup>3</sup>There were no interactions between predictor variables in predicting voice for this or any other study.

<sup>4</sup>In Study 1, participants reported their voice intentions at the end of the survey. We reversed the order in Study 2, to show that the effects of expectancies on intentions were not simply due to order effects.

<sup>5</sup>In Studies 1 and 2, we used single-item measures of both degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance, and 4-item measures of our expectancy variables. It is possible that the stronger associations between expectancies and voice can be explained by these longer, more reliable and valid measures. We address this issue in future studies, by both reducing the length of expectancy measures to 2 items (Study 3) and increasing the length of degree of dissatisfaction and issue importance measures to 2 items (Study 4).

<sup>6</sup>Instrumental expectancies may also predict style of the voice, to the extent that participants believe positive voice will be more effective in solving the problem. However, this possibility is more speculative than are our hypotheses for relational expectancies predicting style of voice.

<sup>7</sup>For this study, dissatisfactions were not limited to those not previously voiced.

Table 1

*Correlations Between Voice Intentions, Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, and Voice Expectancies (Study 1)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Voice Intentions	—				
2. Degree of Dissatisfaction	.07	—			
3. Issue Importance	.21	.50**	—		
4. Instrumental Expectancies	.41**	-.13	.01	—	
5. Relational Expectancies	.30*	-.13	.08	.42**	—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Correlations Between Voice Intentions, Voice Behaviour, Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, and Voice Expectancies (Study 2)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Voice Intentions	—					
2. Voice Behaviour	.56***	—				
3. Degree of Dissatisfaction	.01	-.02	—			
4. Issue Importance	.06	.02	.56***	—		
5. Instrumental Expectancies	.33***	.24**	-.17*	-.22**	—	
6. Relational Expectancies	.16*	.21**	-.20**	-.04	.39***	—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Note: Analysis of intentions used all who participated at Time 1 ( $n = 185$ ); analysis of behaviour used all who participated at Time 2 ( $n = 161$ ).

Table 3

*Correlations Between Voice Behaviour, Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, and Voice Expectancies (Study 3)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Voice Behaviour	—				
2. Degree of Dissatisfaction	.13	—			
3. Issue Importance	.14	.57**	—		
4. Instrumental Expectancies	.34*	-.27 <sup>+</sup>	-.24 <sup>+</sup>	—	
5. Relational Expectancies	.30*	-.13	-.05	.39**	—

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Correlations Between General Voice (GV) Intentions and Behaviour, Positive Voice (PV) Intentions and Behaviour, Negative Voice (NV) Intentions and Behaviour, Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, Instrumental Expectancies (IE), and Relational Expectancies (RE) (Study 4)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. GV Intentions	—									
2. GV Behaviour	.55**	—								
3. PV Intentions	.54**	.37**	—							
4. PV Behaviour	.52**	.67**	.55**	—						
5. NV Intentions	.24**	.20*	.20*	.12	—					
6. NV Behaviour	.17*	.25*	.01	.14	.47**	—				
7. Dissatisfaction	.02	.14	.13	.06	.14	.14	—			
8. Importance	.15*	.16	.19*	.08	.15*	.14	.71**	—		
9. IE	.41**	.25*	.29**	.35**	.11	.07	-.22*	-.15*	—	
10. RE	.25**	.19*	.21*	.26**	-.17*	-.19*	-.27*	-.21*	.52**	—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Analysis of intentions used all who participated at Time 1 ( $n = 183$ ); analysis of behaviour used all who participated at Time 2 ( $n = 147$ ).

Table 5

*Regressions in which Voice was regressed on Dissatisfaction, Issue Importance, Instrumental Expectancies, and Relational Expectancies (Study 4)*

	General Voice		Positive Voice		Negative Voice		Positive/Negative Difference	
	Intent	Actual	Intent	Actual	Intent	Actual	Intent	Actual
Dissatisfaction	-.06	.11	.08	.08	.06	.05	.01	.03
Importance	.26**	.13	.22*	.09	.09	.08	.11	.02
Instrumental Expectancies	.39***	.20*	.28***	.29***	.28***	.23*	.01	.08
Relational Expectancies	.08	.14	.14 <sup>+</sup>	.17 <sup>+</sup>	-.28***	-.26**	.33***	.32***

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Notes: Values are standardized coefficients from multiple regressions. Analysis of intentions used all who participated at Time 1 ( $n = 183$ ); analysis of behaviour used all who participated at Time 2 ( $n = 147$ ).

**Appendices**

Appendix A: Study 1 Questionnaire

Appendix B: Study 2 Questionnaire

Appendix C: Study 3 Questionnaire

Appendix D : Study 4 Questionnaire



**Appendices**

**Appendix A. Study 1 Questionnaire**

People often experience dissatisfaction with others in their lives (e.g., friends, romantic partners, family members, peers, etc.). Sometimes people choose to voice their concerns or dissatisfaction to the other person, fully or partially. Other times, people choose not to voice their concerns. They remain silent and allow the conflict to pass.

Think of a dissatisfaction you are currently experiencing with someone with whom you consider your relationship to be very close. Think of a dissatisfaction which you have **not yet decided whether or not to voice to the other person**. Describe the situation below. Who are you experiencing the dissatisfaction with and what is the dissatisfaction about? What is the situation? What are your concerns?

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Thinking of the situation you described above...	<i>Not at all</i>						<i>Extremely</i>	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	

How dissatisfied are you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How important is this issue for you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Which category best describes your relationship with this person? Place a check in the appropriate box.

Family Member	<input type="checkbox"/>	Co-worker	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	Authority figure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Peer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Romantic Partner	<input type="checkbox"/>		





Thinking of the situation you described above...	<i>Not at all</i> 0	1	2	3	4	<i>Extremely</i> 5	6
How dissatisfied are you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How important is this issue for you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>We know that you have not yet decided how much to voice your concerns or dissatisfaction (if at all). What do you <b>imagine</b> might happen if you <b>do</b> voice your concerns somewhat or fully? <b><u>What possible consequences of voicing do you imagine might happen?</u></b></p> <p>For each possible consequence listed below, please check the appropriate box to indicate how likely you imagine this consequence to be if you decide to voice somewhat or fully.</p>							
If I <i>do</i> voice my concerns I imagine that...	<i>Absolutely unlikely</i> -3	-2	-1	0	1	<i>Extremely likely</i> 2	3
<i>Consequences for my relationship:</i>							
The other person would experience positive feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The other person would feel positively toward me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The other person would experience negative feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The other person would feel negatively toward me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Consequences for the problem:</i>							
The problem would get fixed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would get what I want	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The problem would still not get fixed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would still not get what I want	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>















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