THE LANGUAGE OF DEFENSE
Linguistic Patterns in Narratives of Transgressions

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To investigate how defensive motivations would affect patterns of language use, the authors compared narratives of personal transgressions (about hurting someone) against a set of narratives about making someone happy. Compared to the happy stories, transgression narratives were more likely to describe actions occurring without deliberate guidance or intention. Length in word count did not vary, but transgression narratives had shorter sentences, especially in the sections describing the transgression and its consequences. They had longer introductions, presumably to explain background and mitigating circumstances. Transgression narratives featured the emotions and thoughts of the narrator significantly more than did narratives of making someone happy (which focused heavily on the target's feelings), and they used more adverbs and similar words to emphasize the narrator's emotions. Transgression narratives had fewer specific details but more (ostensibly) exact quotations.

It is generally accepted that people prefer to avoid discussing their own misdeeds and transgressions—unlike the misdeeds and transgressions of others, which people have long shown a keen interest in discussing, as evidenced by gossip and scandal. The reluctance to discuss one's own misdeeds probably stems from the undesirability of making oneself look bad. Sometimes, however, such revelations are inevitable, and so people must confront the dilemma of how to describe their misdeeds. The sensationalizing or gossipy language used to recount the misdeeds of others may seem quite unsuitable for recounting one's

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AUTHORS' NOTE: *This research was made possible by a Feodor-Lynen-Fellowship from the Alexander-von- Humboldt Foundation to the first author, and was supported by grants MH 43826 and MH 51482 from the National Institute of Health to the second author. The authors thank the University of Virginia for laboratory and subject pool resources, including special help by Darren Newtson, and we thank Margit Wenzler and Thomas Kauper for their work coding the data. Address correspondence to A. Schütz, Dept. of Psychology, University of Bamberg, Postfach 1549 D-96045 Bamberg, Germany (or astrid.schuetz@ ppp.uni-bamberg), or to R. Baumeister, Dept. of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland OH 44106-7123, USA, (or rfb2@po.cwru.edu), office phone 216-368-2639, home phone 216-531-5185, fax 216-368-4891.*

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 18 No. 3, September 1999 269-286

own acts, insofar as that sort of language dwells on the unsavory acts and their deplorable consequences, whereas one presumably would want to minimize anything that reflects unfavorably on the self. The present study was concerned with linguistic patterns that occur in people's descriptions of their transgressions, particularly those patterns that may help defend the self against the unsavory implications of the actions being described.

PREVIOUS WORK ON DEFENSIVE LANGUAGE

The idea that people can manipulate language so as to conceal or minimize unsavory aspects of their own history is not new, of course. The self-serving manipulation of language was a major theme of George Orwell's novel *1984*, in which the government sought to eliminate certain words, create new ones, and alter the meanings of others so as to shape the thoughts of citizens. In psychology, a germane point was made by Sullivan (1953), who coined the term *verbalisms* to refer to patterns of speech that are designed to conceal, instead of to communicate.

Empirical research has already shown that people are sensitive to the predicament of how to describe their own undesirable behaviors. They deny or minimize their responsibility, justify their actions as less wrong than they seem, blame others, emphasize mitigating circumstances, apologize (especially if accepting blame does not impugn their moral integrity, as in accidental transgressions), selectively omit uncongenial facts, distance the act from the global self, and generally manipulate both the facts and the attributional implications (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Schönbach, 1985; Schütz, 1991).

Recent evidence has begun to examine the manipulation of language in service of psychological ends. Schmid and Fiedler (1996) analyzed prosecutors' and defense attorneys' closing speeches in the Nuremberg war crimes trials, and they found differences in language patterns. For example, defense attorneys used a higher level of abstraction (which implies generality) when referring to defendants' positive attributes than their negative attributes, and they avoided referring directly to the person when discussing negative attributes and events. In a similar vein, Maass and her colleagues have identified a linguistic intergroup bias, whereby positive ingroup behaviors and negative outgroup behaviors are described in broad, abstract terms, whereas narrowly concrete speech is preferred for negative ingroup and positive outgroup behaviors (Arcuri, Maass, & Portelli, 1993; Maass & Arcuri, 1992; Maass, Arcuri, Salvi, & Semin, 1989). This style of speech makes the ingroup look good and the outgroup less good (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg,1995).

Language can be used to manipulate impressions (for an overview, see Fiedler & Semin, 1996). More specifically, previous research sug-

gests that certain linguistic patterns may be used to conceal a perpetrator's responsibility, such as including details that depict the victim as partially responsible, use of passive voice, nominal style, and avoiding explicit references to what happened (for an overview see Bohner, 1998). For example, Lamb (1991) coded newspaper articles on men battering women and found the following patterns: nominalization (e.g., "the abusive cycle"), diffusion of responsibility or avoiding explicit reference to the deed (e.g., "violent relationships"; "domestic disputes"), and use of passive voice.

Lamb and Keon (1995) tested the effect of linguistic patterns on attribution of guilt. Use of passive voice failed to reduce attributions of guilt, but diffusion of responsibility did result in more lenient attitudes toward the batterer. Bohner (1998) used an experimental approach, investigating how people report on rape and how different types of reports are perceived. He found some support for the notion that people (in Germany) who attribute more responsibility to the victim more frequently use passive voice, avoid explicit references to the word rape, and use nominal style. However, passive style was very rare overall, which may reflect a difference between English and German language use. In a second experiment, Bohner had subjects evaluate reports on an incident of rape. He found that the use of passive voice led to attributing more responsibility to the victim only if people were prone to accept myths about rape and if the report included details that supported such a stereotypic interpretation.

The fact that different types of verbs and adjectives have different cognitive implications has been supported in work by Semin and Fiedler (1988) and Semin, Rubini, and Fiedler (1995). It is reasonable to expect that people learn to use and manipulate these differences for their own social and personal purposes.

Recent research has shown that linguistic features do have an impact on perception (Berry, Pennebaker, Mueller, & Hiller, 1997). Subjects were videotaped while describing themselves, and other subjects rated those tapes. Results showed that, for example, impressions of competence were positively related to the use of present tense and negatively related to negations, negative emotion words, and self-referents. The differential impact of how information was phrased was also shown in a study by McNeil, Pauker, and Tversky (1988) where patients' compliance with a medical intervention depended on whether identical data were framed in terms of positive survival outcome or in terms of mortality rates.

Thus, past work justifies the conclusion that defensive and assertive language differs in context of what is reported, and there is some evidence suggesting that defensiveness may affect the level of abstraction used, the use of passive voice, the inclusion of details, or explicit references to a negative deed. Many of those defensive linguistic devices were observed with respect to transgressions of law, however,

and it is not clear whether more everyday interaction would be subject to such distortions, too. Furthermore, several other linguistic aspects that may very well be relevant to defending one's action have not been considered yet, such as how much detail an event is described in (e.g., length of description, elaboration and inclusion of details), or how much consideration is given to the perspective of victim and perpetrator (i.e., reporting thoughts and emotions of victim and perpetrator).

PRESENT RESEARCH

The present study asked a sample of university students to write about an incident in which they had hurt someone. For comparison purposes, other participants were asked to write about an incident in which they had made someone happy. We assumed that stories about hurting someone would constitute an important form of transgression, and so the requirement to write such a story would constitute a predicament. We expected that people would respond to this predicament with various linguistic devices intended to reduce the degree to which the story made them seem blameworthy and malicious.

Our first prediction concerned intentional action. It has been shown in prior research that perpetrators like to depict their actions as unintentional (Baumeister, Stilwell, & Wotman, 1990; Schütz, 1991). Sentences referring to deliberate volition, such as saying "I decided . . . ," should therefore be rarer in the transgression stories than in the comparison (happy) stories, because volition and conscious decision casts the self as responsible, and transgressors should be motivated to avoid responsibility. In contrast, passive, external constructions such as "It happened" should appeal to transgressors, because they imply that the events evolved on their own momentum, rather than as a result of conscious or deliberate decisions, so that blame is reduced.

Opposing pressures affect story length. The literature on coping points out two opposing ways of dealing with disagreeable or threatening information, namely avoidant versus refutational defenses (Wyer & Frey, 1983; see also Baumeister & Cairns, 1992; Frey, 1986). In this line of thinking, it can be argued that, on one hand, having to talk about a transgression may be considered a predicament and transgressors may want to minimize the amount of time they spend talking about their misdeeds (see Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990; Schütz, 1993), and so the stories about hurting someone might be predicted to be shorter than the comparison stories. On the other hand, transgressors may seek to furnish explanations and justifications for their actions, including a description of all mitigating circumstances (see Baumeister et al., 1990; Schönbach, 1985), and so they might write longer stories than others.

Although competing predictions could be made about length of story, the two theoretical bases do agree in predicting the different distri-

bution of information within the story. If we assume that transgressors want to explain their reasons and justifications in order to make their actions seem more understandable (and hence perhaps forgivable), they should focus their efforts on the background events leading up to the transgression. Meanwhile, their effort to minimize the blameworthiness of their act should make them spend less time detailing the consequences and aftereffects. Accordingly, the simple hypothesis about differences in total length could be elaborated by a more fine-grained hypothesis, namely, that the accounts of transgression would have longer introductions and shorter endings, relative to the comparison group. To measure length, we counted both words and sentences. We assumed that the word count would reflect the total amount of information, whereas the sentence count would indicate the number of meaningful units of information.

Another interesting aspect is sentence length, which is indicative of the grouping of information into meaningful units. Short sentences presumably reflect a fragmented, deconstructed presentation of information, in which the information is presented in many small, separate units. In contrast, reliance on long sentences represents a more integrated way of thinking about what happened, in that it involves grouping all the information into larger units. It can be argued that transgressors would want to avoid an integrative style of thinking, because that style would render apparent the unsavory implications of their actions. Therefore, we predicted that transgressors would use shorter sentences in their stories. The opposite prediction could be made on the basis that transgressors might seek to present a full picture to indicate that they acted from positive motives but somehow produced undesirable outcomes, and this effort could result in longer, more complex thinking (e.g., Tetlock, 1985).

Besides story length, furnishing details is another aspect of elaborating on an event. If transgressors are indeed motivated to present their misdeeds in a vague and less elaborated way, they should generally be reluctant to furnish all the relevant details. We predicted that there would be fewer details in the stories about hurting someone than in the comparison stories.

Descriptions of emotional states and mental processes is important, with respect to whose perspective is represented in the narrative and how much consideration is given to the transgressor's and the target's inner states. People writing stories about doing a good deed for someone else should presumably dwell on how the other person (the target) thought and felt as a result of the narrator's actions, because those thoughts and feelings will dramatize the goodness of the good deed (cf. enhancements, Schlenker, 1980). In contrast, people writing about hurting someone may want to downplay the target's thoughts and feelings, because these mental and emotional states would convey the suffering the narrator caused (Baumeister et al., 1990). Hence we

predicted less emphasis on the target's inner states in the transgression stories.

Furthermore, when one describes one's past misdeed, one may be at pains to explain how one's own emotional state or mental processes could have contributed to the improper action. For example, it is generally accepted, even in courts of law, that misdeeds committed under emotional distress are less blameworthy than those committed in the absence of emotion (Averill, 1982), and so people may seek to reduce their blame by emphasizing their own emotional distress. In extreme cases, perpetrators can depict themselves as victims too, if they can paint themselves as having suffered during the incident, and so a story about hurting someone else can end up coming across as a story about joint or mutual victimization (Baumeister, 1997). We predicted that the stories about hurting someone would show an increased emphasis on the narrator's emotional state, particularly with regard to negative emotions.

SUMMARY OF PREDICTIONS

1. Transgression stories will include fewer statements describing intentional action, such as "I decided to . . . " but more statements describing external causation, such as "It happened. . . ."
2. Overall stories will not differ in length. However, transgressions will have longer introductions and shorter endings than the comparison stories.
3. Transgressions will be presented in a more fragmented style. That is, they will consist of shorter sentences than the comparison stories.
4. Transgressions will contain fewer details than the comparison stories.
5. Target thoughts and feelings will be deemphasized in the transgression stories while the narrator's inner states, especially negative emotions, will be emphasized.

METHOD

Participants. The experiment was run in groups of 4 to 6 persons. They were undergraduates who participated in connection with their introductory psychology course. The total sample consisted of 122 students (52 male, 70 female) and reflected an assortment of ethnic backgrounds.

Procedure. The experimenter (the first author) explained to each group that the study was concerned with the effects of mood on memory for social experiences. The students then rated their present moods on a scale consisting of 16 items (calm, happy, content, nervous, tired, sad, etc.), each of which had a 7-point scale. The mood scale was used simply to make the cover story plausible, and to allow a little extra time for late-arriving participants to get settled.

The next part involved having each person write about a social experience. By random assignment, each person was assigned to write either about an event in which his or her actions hurt someone or about an event in which his or her actions made someone happy. As a control condition to the transgressions, we used positive events to avoid the problem of comparing meaningful and important to relatively meaningless, unimportant events. The randomization procedure was targeted at the entire group, because the instructions were given orally, and so all members of the group wrote on the same theme. The instruction in the Hurt condition was "Please describe an event in which your actions hurt someone. Ideally, you would choose the most important and extreme event you can remember." In the Happy condition, the words "hurt someone" were replaced by the words "made someone happy." Further instructions asked the participants to give thorough and detailed descriptions. We asked for the most important events to receive a sample of events, and to exclude trivial events that narrators may not have cared enough about to describe in a comparable way.

All participants were assured of confidentiality and were exhorted not to use real names in their stories. No identifying information was collected. The experimenter allowed participants 30 minutes to complete their essays. After 30 minutes, the essays were collected and the experimenter asked participants about their perceptions of the experiment and their expectations. Then they were given a full debriefing that included an explanation of the purpose of the study.

Coding. All stories were coded by two research assistants for the frequency of various language features. One assistant coded all the stories. A subsample (10%) was coded independently by a second assistant, in order to permit the calculation of reliabilities. The two assistants were blind to the hypotheses of this study. Training of the coders involved explication of the coding categories as they are described below, as well as supervised coding of a sample of six stories that were not used in the present analyses.

To check on the use of language to emphasize or diminish the appearance of volition, we coded first for sentences that asserted that the actor had acted consciously or intentionally, such as "I decided to . . . " or "I chose to . . . " or "I wanted to . . . ." We also then counted sentences that clearly indicated that the outcome had not been intended or had occurred despite the person's wishes, such as " . . . at the time it was almost an unconscious act," "it wasn't an intentional thing," "it just happened," and "before I knew it, I was signing. . . ."

We counted the number of words in each story as well as the number of sentences. For each story, we computed the average sentence length by dividing the number of words by the number of sentences. For each story, we then identified the transition point between the introduction or background, and the incident itself (plus any explanation of

aftermath or consequences). Both coders identified this transition point independently. They agreed in 92% of the cases. Dissent was adjudicated through discussion. We then did the word count, sentence count, and sentence length computation separately for the two parts to each story.

To examine elaboration, we analyzed three aspects possibly representing elaboration that emerged during the coding process: (a) the number of adjectives used in each story; (b) the number of specific details, such as names, locations, ages, distances, times, frequencies, and dates; (c) the number of specific quotations (i.e., supplying actual words allegedly spoken during the incident).

Emotion words were tallied in four categories: positive and negative emotions pertaining to either the narrator or the target. We also counted the use of words or phrases to emphasize the strength of the emotions, such as "terribly upset," "happy," or "happier and happier." Last, we tallied the allusions to specific thoughts by the characters in the story. We made separate counts for the narrator's own thoughts and for the target's thoughts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generally, participants furnished stories that were one to two handwritten pages long. About 40% of the targets were friends, 25% were family members, and 20% were romantic partners. The rest were acquaintances and strangers. Most of the events involved rather recent but not ongoing events. Because most stories did not provide exact dates, coders estimated how recent events were. Over 80% of the stories were estimated to have occurred less than two years but more than 4 weeks prior to the test. Characteristics like recency and who the target was were not associated with story type. All of the events appeared to be rather meaningful to the narrators and thus conformed to the task given. However, none of the events involved very severe events such as physically injuring someone or other legal transgressions.

Stories about hurting someone referred to insensitive, cold, rude behaviors; to norm transgressions such as stealing, betraying secrets, gossiping, or harming someone's reputation; or failing to meet the expectations of others. Stories about making someone happy included major gifts or presents, participants' own successes in academics or athletics (which made their parents happy), important or well-timed communications (especially phone calls or letters) to parents or friends, engaging in fun activities with someone, and lending support to someone in trouble.

Reliability of coding and analysis strategy. Cohen's Kappa was used to assess the reliability of codings. Across the coding dimensions, the average Kappa was .88, and the range was .70 to 1.00. These figures indicate that the coding was satisfactorily reliable. Most analyses were simple tallies of relevant behaviors. The hypotheses were tested by comparing the mean frequency in the hurt versus happy stories. Before proceeding to specific hypotheses, we conducted a MANOVA with the story type as independent variable and the various coding dimensions as dependent variables. This was highly significant, $F(17, 105) = 14.54$, $p < .001$. The main results are summarized in Table 1.

Intentional action. Our first hypothesis concerned the use of phrasing to deny or affirm that the narrator's actions were intentional. Consistent with predictions, there was a significant tendency for the transgression stories (i.e., stories about hurting someone) to use phrases that evaded or denied intentional action, such as "before I knew it, . . . " or "it turned out that . . . ," as compared with happy stories, $t(121)=4.31$, $p < .001$. Thus, narrators of transgressions spoke so as to conceal or minimize their control of events. The related hypothesis concerning phrasings that emphasize responsible volition was not supported. Use of phrases such as "I decided . . . " were not used at significantly different rates in the two sets of stories, $t < 1$, *ns*.

The results provide partial support for the view that accounts of transgressions minimize personal responsibility by using phrases that make it seem as though events followed along on their own and produced unwanted consequences without the active guidance of the transgressor. With such language, people can send the implicit message that they hurt someone without fully intending to do so.

Story length. The amount of information furnished by participants was coded in several ways. The simple count of the number of words in the story did not yield a significant difference between the two types, $t(121) = 1.13$, *ns*. There was, however, a significant difference in the number of sentences per story, $t(121) = 2.73$, $p < .01$. The transgression stories had more sentences than the stories about making someone happy.

Each story was divided at the point where the background or introduction ended and the narration began to cover the actual incident itself. The hypothesis that the transgression stories would emphasize the introduction disproportionately, as compared with the stories about making someone happy, was supported. The stories about hurting someone had significantly more sentences in their introductions than the comparison stories, $t(121) = 2.65$, $p < .01$, and they had marginally significantly more words, $t(121) = 1.71$, $p < .10$. The endings (including the narrations of the incidents themselves) did not differ

Table 1
Mean Frequencies of Linguistic Features in Two Types of Stories

	Made Someone Happy	Hurt Someone	
Intentional Action			
"I decided to . . . " or similar	0.54	0.65	*ns*
"It happened . . . " or similar	0.10	0.52	***
Length			
Number of words	213.79	231.65	*ns*
Words in introduction	139.95	165.61	*
Words in end	73.84	66.03	*ns*
Number of sentences	28.34	35.26	**
Sentences in introduction	16.83	23.02	**
Sentences in end	11.51	12.24	*ns*
Fragmentation			
Words per sentence	7.82	6.84	***
Words per sentence in introduction	9.04	8.50	*ns*
Words per sentence in end	6.44	5.39	*
Elaboration			
Number of adjectives	11.59	10.30	*ns*
Number of details	3.36	2.21	**
Number of quotations	0.07	0.31	*
Emotions			
Emotions of target	3.80	1.59	*
Positive	2.77	0.18	*
Negative	1.03	1.42	*ns*
Emotions of narrator	1.21	1.84	*
Positive	0.85	0.31	***
Negative	0.36	1.53	***
Total Emotions (combined)	5.02	3.44	***
Emphasizing Emotion			
Emphasis with target's emotions	1.18	0.47	***
Emphasis with narrator's emotions	0.28	0.53	*
Thoughts0			
Cognitions by target	0.23	0.06	*
Cognitions by actor/author	0.34	0.34	*ns*

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

significantly. Neither the the number of words nor the number of sentences yielded a significant difference between the two types of stories, $t < 1$, *ns* for both.

The results suggest that narrators went to greater lengths to present the backgrounds and mitigating circumstances of their misdeeds, as compared to the stories about good deeds. If one wants to describe something good that one did, such as making someone happy, it is perhaps enough to skip over the background and simply present the commendable action itself. In contrast, when describing a transgression, people may seek to furnish persuasive accounts of why they acted as they did, even to the extent that their acts may seem reasonable and justifiable. Simply describing a transgression by itself could leave the impression that the narrator is heartless, cruel, or prone to hurt others

for little reason. By explaining the background circumstances, people may seek to avoid that impression.

Fragmentation. The pattern of including more sentences but not more words naturally pointed toward the possibility that sentence length would vary between the stories. We computed the average sentence length for each story and then entered these individual (participant) means into an analysis. Stories about hurting someone were indeed composed of shorter sentences overall than the happy stories, $t(121) = 3.59$, $p < .001$. We also compared fragmentation in the introduction versus the latter part of the stories. The two types of stories did not differ with respect to sentence length in the introduction, $t < 1$, *ns*. Sentence length, however, did differ in the endings of the stories. Stories about hurting someone had shorter sentences in the latter part than did stories about making someone happy, $t(121) = 2.45$, $p < .05$. This fits the view that short sentences are used to avoid dwelling on the implications of one's actions, such as their harmful consequences.

This pattern suggests that people use a less integrated and more fragmented or deconstructed form of speech when describing their transgressions rather than their good deeds. By using short sentences, transgressors present the reader or listener with small units of information instead of broader, more integrative ones. Small units may leave the job of working out implications to the listener, and in that way narrators may avoid having to face up to the full moral implications of their actions. Apparently, transgressors may write long sentences when describing the background of their actions because they want to justify and explain what they did, but when they come to describing the transgression itself and its consequences, they shift toward shorter sentences. The deed and its consequences are what make them look bad, so they present these aspects in brief, deconstructed units, unlike the background information which they can use to mitigate their appearance of guilt.

Details. We predicted that there would be less elaboration in the transgression stories than in the comparison stories. During the coding process, it became apparent that this prediction could be tested with respect to three different aspects of elaboration: number of adjectives, number of specific details, and number of quotations used. Consistent with the prediction, there were fewer concrete details in the transgression stories, $t(121) = 2.42$, $p < .05$. The transgression stories also showed a trend toward having fewer adjectives, but this failed to reach significance, $t(121) = 1.47$, *ns*.

The number of (supposedly) exact quotations was relatively small overall, but they were significantly more common in the transgression stories, $t(121) = 2.42$, $p < .05$. In general, the quotations referred to a decisive point in an argument or to the exchange in which the narrator

said something that hurt the other person. Often the quotations depicted the other (target) person as initiating the phase of the conversation that led to the hurtful remark, or they presented the narrator's own words in a way that made them seem less offensive than the target's subsequent reaction would imply.

The reliance on quotations in the transgression stories was not predicted, but it may serve the same end as the observed fact that transgressions had longer introductions and consisted of shorter sentences. By relating precisely what was said, the narrator can appear to be offering the listener all the facts so as to permit the listener to make up his or her own mind. The quotations often seemed to have the advantage of shifting some responsibility for the incident onto the target person. Moreover, when the transgression involved saying something hurtful or upsetting to the target, the narrator can minimize blame by quoting his or her exact words, as if to say, "all I said was . . . ," which by itself did not generally seem all that blameworthy. Thus, again, the defensive narrator presents small units of information and ostensibly allows the listener to make up his or her own mind. As expected, inclusion of specific details was not common in the transgression stories; indeed, these stories had fewer such details (e.g., names, dates, locations, ages, distances) than the comparison stories.

This suggests that transgressors have multiple strategies for dealing with facts. On one hand, they present crucial facts in a fragmented fashion and allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. On the other hand, they minimize other facts and details that might elaborate their misdeeds and make them seem all the more real and concrete. The omission of specific, identifying details may help the transgressors avoid letting the reader know precisely what they have done. A transgressor only becomes (ostensibly) precise when covering facts that may help the reader put himself or herself in the transgressor's place and regard the transgressor's actions as understandable.

Emotions and Thoughts. We coded four categories of emotions in each story: the positive and the negative emotions of the target, and then of the narrator. Adding these all together, there were fewer total emotions in the transgression stories than in the stories about making someone happy, $t(121) = 3.39$, $p = .001$. This global difference conceals some more important and interesting patterns in the four more specific tallies, however. An ANOVA with three independent variables (story type × valence of emotion × target vs. narrator) yielded a three-way interaction among the variables, $F(1,121) = 9.90$, $p = .002$.

The obvious and predictable difference between the stories was found on three of the four tallies. Happy stories had more positive emotions than the transgression stories, both for the target person, $t(121) = 12.07$, $p < .001$, and for the narrator, $t(121) = 3.46$, $p = .001$. The narrator's negative emotions were more common in the stories about

hurting, than in the stories about making someone happy, $t(121) = 4.66$, $p < .001$. This was, however, not true for the target's emotions, $t(121) = 1.55$, *ns*. Inspection of the means (see Table 1) suggests that this is due to an unusually high frequency of negative target emotions in the stories about making someone happy. This probably signifies that subjects described the target as feeling bad before they made him or her happy.

Probably the most important comparisons are within story type, across person—that is, the comparisons referring to whose emotions (and of what type) predominated in the two types of stories. In the positive stories, the target's emotions prevailed, both for positive emotions, $t(60) = 9.04$, $p < .001$, and for negative emotions, $t(60) = 3.35$, $p = .001$. In view of this pair of differences, it is not surprising that the stories about making someone happy also showed significantly more total emotions of the target than of the narrator, $t(60) = 8.72$, $p < .001$.

In contrast, the transgression stories failed to show a preponderance of target emotions, and, if anything, there was an emphasis on the narrator's own emotions. The preponderance of narrator emotions was almost significant with positive emotions, $t(60) = 1.93$, $p = .059$, although those were few in general. There was no significant difference with negative emotions, and likewise the total difference failed to approach significance, $t < 1$, *ns*.

The difference between the preponderance of target emotions in the positive stories and the preponderance of the narrator's emotions (or at least equality) in the transgression stories was confirmed by 2×2 ANOVAs. These yielded significant interactions between story type and person (i.e., who was feeling the emotion) on total emotions, $F(1,121) = 52.16$, $p < .001$, for positive emotions, $F(1,121) = 85.87$, $p < .001$, and for negative emotions, $F(1,121) = 5.68$, $p < .05$. All these interactions fit the pattern that the happy stories featured the target's emotions more than the narrator's, whereas this difference was eliminated or reversed in the transgression stories.

The instructions for both types of stories pointed toward the theme of how the narrator's actions had affected the feelings of another person, either by making that person feel happy or by hurting that person. Based merely on the instructions, therefore, both stories should have focused about equally on the target's feelings. Instead, we found that the narrators of transgression stories devoted ample coverage to their own feelings, and particularly their unpleasant emotions.

We followed up the emotion codings with a count of the use of words such as "very" or "extremely" to emphasize the extremity of the emotion. With regard to the target's emotions, such words of emphasis were less common in the hurt stories than in the happy stories, $t(121) = 4.52$, $p < .001$. With regard to the narrator's emotions, however, the reverse was found: Narrators used adverbs (and similar words) to emphasize their own emotions more often in the stories about hurting

than in the stories about making someone happy, $t(121) = 2.19$, $p < .05$. We conducted a repeated measures ANOVA to examine these differences together. There was a main effect for type of story, $F(1,121) = 4.48$, $p < .05$, reflecting less emphasis on emotions in the transgression stories. There was also a main effect for person, $F(1,121) = 23.89$, $p < .001$, indicating overall greater emphasis on the target's emotions. Both these effects were qualified, however, by a significant interaction, $F(1,121) = 31.82$, $p < .001$. The happy stories emphasized the target's emotions, whereas the hurt stories showed a slight reversal.

References to thoughts or cognitive processes were also coded separately for the narrator and the target. Stories about hurting someone made marginally significantly fewer references to the target's thoughts than stories about making someone happy, $t(121) = 4.31$, $p < .10$. The narrator's thoughts were covered about equally in the two types of stories, $t < 1$, *ns*. As with emotions, the important comparisons may be the ones within story type rather than across type. Stories about hurting someone were significantly less likely to include any description of the target's thoughts than to include the narrator's own thoughts, $t(60) = 3.29$, $p < .01$. In contrast, the stories about making someone happy devoted roughly equal coverage to the two characters' thoughts, $t(60) = 1.02$, *ns*.

What do all these patterns mean? The tendency for transgressors to emphasize their own emotions emerged as a notable and unusual feature of these results. The transgressors' discussion of their own emotions, and especially their negative emotions, may contribute to reducing guilt and avoiding unfavorable impressions. The more the story dwells on the distress and suffering of the victim, the worse the narrator looks. Therefore it is not surprising that transgressors devoted less space and less emphasis to the victims' feelings. That seems to be generally what transgressors do, in order to reduce their guilt (Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). By pointing to one's own distress, one can furthermore make a claim that whatever one did or said was done in the heat of passion and hence should not be condemned as severely as a similar act that had been done in a calm, considerate state of mind (e.g., Averill, 1982).

Similarly, by suggesting that he or she suffered during the episode, the transgressor can perhaps portray himself or herself as a fellow victim, and as deserving of sympathy instead of punishment. Orbuch, Harvey, Russell, and Sorenson (1992) found that people who read accounts of romantic breakups liked the storyteller more when he or she expressed feelings of distress over the breakup, rather than the absence of such feelings. Thus, referring to one's own distress or suffering may indeed be an effective technique for obtaining a positive reaction from the reader or listener. Transgressors may be able to reduce the appearance of being evil by telling how badly they felt. The general stereotype of evil, from religious stories to modern movies and

cartoons, involves villains who derive pleasure and satisfaction from inflicting harm on others (Baumeister, 1997). Insisting that one did not get pleasure and in fact suffered distress and pain may help transgressors distance themselves and their actions from that stereotype.

Limitations. Several limitations of the present work must be noted. First, the participants were college students, and as such they may have more facility with language than less well-educated people. One should therefore be cautious about generalizing from these findings to the linguistic and speech patterns that less well-educated people might use.

We had asked people to describe their most important transgressions to get a homogeneous and well-remembered sample of stories. It is certainly possible that less extreme transgressions would be told using fewer of the linguistic devices observed here. In a similar vein, it can be argued that the findings may very well be culturally and historically relative. Concern over protecting one's image and self-esteem is widely regarded as being exceptionally high among modern young people in the United States (many of whom even had programs and courses in school aimed at boosting their self-esteem). It is plausible that cultures or circumstances that would support self-criticism or humility would not elicit such defensive maneuvers.

Furthermore, personality traits may moderate how defensive people are about their misdeeds. For example, people with relatively negative self-views may readily accept wrongdoing on their part (e.g., Blaine & Crocker, 1993). On the other hand, people with high self-esteem or even inflated self-views, as they are measured in narcissism scales, may be very reluctant to admit that they acted wrongly (e.g., Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996; Schütz, 1997). Effects of mood or gender were not observed with this sample, however. Another potential boundary condition is that our research participants provided written stories. Stories told to others orally may follow different rules (see Schütz & DePaulo, 1996). Subjects may, for example, anticipate the audience's reactions and want to avoid appearing defensive. They may, therefore, employ fewer defensive strategies.

To study transgressions, we used the instruction to describe an incident in which the participant had hurt someone. It is conceivable that other types of transgressions would yield different results. To be sure, hurting someone is one prototype of a transgression. Still, victimless crimes such as abstract norm violations or sins may be described in different terms. If nothing else, the present findings about how transgressors downplayed the victim's thoughts and feelings would have no direct parallel in victimless transgressions. Converging evidence from studies about other kinds of transgressions or, indeed, about other incidents that could reflect badly on the narrator's image would be valuable to extend and corroborate the present findings.

The possibility that people may use different selection criteria when asked to describe their "most important" transgression, than when asked to describe their most important act of helping someone could conceivably contribute to the present results, although this concern is less pressing with the present focus on linguistic patterns than it would be with other instructions. For example, studies that compare victim and perpetrator narratives (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990) must grapple with the possibility that victims and perpetrators systematically choose different kinds of events rather than merely describing the same events in different terms. Then again, a selection bias would probably have worked against the present results, because if people could choose events that did not make them look bad, they would not have had to resort to various linguistic devices to protect the self from unsavory implications. The patterns of results we found might well have been substantially stronger if people could not use any choice as to what incident to describe, because they would have had to rely all the more on linguistic devices. In any case, it would be desirable for some future researchers to find a circumstance in which people are constrained to describe a particular incident (chosen by the experimenter rather than the participant), in order to eliminate any possible role of personal selection (cf. Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997).

A last issue is the effectiveness of the defensive strategies we found (see Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998, on defense mechanisms). Although the linguistic shifts appear to be motivated because they were associated with telling stories that could threaten the self's favorable image, they may or may not be successful. Success could be measured either in terms of self-deception, such as if the person managed by linguistic devices to avoid facing up to his or her own guilt, or in terms of impressions made on others. Future research is needed to address the question of how effective the various linguistic devices observed in this study are in manipulating observers' impressions and thus reducing the attribution of blame to the narrator.

Concluding Remarks. The present investigation provided preliminary evidence about how linguistic patterns may be altered in response to the predicament of having to describe an incident that could make one look bad. We found that people employed a series of linguistic devices when telling a story in which they hurt someone, and that these seem fairly well suited to serve the overarching goal of protecting the self from the most damaging implications of the story being told.

We assume that differences in sentence length, suppression versus inclusion of identifying details, relative coverage of the emotional states of self and other, and similar patterns do not reflect conscious strategies. Rather, our participants were probably conscious of the predicament of having to describe a transgression that could make them look bad, and the changes in sentence length and so forth

emerged as a result of their concern over looking bad. Still, the degree to which the changes we observed were automatic processes and byproducts, as opposed to deliberately cultivated ploys, remains for further study. If people were indeed unaware of how their speech patterns changed in response to the predicament we put them in, the present findings constitute a dramatic illustration of the skill with which people can manipulate language to protect their favorable images of self, even while revealing their misdeeds.

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