

## Intentions in Teasing: When “Just Kidding” Just Isn’t Good Enough

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Teasing is ambiguous. Although the literal content of a tease is, by definition, negative, seldom do teasers intend for their tease to be taken literally. Toward this aim, teasers often attempt to mitigate the negative surface content of the tease by communicating via gesture, facial expression, or tone of voice that they are “just kidding.” The research presented here suggests that such attempts often fall on deaf ears. Despite teasers’ attempts to mitigate the tease, targets are often unaware of—and unmoved by—the teaser’s benign intentions. As a result, teasers and targets systematically differ in their perceptions of teasing: Although it is often seen as innocent and playful by the teaser, it tends to be construed as considerably more malicious by the target.

*Keywords:* teasing, social judgment, social perception, miscommunication, aversive interpersonal behaviors

Teasing is ambiguous. On the one hand, the literal content of teasing is typically negative. When people tease, they point out physical flaws, quirky habits, questionable attire, or a variety of other less-than-flattering observations (Alberts, 1992; Baxter, 1992; Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981; Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Kowalski, 2000; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). On the other hand, there is often a positive component of teasing as well. To be sure, some teasing is designed with the sole purpose of hurting, humiliating, or harassing the target of the tease. But often, individuals tease to flirt, socialize, play, enhance social bonds, teach, entertain (themselves, the target, or an audience), or to express affiliation, affection, and even love (e.g., Alberts, 1992; Boulton & Hawker, 1997; Drew, 1987; Eder, 1993; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Keltner et al., 1998; Mooney, Creeser, & Blatchford, 1991; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Shapiro et al., 1991; Voss, 1997).

How do teasers accomplish this goal? How do they inform the target of their tease that they are “just kidding”? The predominant strategy is to accompany the tease with subtle redressive signaling devices designed to indicate that the critical, aggressive component of the tease is not to be taken seriously—or at least not completely seriously (Eder, 1993; Eisenberg, 1986; Keltner et al., 1998, 2001; Kowalski, 2000; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). For instance, one may smile or laugh just before or after delivering the tease (Drew, 1987) or vary one’s tone of voice or facial expression (Shapiro et al., 1991).

This raises the question of whether such attempts to mitigate teases are successful. Do individuals effectively communicate when—and to what extent—their teasing is not to be taken literally? The thesis we propose in this article is that teasers’ attempts to mitigate the literal content of the tease often fall on deaf ears. Despite redressive signals on the part of teasers, targets of the tease are often unaware of—and unmoved by—the teaser’s benign intentions. These factors work together, we argue, to create a systematic rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing: Whereas teasing is often seen as innocent and playful by the teaser, it tends to be seen as considerably more malevolent by the target.

We base our predictions, at least in part, on two sets of recent findings in the language processing and social judgment literature. First, individuals are egocentric in their social communications, assuming that because they know what they intend to communicate, their intended audience will as well. Second, actors and observers differ in the importance they place on intentions and, in particular, the extent to which they feel that good intentions absolve bad behavior.

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### Perspective Taking in Communication

There is a long history of researchers in social, developmental, and cognitive psychology noting the difficulty people can have arriving at an accurate assessment of the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000; Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998; Ichheiser, 1949; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Keysar, Ginzler, & Bazerman, 1995; Piaget, 1962; L. Ross & Ward, 1996; Stephenson & Wicklund, 1983; Van Boven, Kruger, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2000). Researchers in the language-processing literature, for instance, have found that speakers tend to design speech egocentrically—that is, in accordance with their own perceptions and perspective—with the perspective of the audience a mere afterthought (Keysar, Barr, & Horton, 1998, p. 47; see also Barr & Keysar, 2002; Dell & Brown, 1991; Keysar, Barr, Balin, & Brauner, 2000). As a consequence, whereas the intended message tends to be perfectly clear to the speaker, it is almost inevitably less so to the audience. We are reminded of the task of moving heavy furniture with friends. Inevitably during the course of the move the couch will become stuck, usually in a narrow hallway or staircase. Just as inevitably, the individuals carrying it (perhaps with the aid of one or two observers) will begin barking less than helpful suggestions to one another, such as “Twist it sideways!” or “Angle it!” Although such instructions are perfectly clear from the perspective of the speaker, they can be comically indecipherable from the vantage point of the listener. In much the same way, we argue, a teaser’s good intentions are likely to be considerably more obvious to the teaser than to the target.

This misperception of intent is especially likely in light of the methods typically used by teasers to convey their good intentions. As already mentioned, the predominant strategy is to accompany the tease with nonverbal signals, such as tone or facial expression (Drew, 1987; Shapiro et al., 1991). However, such nonverbal signals are notoriously prone to misunderstanding (Krauss, Apple, Morency, Wenzel, & Winton, 1981; Lanzetta & Kleck, 1970; Rume, 1982; Van Boven et al., 2000). As a consequence, the fact that the teaser may be “just kidding” is likely to be clearer to the teaser than the target. Indeed, this was precisely the contention of Keltner and his colleagues in their 1998 article on the subject: “Teasers are certain to be more aware of the benign intentions motivating the teaser’s off-record, redressive actions than targets, who are likely to attend more exclusively to the literal, intentionally aggressive component of the tease” (Keltner et al., 1998, p. 1233; see also Shapiro et al., 1991). As these researchers pointed out, however, this assertion has yet to be investigated empirically.

### Actions and Intentions

Even if the targets of teasing were fully aware of the benign intentions behind the tease, it is unlikely that they would be terribly moved by them. Our prediction derives from recent work by Kruger and Gilovich (2004) showing that actors and observers differ in the weight they place on intentions when making interpersonal evaluations, such as whether the fact that one tries (but fails) to be helpful actually makes one helpful. Specifically, people tend to give themselves more credit for such intentions than they give others for theirs.

In one illustrative study, participants underwent a painful ice-submersion task for charity in which the longer they kept their

hand submerged, the more their charity earned. Participants then rated their intended task performance (i.e., how long they intended to keep their hand submerged), their actual task performance (i.e., the duration their hand was submerged), and the “altruism” they displayed during the study. Meanwhile, an observer made an analogous set of ratings after watching a videotape of the actor’s performance. Despite the fact that actors and observers each saw a rift between actions and intentions (i.e., both thought that the actor intended to keep his or her hand submerged longer than he or she actually did), they differed in their opinion of the altruism displayed by the actor. Whereas actors tended to base their appraisals on their altruistic intentions, observers tended to base their appraisals on the target’s behavior (ignoring intentions). As a consequence, actors arrived at a more positive appraisal of the target’s altruism than did observers. This basic pattern was replicated in a variety of other studies: In each case, actors weighted intentions more heavily than did observers.

It is important to note that this self–other difference in the weight assigned to intentions appears to characterize not only trait judgments but a wide variety of other judgments as well. For instance, people tend to base their predictions about their health in old age not on the health-related behaviors in which they actually engage (such as drinking, smoking, and unsafe sex), but on the health-related behaviors in which they intend to engage (such as running, swimming, and latex sex). Predictions about the health prognoses of others, in contrast, tend to be based far more on current behavior (Kruger, Gilovich, & Staggs, 2004). Even more directly related, other work has shown that when one member of a romantic couple tries but fails to fulfill some relationship obligation (e.g., intending to pick up dinner but forgetting), the individual who “dropped the ball” tends to feel that the good intentions exonerate the failure more so than does the other member of the couple (Summerville & Kruger, 2005).

Applied to the phenomenon of teasing, these data suggest that the good intentions behind the tease are likely to be less relevant to the target than to the teaser. Whereas for the teaser the fact that he or she is “just kidding” may absolve the negativity of the tease, this is likely to be less true from the vantage point of the target.

### A Proposed Rift in Tease Construal

Taken together, the research reviewed thus far suggests that relative to teasers, the target of the tease may not know—or care—that the teaser was kidding when he or she teased the target. These two factors are likely to work together, we argue, to cause targets to construe specific instances of teasing more negatively than do teasers.

There is some evidence that supports these predictions. First, research on aversive interpersonal behavior more generally (such as lying, sexual harassment, and infidelity) has revealed systematic differences in the way perpetrators and victims construe specific instances of these behaviors (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Hansen, 1987; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Mikula, Athenstaedt, Heschgl, & Heimgartner, 1998). Specifically, victims tend to see such transgressions as more serious than do perpetrators and also tend to perceive more negative intentions behind them, consistent with our thesis. However, these researchers did not investigate teasing *per se*—nor did they address the question of whether the rift between victims and perpetrators in

their construal of the incident could be traced to the rift in the perceived intentions behind the incident or the perceived importance of those intentions.

Work examining teasing directly also provides some support for our thesis. In one study of romantic idioms, for instance, men reported more positive experiences when recalling instances in which they teased their spouse than did the female targets of the tease (Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981). In another line of work, romantic couples (in one study) and fraternity members (in another) reported more negative emotions when they recalled specific instances of teasing when they were the recipient of the tease than when they were the instigator (Keltner et al., 1998). Similarly, in a study by Kowalski (2000), participants who recalled an instance in which they were teased reported more negative emotions than did participants who recalled an instance in which they were the one doing the teasing. As well, targets in Kowalski's study described the experience in more negative terms than did teasers. However, as in the case of work on aversive interpersonal behavior, in none of these studies did the investigators examine the role of perceived intentions in this rift.

An additional ambiguity of previous research on teasing is whether teasers and targets differed in their construal of the tease (our contention) or merely their reactions to it. As an admittedly crude analogy, an individual on the business end of a punch to the arm is likely to experience considerably more negative affect than the individual delivering it despite the fact that the two may be in perfect agreement about how hard, deserving, and/or aggressive the blow may have been. Similarly, the fact that teasers and targets react differently to teasing does not necessarily imply that they view the tease as any more or less malicious. Thus, although past research shows a rift between teasers and targets in tease reactions, it does not show (nor was it designed to show) a rift in tease construal. The present account, however, suggests that teasers and targets not only react differently to teasing, but differ in their construal of the tease itself.

### Overview of Present Research

The present research was designed to explore this rift as well as the mechanisms that underlie it. We conducted four studies in which participants described an instance from their life in which they either teased (or were teased by) another individual and a fifth study in which participants teased someone in a controlled setting in the lab. In each study, participants evaluated the tease on a number of criteria designed to capture one or more of the following three conceptual variables: (a) the perceived valence of the tease, (b) the perceived intentions behind the tease, and (c) the perceived importance of those intentions (i.e., the extent to which having good intentions absolves the negative surface content of the tease). We predicted that teasers and targets would systematically differ on all three variables, with targets construing teasing as more negative, more maliciously intended, and less mitigated by good intentions than would teasers. As well, we predicted that the rift in tease construal would be statistically mediated by the rift in evaluations of intent, consistent with our account.

Finally, Studies 4 and 5 examined the role of intentions in the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing experimentally. In Study 4, participants read a description of a tease that had been instigated by a previous study participant and then rated

it either with or without knowledge of the intentions behind it. We predicted that the tease would be seen as less malicious when the intentions of the teaser were known than when they were not. In Study 5, we experimentally manipulated the intentions of the teaser. If teasers construe their teases more positively than do targets in part because their good intentions are less known and less relevant to targets than to teasers, whereas teasers ought to construe their teasing more positively than targets when teasing with positive intentions, they ought to construe their teasing more negatively than targets when they tease with negative intentions.

### Study 1: Teasing Among Roommates

Our first study was designed simply to examine whether teasing is construed more negatively by targets than by teasers. To find out, we examined the teasing of college roommates, which informal observation (and fuzzy memories) suggests is a relationship rife with teasing. We recruited 35 pairs of roommates and asked each one to describe a specific instance in which one member of the pair teased the other. We then separated the pair and asked each member to provide his or her own honest appraisal of the tease. Specifically, we asked them to rate the tease in terms of how funny, mean, light-hearted, hurtful, and annoying the tease was (each on separate scales). We predicted that the targets of the tease would construe the tease more negatively than would the teaser—despite the fact that they rated the very same tease.

#### Method

*Participants.* Thirty-five pairs of roommates enrolled at the University of Illinois participated on a volunteer basis. Each pair was recruited door to door by a separate student experimenter following a standardized script. The experiment took place in participants' residences.

*Procedure.* Once each member of the pair agreed to participate, the experimenter explained that he or she would be asked to describe (privately) an occasion in which one of them teased the other. Each roommate was then separated and randomly assigned to the role of either teaser or target. Teasers were instructed to take a few minutes to think of an instance in which they teased their roommate and then to write a summary of the occasion on a questionnaire. The experimenter showed the description of the tease to the target, who then recorded the tease on his or her own questionnaire. Finally, each member of the dyad evaluated the tease on each of the following dimensions, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*extremely*): "How humorous would you say this tease was?"; "How mean would you say this tease was?"; "How light-hearted would you say this tease was?"; "How hurtful would you say this tease was?"; and "How annoying would you say this tease was?"

Special care was taken to ensure that participants did not talk to one another until the end of the experiment and that the study was completed in private (i.e., with no one other than the experimenter and the dyad present). As well, each member of the dyad was informed that the other member would not have access to his or her responses at any time during or after the experiment. These aspects of the design were shared by all but the last study reported in this article and were designed to maximize the honesty of participants' responses and to minimize demand characteristics.

#### Results and Discussion

Our prediction was that individuals on the receiving end of the tease would construe it more negatively than those doing the teasing. To find out whether this was the case, we averaged the five measures to create a single index of tease valence (reverse scoring where appropriate;  $\alpha = .79$ ). Although there was a corre-

lation between teasers' and targets' ratings of the tease ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that some teases were seen as more negative than others by both individuals, teasers tended to construe the tease more positively than did targets, ( $M_s = 7.77$  vs.  $6.82$ ),  $t(34) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $d = .42$ .

## Study 2: Teasing Among Romantic Couples

Few social relationships are as characterized by teasing as much as romantic relationships. Couples routinely tease one another about idiosyncratic preferences, habits, and behaviors that on the surface are negative but often contain subtle metaphors for love and affection (Baxter, 1992; Hopper et al., 1981). Our thesis, however, is that these positive intentions are likely to be less salient, and less important, to the target of the tease than to the teaser and that as a result, targets are likely to construe specific instances of teasing more negatively than teasers.

Study 2 was designed to test this hypothesis. Thirty-five heterosexual couples were interviewed about their perceptions of specific instances in which one member of the couple teased the other. In addition, we also asked couples to rate the intentions behind the tease as well as the perceived importance of those intentions. We predicted, first, that targets would construe specific instances of teasing more negatively than teasers, as in Study 1. Second, we predicted that targets would rate the intentions behind the tease as both more negative and less relevant than would teasers. Finally, we predicted that the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease would be statistically mediated by the perceived intentions behind the tease and the perceived importance of those intentions.

## Method

**Participants.** Thirty-five heterosexual couples were recruited via advertisements posted in several locations on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus and surrounding community. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years ( $M = 22$  years, median = 21 years) and had been dating for an average of 28 months (median = 18 months, range 2 weeks to 11 years). (Curiously, only 54% of couples agreed with one another about the exact length of their relationship, suggesting many awkward anniversaries.) Each couple received \$12 in exchange for their participation.

**Procedure.** Participants followed the same procedure as in the previous study, with two major exceptions. First, in addition to rating the tease itself, each member of the pair also gauged the intentions behind the tease and the importance of those intentions. Specifically, participants answered the following six questions:

1. How humorous would you say this tease was?
2. How light-hearted would you say this tease was?
3. To what extent was the tease given with good intentions?
4. To what extent did you intend to hurt your partner's feelings with the tease?
5. At the time of the tease, how obvious do you think it was to your partner that you were just kidding when you teased him or her?
6. How important was it at the time of the tease that your partner was "just kidding"?

The wording of the questions changed slightly depending on whether the question was asked of the teaser or the target (e.g., "to what extent did *you* intend" vs. "to what extent did *your partner* intend"), and each was followed by a 1-to-11 Likert-type scale. The first two questions were averaged to create an index of the valence of tease construal ( $\alpha = .69$ ), the next three were averaged to create an index of the perceived intentions behind the tease ( $\alpha = .68$ ), and the last question served as the measure of the perceived importance of having good intentions.

The second major change from Study 1 was that instead of writing about one tease, participants wrote about four teases. Two were teases in which the male member of the couple teased the female member, and two were teases in which the female member of the couple teased the male member. As well, half of the time the man thought of the tease, and the other half of the time the woman thought of the tease. Thus, across the four teases rated by the couple, one was a tease that the boyfriend recalled in which he teased his girlfriend, one was a tease the boyfriend recalled in which his girlfriend teased him, one was a tease the girlfriend recalled in which she teased her boyfriend, and one was a tease the girlfriend recalled in which her boyfriend teased her. The design of the experiment was thus a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  fully within-subject (or, more precisely, within-dyad) design, with participants' role in the tease (teaser or target) as one factor, the gender of the participant as another factor, and whether the teaser or target thought of the tease as the third factor.

Although the design of this study is somewhat complicated, note that our predictions are not: If teasers and targets differ in their perceptions of teasing because of differences in the awareness of—and the perceived importance of—good intentions, then we should observe a main effect for participant's role in the tease (teaser or target) on all three dependent measures.

Including the other two factors in the analysis allowed us to answer two additional questions. First, does the rift between teasers and targets depend on the gender of either the teaser or the target? Although our intentionality account does not make any specific predictions regarding this issue, there is some evidence to suggest that there are gender differences in teasing behavior (e.g., Tannen, 1990; see Keltner et al. [2001] for a review) and at least one study showing a gender difference in the construal of teasing (Mikula et al., 1998). Thus, we felt that it would be an important issue to address here as well.

The second question the full  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design allows us to examine is whether the rift between teasers' and targets' perceptions of teasing depends on who remembers the tease to be rated. Note that in the previous study, the teaser, rather than target, always determined the tease to be evaluated. It is possible that teasers may bring to mind qualitatively different types of teases than targets. For instance, whereas teasers may tend to generate funny or entertaining teases, what for targets may be more memorable are particularly hurtful or cruel ones. This presents a possible alternative interpretation of the results of Study 1. By varying who recalls the tease to be rated in the present study, we can address this issue.

## Results

We submitted each dependent variable (DV) to a separate  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  fully within-dyad analysis of variance (ANOVA), with participants' role in the tease (teaser or target) as one factor, gender as another factor, and whether the teaser or target thought of the tease as the third factor. As predicted, these analyses yielded significant main effects for participants' role in the tease (teaser or target) for all three dependent measures. As Table 1 shows (separately by gender for interested readers), teasers provided more favorable overall evaluations of the valence of the tease than did targets,  $F(1, 34) = 5.11$ ,  $p = .030$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ . Teasers also provided almost universally positive ratings of their intentions behind the tease (not a single teaser rated his or her intentions as below the midpoint of the scale) and ratings that significantly exceeded those provided by the targets of the tease,  $F(1, 34) = 9.56$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Finally, teasers said that having good intentions was

Table 1  
*Perceptions of Teasing Among Romantic Couples, Study 2*

Dependent measure	Male-initiated teasing		Female-initiated teasing	
	Teaser	Target	Teaser	Target
Tease construal	8.23	7.97	8.27	7.71
Good intentions obvious	8.96	8.43	9.06	8.76
Good intentions important	9.40	8.81	9.38	7.40

*Note.* Higher numbers indicate a more positive construal, more positive perceived intentions behind the tease, and greater perceived importance of having good intentions, respectively.

more important than did targets,  $F(1, 28) = 15.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$ .<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that these effects were independent both of gender and whether the teaser or target came up with the tease. None of the other main effects or interactions were significant, with one exception. In addition to yielding a robust main effect for participants' role in the tease, the  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the importance placed on good intentions yielded a significant Role  $\times$  Gender two-way interaction,  $F(1, 28) = 5.44, p = .027, \eta^2 = .16$ . As the last row of Table 1 shows, the between-role difference in the importance placed on good intentions was greater when women teased men than when men teased women. Or, to put it another way, both men and women placed greater importance on intentions when they were in the teaser role than when they were in the target role, but this difference was greater for men than for women. There were no gender differences, however, in participants' ratings of the valence of the tease—the only independent variable (IV) that influenced that dependent measure was whether the individual was the teaser or the target.

The results presented thus far suggest that targets have more negative views of the intentions behind teases and the importance of those intentions than do teasers and that targets construe specific instances of teasing more negatively than do teasers. Our contention is that the former causes the latter. That is, it is because the good intentions of teasers are less apparent and less relevant to targets than to teasers that the former come away with a more negative assessment of the tease.

We investigated this proposed relationship empirically by using the method outlined in Judd, Kenny, and McClelland (2001) for testing mediation in within-subject designs. For readers unfamiliar with the procedure, the first step is to establish that the IV (in this case, participants' role in the tease) is significantly related both to the proposed mediator(s) (the perceived intentions behind the tease and the importance placed on those intentions) and the DV (the overall evaluation of tease valence). This was established by the previously mentioned main effect of participants' role in the tease on their ratings of tease valence, tease intention, and perceived importance of intention (all  $ps < .05$ ).

The next step is to establish that each of the proposed mediators is significantly related to the DV at each level of the IV, that is, for both teasers and targets. Follow-up analyses revealed that this was the case for one proposed mediator, the perceived intentions behind the tease, but not the other, the importance placed on those intentions. Specifically, whereas there was a significant relation-

ship between perceived intentions and tease valence for both teasers and targets ( $\beta_s = .75$  and  $.84$ , respectively,  $ps < .001$ ), the relationship between the perceived importance of intentions and tease valence was significant only for teasers ( $\beta = .51, p = .005$ ; the corresponding beta among targets was  $-.25, p = .192$ ).

The third and final step involves predicting the between-condition difference in the DV (i.e., the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease) from the between-condition difference in the proposed mediator (i.e., the rift between teasers and targets in the perceived intentions behind the tease). A significant relationship provides evidence of mediation, which is precisely what we found ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ). Taken together, these data suggest that the difference between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease was at least partially mediated by the perceived intentions behind it, although not (in this study) the perceived importance of those intentions.

### Discussion

The results of Study 2 extend the results of Study 1 in several meaningful ways. First, the results once again show that teasers and targets construe teasing differently. In both studies, targets rated specific instances of teasing more negatively than did teasers. As well, the results of Study 2 shed light on two potential causes of this rift. First, whereas teasers reported having largely positive intentions behind the tease, those intentions were less salient to the target of the tease, a difference that statistically mediated the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease. Second, we also found that teasers thought that having good intentions was more important than did targets, consistent with the work of Kruger and Gilovich (2004). However, contrary to our predictions, we found no evidence that this difference mediated the rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of the tease. We revisit this issue in the next three studies.

### Study 3: Teasing Among Friends and Family

Study 3 was designed with three aims in mind. First, in the interest of generalizability, we wanted to extend the results of Studies 1 and 2 to other social relationships. Thus, in Study 3, we examined perceptions of teasing among friends and family members. A second aim of Study 3 was to explore some of the potential moderating factors in perceptions of teasing, to see whether certain types of teases are more prone to misunderstanding than others. Specifically, in addition to once again examining the gender of the teaser or target, we also examined the subject of the tease as well as the objective valence of the tease (as determined by two independent coders). Although these data are exploratory and not central to our thesis, we were interested in finding out whether the rift between teasers and targets in their perception of teasing might vary as a function of the type of tease. For instance, it may be the case that good intentions are less obvious and/or relevant to individuals being teased about flaws in, say, their physical appearance or lovemaking skills than in their tendency to leave the toilet seat up.

Finally, and most important, we hoped to shed additional light on the proposed cause of the rift between teasers and targets: that

<sup>1</sup> The degrees of freedom were reduced in this latter analysis because the first four couples in this study were not asked this question.

targets are often unaware of and unmoved by the teaser's good intentions. Thus, as in the previous study, participants rated not only the tease itself but also the perceived intentions behind it and the importance of those intentions. This was important not only in order to provide converging evidence for our central thesis, but also to further explore the proposed mediational role of the actor–observer difference in the importance placed on intentions, which was not supported in Study 2.

### Method

**Participants.** Eighty-seven University of Illinois students (43 women, 38 men, 6 unidentified) enrolled in a research methods course participated as part of a course requirement.

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to either the teaser or target condition. Those in the teaser condition ( $n = 42$ ) were asked to “take a moment to think of an instance in which you teased a friend or family member” and then to write a description of the tease on a questionnaire. Next, they completed the same set of dependent measures used in Study 2. Participants in the target condition ( $n = 45$ ) followed a similar procedure, except that they were asked to think of a moment in which a friend or family member teased them.

After the experiment, two coders (one male and one female) unaware of the experimental hypothesis independently rated each tease along two criteria. First, they rated the valence of the tease on a scale from 1 (*not bad at all*) to 5 (*mean*), and the two sets of ratings were averaged to create a single index of tease valence ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Next, the coders categorized the content of each tease into one of three topics that prior research has shown accounts for the vast majority of teasing (Kowalski, 2000; Shapiro et al., 1991)—appearance, relationships or sex, and behavior—with a fourth category reserved for teases that did not fall into any of the other three categories. The coders agreed with one another 80% of the time, and a third rater resolved the remaining discrepancies.

### Results

As in Study 2, the various ratings of the tease were combined to create three variables: one designed to capture tease valence ( $\alpha = .76$ ), one designed to capture the perceived intentions behind the tease ( $\alpha = .75$ ), and one designed to capture the perceived importance of those intentions. Our first prediction was that targets would provide more negative evaluations of the tease than would teasers. As Table 2 reveals, our predictions were strongly confirmed,  $t(85) = 4.17, p < .001, d = .92$ . Also as predicted, participants in the role of target reported that the intentions behind the tease were quite positive (with only 6.3% rating their intentions below the midpoint of the scale), and more positive than did participants in the role of target,  $t(85) = 2.85, p = .005, d = .62$ . Finally, as Table 2 also shows, teasers reported that the fact that

they were kidding was more important than did targets,  $t(85) = 4.41, p < .001, d = .97$ .

**Mediational analysis.** As in the previous study, we next conducted a path analysis to explore whether awareness of, and/or perceived importance of, good intentions mediated the link between participants' role in the tease (teaser or target) and their construal of it. Because the independent variable was between subjects rather than within subject, we used the familiar Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure to test for mediation.

The results are illustrated in Figure 1. As can be seen, the IV (participant's role in the tease) was a significant predictor both of the perceived intentions behind the tease (Figure 1A) and the perceived importance of having good intentions (Figure 1B). As well, the significant relationship between role and tease construal was reduced when either of these variables was held constant. Sobel (1982) tests revealed that this reduction was significant both for the perceived intentions behind the tease ( $Z = 2.67, p = .008$ ) and for the perceived importance of having good intentions ( $Z = 2.50, p = .023$ ). As well, both proposed mediators continued to significantly predict the DV when the effects of the predictor variable were controlled ( $\beta$ s = .60 and .32, respectively,  $ps < .01$ ). These results suggest that both variables partially mediated the link between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease.

**Moderational analysis.** Finally, we sought to explore three potential moderators of the rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of teasing: gender, objective tease valence, and tease topic. To examine gender, we conducted a 2 (sex: male vs. female)  $\times$  2 (condition: teaser vs. target) fully between-subjects ANOVA with participants' evaluation of the tease as the DV. Not surprisingly, this analysis yielded a main effect for condition, mirroring the results presented above. It also yielded a modest but reliable interaction,  $F(1, 81) = 4.57, p = .036, \eta^2 = .056$ . An examination of means revealed that the rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of teasing was bigger for men (8.97 vs. 6.03) than it was for women (8.03 vs. 7.09).

We next examined the moderating influence of tease valence by using an analogous data analysis strategy, except that we used regression instead of ANOVA because tease valence was a continuous variable. Specifically, we predicted tease construal from participants' role in the tease, tease valence, and their interaction (after standardizing all variables). As in the case of the gender analyses, in addition to the main effect for participants' role in the tease, we also observed a significant interaction ( $\beta = .30, p = .003$ ). Specifically, the more negative the tease, the greater the rift between teasers' and targets' perspectives. In fact, the more negative the tease, the more negatively it was evaluated by targets ( $r = -.32, p = .032$ ) but the more positively it was rated by teasers ( $r = .35, p = .021$ ). We return to this issue in the General Discussion.

Finally, we examined the moderating influence of the subject of the tease. Of the 86 teases described, 20 fell into the “relationships or sex” category (which included not only teases about the target's sexual behavior but also teases about the target's partner), 20 fell into the “physical appearance” category, 17 fell into the “behavior” category, and the remaining 29 teases did not fall into any of the preceding categories. Examples of each type of tease can be found in Table 3. These figures are on par with those of previous research (e.g., Kowalski, 2000). As Table 3 reveals, although targets tended to construe teasing more negatively than did teasers in each subject

Table 2  
*Perceptions of Teasing Among Friends and Family, Study 3*

Dependent measure	Teaser	Target
Tease construal	8.49	6.53
Good intentions obvious	8.75	7.35
Good intentions important	9.31	6.31

*Note.* Higher numbers indicate a more positive construal, more positive perceived intentions behind the tease, and greater perceived importance of having good intentions, respectively.

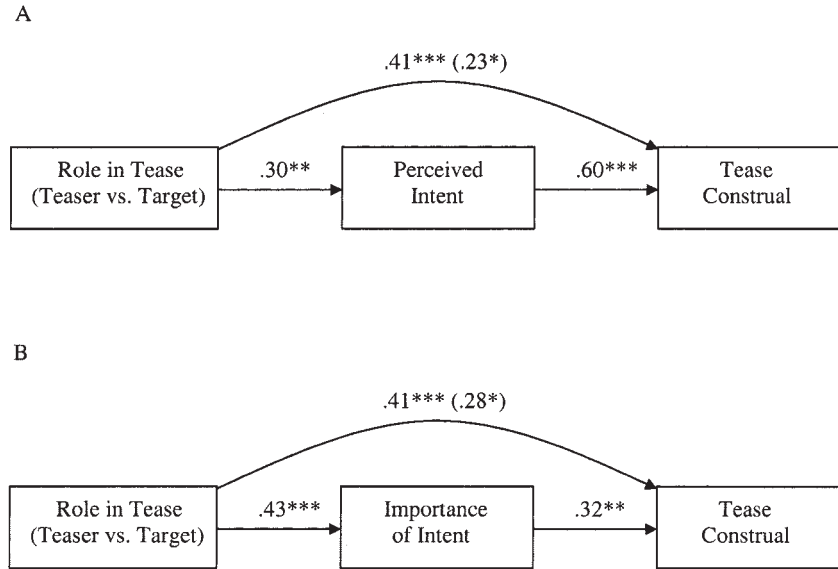


Figure 1. Standardized betas from a path analysis of teaser role (teaser or target) and tease construal, Study 3. A: The path analysis with perceived intention as a mediator. B: The path analysis with the perceived importance of good intentions as a mediator. The standardized betas in parentheses show the relationship between teaser role and construal after controlling for the proposed mediator. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

category, that difference was bigger for some types of teases than others. In particular, teases critical of the target’s romantic relationships or appearance produced a large rift between teasers and targets, whereas other types of teases tended to produce a smaller rift,  $F(1, 82) = 4.48, p = .037, \eta^2 = .052$ . This analysis should be interpreted with caution, however, because it is post hoc.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 extend the results of the previous two studies. First, the results demonstrate that the rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of teasing is not unique to roommates and romantic partners, but characterize the teasing of friends

and family as well. Second, the data highlight several potential moderators of this effect, including gender, tease valence, and the topic of the tease. Specifically, we found that (a) the rift between teasers and targets was bigger for men than for women; (b) the more negative the tease, the greater the rift; and (c) teasing an individual about his or her relationships or appearance was associated with a greater difference in tease construal than were other types of teases.

Finally, and most important, these data further suggest that the rift between teasers and targets may be borne of differences in the awareness of, and the perceived relevance of, the teaser’s good intentions. As was the case in Study 2, we found that whereas the fact that the teaser was kidding was obvious to the teaser, it was less so to the target. As well, we found that teasers thought that the fact that they were kidding was more important than did targets. Path analyses further showed that both the awareness of the target’s good intentions and the perceived importance of those good intentions statistically mediated the link between condition and tease ratings, consistent with our causal explanation.

Study 4: Manipulating the Salience of Teasers’ Intentions

Thus far we have shown that (a) teasers and targets differ in their construal of teasing, (b) teasers report more positive intentions behind the tease than do targets, and (c) the fact that the teaser has good intentions is perceived as more relevant to the teaser than to the target. Our contention is that these differences in perceived intentionality in part cause the rift in tease construal. That is, it is because the teaser’s good intentions are more obvious and important to the teaser than to the target that targets perceive teasing more negatively than do teasers. Consistent with this explanation, we found that the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing is mediated by the perceived intentions

Table 3  
Tease Construal by Tease Topic, Study 3

Topic	Teaser	Target	Difference
Physical appearance (e.g., “I always tease my girlfriend about her fatness even though she is not but I know she is conscious about it.”)	8.78 (9)	5.59 (11)	3.19
Relationship/sex (e.g., “I teased a friend after she gave oral sex to another one of my friends by calling her ‘Hoover.’”)	8.77 (13)	6.00 (7)	2.77
Behavior (e.g., “I teased my sister for spelling DNA ‘denay.’”)	7.90 (5)	7.21 (12)	0.69
Other (e.g., “Made up new screen names just to annoy my boyfriend.”)	8.27 (15)	7.07 (14)	1.20

Note. Sample sizes (n) are given in parentheses. Higher numbers indicate a more positive construal.

behind the tease and, to a lesser extent, the perceived importance of having good intentions.

Study 4 was the first of two studies designed to examine our causal account more directly. Our procedure was simple. As in the previous studies, participants in Study 4 described an instance in which they teased someone else and then evaluated the tease along several dimensions. This time, however, some participants were asked to describe not only what they said but also why they said it. That is, after summarizing the tease and the situation in which it occurred, some participants were asked to go on and describe what their intentions were behind the tease, such as whether they intended to, say, hurt the person's feelings or were just trying to be playful. Then, a separate group of participants read the teaser's description of the tease—either with or without information about the teaser's intentions—and rated it along the same criteria used by the teaser.

Our predictions also were simple. We expected, first, that observers would tend to construe the tease more negatively than would teasers (just as the targets construed the tease more negatively than did teasers in the previous studies). We also expected that teasers would report (and, in this study, describe) more positive intentions behind the tease than would the observers, also analogous to the results of the previous studies. We expected these rifts to be reduced, however, when the observers learned the stated intentions behind the tease.<sup>2</sup>

A secondary goal of this experiment was to explore more closely the role of gender in perceptions of teasing. An ambiguity of the gender results presented thus far is that the gender of the individual on the other end of the tease was either unknown (in the case of Study 1, in which we did not record gender, and in the case of Study 3, in which we recorded either the gender of the target but not the gender of the teaser or vice versa) or constant (in the case of Study 2, in which the teaser was always of the opposite gender as the target). Thus, it is unclear whether the gender results (and the lack of them) reported in previous studies were driven by the gender of the target, the gender of the teaser, or both—either additively or interactively. Thus, in the present design, in addition to experimentally manipulating the condition of the teaser, we included the gender of both the teaser and the observer as additional factors.

## Method

**Participants.** Participants were 630 University of Illinois students (393 women, 237 men) who participated on a volunteer basis or as part of a course requirement.

**Procedure.** There were two phases to the experiment. In the first phase, 315 participants (186 women, 129 men) were given a questionnaire that asked them to think of a specific time in which they teased a friend, roommate, or family member. Once they had a particular tease in mind, they described the content of the tease on the questionnaire. Specifically, they were asked to write down exactly what they said when they teased the individual. The questionnaire went on to point out that although it might be hard to remember exact words, the participant should try his or her best to be as accurate as possible. As well, participants were reminded that all responses were anonymous and confidential.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to condition. Those in the *content-only* condition next rated the tease by using a combination of the measures used in the previous studies. Specifically, they rated the valence of tease by using the five questions from Study 1 (i.e., “How humorous would you say this tease was?”; “How mean would you say this tease

was?”; “How light-hearted would you say this tease was?”; “How hurtful would you say this tease was?”; and “How annoying would you say this tease was?”), which were averaged together to create a single index of tease construal ( $\alpha = .73$ ). They also rated the intentions behind the tease ( $\alpha = .73$ ) and importance of good intentions by using the same questions as in Studies 2 and 3. As in those studies, all responses were made on a 1–11 Likert-type scale.

Participants in the *content + intention* condition followed a similar procedure, except that immediately after describing what they said, they also described why they said it. Specifically, they were provided with the following instructions:

Now we would like you to write down what you *intended* when you teased this person. That is, people tease for many reasons. Sometimes people tease to hurt a person's feelings, sometimes to correct negative behavior, sometimes to tell a person that we like him or her, and so on. What we would like you to do is tell us what *you* intended to communicate when you teased this person. Again, all responses are anonymous, so please answer honestly.

In the second phase of the experiment, a separate group of participants read the descriptions of the teases—which for half of the participants included information about the teaser's intentions and for the other half did not—and rated them along the same criteria used by the teasers. Specifically, participants were told (correctly) that the tease had been written by another study participant who was asked to describe an instance in which he or she teased a friend, roommate, or family member. After they read the tease, they were asked to summarize it on a questionnaire and then evaluate it by using the same questionnaire we gave teasers. In the interest of data independence, a separate observer (207 women, 108 men) was yoked to each teaser.

## Results and Discussion

Our primary prediction was that teasers would construe teasing more positively than would an individual reading a description of the tease, but that this rift would be reduced when the teaser was prompted to make his or her intentions behind the tease explicit. To find out whether this was the case, we submitted these tease ratings to a 2 (condition)  $\times$  2 (gender of teaser)  $\times$  2 (gender of observer)  $\times$  2 (role) mixed-model ANOVA. This analysis yielded two significant main effects. First, there was an uninteresting main effect for teaser gender: On average, the ratings provided by both teasers and observers were higher when the teaser was a woman ( $M = 7.35$ ) than when the teaser was a man ( $M = 6.82$ ),  $F(1, 307) = 10.51, p = .001, \eta^2 = .033$ . As well, we also observed a main effect for role. As expected, teasers evaluated the tease more favorably ( $M = 7.56$ ) than did the yoked observers ( $M = 6.70$ ),  $F(1, 307) = 49.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .138$ , just as teasers rated the tease more favorably than did targets in the previous studies.

No other main effects or interactions were significant, with one important exception. We observed the expected (albeit modest) Role  $\times$  Condition two-way interaction,  $F(1, 307) = 3.78, p =$

<sup>2</sup> Note that this prediction is far from obvious. Discovering that the literal content of the tease does not correspond to the stated intentions of the teaser could seem insincere. After all, people are assumed to say what they mean, and violations of that assumption tend to be irksome (Grice, 1975). Applied to the present study, this implies that learning the stated intentions behind the tease might increase, rather than decrease, the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease. This fact thus enables a conservative test of our hypothesis.



.053,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . The rift between the teaser's and observer's evaluation of the tease was, on average, 37% bigger when they were in the content-only condition ( $M_s = 7.61$  vs. 6.61, respectively) than when they were in the content + intention condition ( $M_s = 7.52$  vs. 6.79, respectively). We found no evidence, despite the considerable power afforded by the large sample size, that the gender of either the target or the yoked observer moderated this rift or its reduction.

Note that the size of this interaction was quite small, however. Follow-up analyses on the perceived intentions behind the tease provided a clue as to why. First, by repeating the ANOVA described above with perceived intentionality as the DV, we once again observed a significant main effect for role. Virtually all teasers reported that they had positive intentions (all but 7.6% put their intentions above the midpoint of the scale), and they provided intention ratings that tended to exceed the ratings provided by observers,  $F(1, 307) = 50.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .141$ . But we also observed a small Role  $\times$  Condition two-way interaction,  $F(1, 307) = 3.80$ ,  $p = .052$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . It is telling to note that this interaction was exactly as small as the one reported for tease construal: The effect sizes were identical, indicating that the rift between teasers and observers in their evaluations of the intentions behind the tease was bigger in the content-only condition than in the content + intention condition. Thus, it is not surprising, in light of our thesis, that we observed a correspondingly slight reduction in the valence of tease construal. Note as well that our manipulation had no influence (nor did we expect it to have) on the perceived importance of good intentions,  $F(1, 307) < 1$ . Teasers placed greater importance on good intentions than did observers ( $M_s = 8.42$  versus 8.11, respectively),  $F(1, 305) = 5.29$ ,  $p = .022$ ,  $\eta^2 = .017$ , and this was true regardless of condition. Thus, to the extent this difference in the perceived relevance of intentions in part underlies the rift between teasers and targets, as we maintain, it is not surprising that some semblance of that rift remained even after our experimental manipulation.

Our final set of analyses focused on the proposed mediational relationship of the awareness of and weight placed on good intentions between one's role in the tease (teaser vs. observer) and one's construal of it. Because participants' role in the tease was a within-subject variable (or, more precisely, a within-unit-of-analysis variable, as each teaser was yoked to a separate observer), we once again used the Judd et al. (2001) procedure for testing mediation in within-subject designs.

This analysis revealed that both the perceived intentions behind the tease and the perceived importance of those intentions partially mediated the link between participants' role in the tease and their evaluation of it. First, the IV (one's role in the tease) was significantly related to both proposed mediators as well as the DV, as indicated by results reported previously (namely, the significant main effect of participants' role in the tease on tease valence, the perceived intentions behind the tease, and the perceived importance of those intentions). As well, each proposed mediator significantly predicted the DV at both levels of the IV (all  $p_s < .02$ ). Finally, the difference between teasers and observers in the perceived intentions behind the tease was a significant predictor of the rift in tease construal ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as was the difference between teasers and observers in the perceived importance of having good intentions ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

## Study 5: Manipulating the Valence of Teasers' Intentions

Our thesis is that because teasers know (and care) more about their good intentions than do targets, targets are likely to construe teasing more negatively than do teasers. But what if teasers do not have good intentions? What if, instead of intending to flirt or socialize, the teaser's goal is to hurt or harass? On the one hand, targets may construe the tease every bit as negatively (if not more) than the teasers. As one anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article put it, "If somebody does something willfully to hurt me in some way, well, sure, that person will construe the event negatively, but I as the innocent victim will consider it an even more dastardly act." On the other hand, our egocentrism analysis predicts the opposite. To the extent that the teaser's desire to hurt or ridicule is more salient—and more relevant—to the teaser than target, teasers are likely to come away from the tease with a more negative construal of the tease than targets. However dastardly a tease designed to hurt or humiliate seems to the target, it is likely to seem even more so to someone actually aware of the hurtful motive behind the tease—namely, the teaser.

Our fifth and final study was designed to investigate this hypothesis experimentally. Participants engaged in a short "get to know you" conversation with another participant as part of an impression formation study and then (privately) wrote a short personality description about the person on the basis of the limited information gleaned from the interview. Participants assigned to the role of teaser were instructed to "tease the person a little," but our definition of "teasing" varied by condition. Teasers assigned to the positive-intention condition were told that by teasing we meant that what they say should be negative, but their intentions should be positive, in an effort to give him or her a "playful ribbing like you would teasing someone you like." Participants assigned to the negative-intention condition, in contrast, were told that by teasing we meant that their goal should be to "bring the person down a peg like you would teasing someone you don't particularly like." Our prediction was that whereas in the positive-intention condition, teasers would tend to evaluate the tease more positively than the target, in the negative-intention condition this difference would reverse.

## Method

*Participants.* Participants were 171 University of Illinois students who earned either extra credit in an introductory course in psychology or \$8 for their participation. They were recruited in groups of three.

*Procedure.* On arrival to the lab, the experimenter explained to the group that the purpose of the experiment was to investigate impression formation and that the first part of the study would involve a short "get to know you" conversation in which the experimenter would interview each member of the group. The interview was a scripted series of 12 questions (e.g., "what are your favorite movies?"; "what is an embarrassing moment in your life?"), and the experimenter solicited an answer from each participant to a particular interview question before continuing to the next question. The interview ended after 10 min had elapsed or all 12 questions had been answered, whichever came first.

Once the interview ended (but while the group was still assembled together), the experimenter explained that the next part of the experiment would involve each person writing a brief personality description of one of the other participants on the basis of the information gleaned from the interview. After indicating which participant they were to evaluate, the experimenter escorted each participant to a private cubicle and gave him or

her a personality evaluation form. The form asked participants to write a brief personality evaluation of the person on the basis of the information provided in the interview. The instructions explained that they should emphasize not only the positive aspects of the person but the negative aspects as well. It went on to explain that a copy of their evaluation might be provided to one or both of the other study participants.

At this point, participants were randomly assigned to condition. One was assigned to the role of teaser, another to the role of target, and the third to the role of observer. As well, the teaser was assigned to either the positive-intention condition or the negative-intention condition. Participants in the positive-intention condition were interrupted by the experimenter just prior to beginning the personality description and given the following oral instructions:

OK, as you know, we'd like you to write your description about [the person indicated by the experimenter]. We do have some specific instructions, however. In particular, we'd like you to tease the person. That is, although we'd like you to base your personality evaluation on the conversation that just took place, we'd like you to tease the person a little. For instance, you might give him or her a hard time about his or her most embarrassing moment, make fun of him or her about their favorite movies, whatever—the choice is up to you. The only restriction is that you stick to the spirit of teasing. That is, *although what you say may be negative, your intentions should be positive. We don't want you to hurt the person's feelings, but instead just give him or her a playful ribbing like you would teasing someone you like.*

Teasers in the negative-intention condition were given an identical set of instructions, except that the definition of teasing was changed. Specifically, the italicized text above was replaced with "your goal should be to bring the person down a peg like you would tease someone you don't particularly like."

Once each participant's personality evaluation was complete, the experimenter explained that in the next part of the experiment, each participant would be given one of the personality descriptions and asked several questions about it. The experimenter then gave a photocopy of the teaser's personality evaluation to all three members of the group (including the teaser), along with a questionnaire.

The questionnaire asked each participant to rate the personality evaluation (henceforth referred to as "tease") along several dimensions designed to capture the same three variables as in the previous studies. Participants rated the valence of the personality description along the following 20 dimensions, each accompanied by a scale ranging from 0 (*does not describe evaluation at all*) to 5 (*describes evaluation well*): positive, negative, accurate, amusing, annoying, complimentary, cruel, flirtatious, friendly, funny, generous, honorable, humiliating, hurtful, insulting, kind, light-hearted, mean, nice, and polite. These measures were averaged (after reverse scoring the appropriate items) to create a single index of tease construal ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

Next, participants rated the intentions behind the tease, which began with the following instructions:

When people provide personality feedback, they often do so for a variety of reasons. These reasons can range from the positive—such as trying to be polite, funny, or honest—to the negative—such as trying to be "brutally" honest or downright mean. What we would like you to do is tell us about what you think the intentions of the personality description writer probably were. (*Or, if you wrote the personality description yourself, your own intentions behind what you wrote down.*)

This was followed by 16 intentions, each of which was accompanied by a scale ranging from 0 (*does not describe intentions at all*) to 5 (*describes intentions well*). They were as follows: bring down a peg, annoy, be cruel, be friendly, be funny, be generous, be honorable, be kind, be light-hearted, be mean, be nice, be polite, compliment, humiliate, hurt, and insult. Here,

too, we averaged responses across items (again after reverse scoring where appropriate) to create a single index ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

Finally, participants were asked the following question designed to capture the perceived importance and relevance of the teaser's good intentions:<sup>3</sup>

To what extent did the fact that the writer may have been just kidding (i.e., did not mean, wasn't serious) make the negative things that he or she wrote down OK? In other words, how much did the writer's good intentions exonerate the negative things he or she wrote down? (*If you were the writer, how much does the fact that you may have been just kidding make the negative things you wrote down OK?*)

This was followed by a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*), and participants were instructed to circle "not applicable" if they felt that the personality description did not contain anything negative.

Finally, all participants were thanked and given a thorough debriefing, including a systematic probe for suspicion. Special care was taken to ensure that the target understood that the teaser was forced to tease him or her and thus did not really mean the things he or she wrote down.

## Results

Gender did not influence any of the results of this study and is not discussed further. In 5 of the 57 groups, 1 or more participants did not complete the primary dependent measures, and so we excluded these groups from our analyses.

*Teasers and targets.* Our initial set of analyses focused on the perceptions of teasers and targets. Our first prediction was that the rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of the intentions behind the tease would vary as a function of the experimental manipulation. To find out whether this was the case, we submitted these ratings to a 2 (role: teaser vs. target)  $\times$  2 (intention manipulation: positive vs. negative) mixed-model ANOVA. This analysis yielded a main effect for intention condition: Not surprisingly, the perceived intentions behind the tease were more positive when the teaser was instructed to deliver a positive tease ( $M = 2.82$ ) than a negative one ( $M = 1.78$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 13.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .21$ . Of greater importance, this analysis also revealed a significant interaction,  $F(1, 50) = 10.62$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ . Whereas teasers tended to rate the intentions behind the tease more positively than targets in the positive-intention condition ( $M_s = 2.94$  vs. 2.69), the opposite was true in the negative-intention condition ( $M_s = 1.46$  vs. 2.10), although only the latter contrast was significant,  $t(26) = 3.10$ ,  $p = .005$ .

Did this difference in the perceived intentions behind the tease translate into differences in the appraisal of the tease? In a word, yes. In addition to a main effect for condition,  $F(1, 50) = 10.92$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ , we found that the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease varied as a function of condition,  $F(1, 50) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .052$ ,  $\eta^2 = .074$ . Whereas in the positive-intention condition, teasers tended to rate the tease more positively than did targets ( $M_s = 2.56$  vs. 2.45), the opposite was

<sup>3</sup> We also asked a second question designed to get at the perceived importance of intentions, namely, "how important was it that the writer was just kidding (i.e., did not mean, wasn't serious) about the negative things that he or she wrote down?" As it turned out, this item was poorly related to the other item ( $\alpha < .5$ ), and so we dropped it from the analyses. It should be pointed out, however, that the two items yielded very similar patterns of results.

true in the negative-intention condition ( $M_s = 1.39$  vs.  $1.81$ )—although here, too, only the latter contrast was significant,  $t(26) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .046$ .

We also found, consistent with the previous studies, that teasers felt that the fact that they were just kidding exonerated the negative things they wrote more than did targets ( $M_s = 5.51$  vs.  $4.00$ , respectively),  $F(1, 39) = 5.39$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . It is interesting to note that there was also a nonsignificant interaction,  $F(1, 39) = 3.31$ ,  $p = .076$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . The difference between teasers and targets in the perceived relevance of good intentions was greater when the teaser's intentions were negative ( $M_s = 5.85$  vs.  $3.10$ ) than when they were positive ( $M_s = 5.19$  vs.  $4.86$ ). In fact, in only the negative-intention condition was that difference significant,  $t(19) = 3.48$ ,  $p = .003$ .<sup>4</sup>

*Mediational analyses.* We also were interested to see whether the awareness and perceived importance of good intentions partially mediated the link between participants' role in the tease and their construal of it (independent of condition), to see whether the results of the previous studies were replicated in the lab. They did. The difference between teasers and targets in their evaluation of the intentions behind the tease was a significant predictor of the rift between them in their construal of the tease ( $\beta = .78$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as was the rift between teasers and targets in the perceived relevance of good intentions ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p = .043$ ).<sup>5</sup>

*Observers.* Our final set of analyses focused on the perceptions of observers. Recall that each tease was evaluated not only by the teaser and the target but also by a neutral observer uninvolved with the tease. These ratings enable yet another test of the proposed hypothesis. To the extent that observers, like the targets themselves, are less aware of (and less moved by) the teasers' intentions than are the teasers themselves, then observers ought to display a pattern of data similar to that of targets—and dissimilar to that of teasers.

That is exactly what we found. The ratings of observers did not significantly differ from the ratings of targets on any of the three dependent measures in either intention condition (all  $t_s < 1.2$ ,  $p_s > .24$ ). In contrast, the ratings of observers did differ from the ratings of teasers, in much the same way that the targets' ratings differed from the ratings of teasers. Specifically, like the targets themselves, the observers rated the intentions behind the tease more positively than did teasers in the negative-intention condition ( $M_s = 2.15$  vs.  $1.46$  and  $1.88$  vs.  $1.39$ , respectively,  $t_s > 2.7$ ,  $p_s < .012$ ) and also felt that good intentions exonerated the negative content of these teases less than did teasers ( $M_s = 3.30$  vs.  $5.35$ ),  $t(19) = 2.38$ ,  $p = .028$ .

## Discussion

The results of Study 5 provide additional support for the role of intentions in the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing. Whereas teasers instructed to deliver a tease with positive intentions tended to provide more positive evaluations of their intentions than did targets (as in the previous studies), this effect was reversed when teasers had more malevolent intentions. As a consequence, teasers provided a more negative evaluation of the tease than did targets in the negative-intention condition (but not in the positive-intention condition), reversing the rift observed in Studies 1 through 4. Further evidence for the role of intentions in the difference between teasers and targets in their construal of

teasing is the fact that, as in the previous studies, differences in the awareness and perceived importance of good intentions statistically mediated the link between participants' role in the tease and their evaluation of it. As well, the ratings provided by observers—who, like the targets, were unaware of the intentions behind the tease—were indistinguishable from the ratings provided by the targets but reliably different from the ratings provided by the teasers.

One unexpected finding was that although teasers tended to construe the tease more positively than did targets in the positive-intention condition, this difference was not significant. We suspect that one reason for this stems from discomfort felt by teasers even in the positive-intention condition. Several participants assigned to the role of teaser voiced feelings of discomfort at having to make fun of someone they barely knew (although when participants were reminded of their option to withdraw from the study without suffering any penalty, none wished to do so). As such, we suspect that they may have been especially sensitive to the negative component of the tease, lowering their ratings.

## General Discussion

Teasing is a common interpersonal interaction. Few individuals have not at one time or another teased—or been teased by—a friend, family member, or romantic partner. Indeed, even chimpanzees have been found to tease one another (Adang, 1984). Although the construal of teasing among chimpanzees is of course difficult to assess (they do not respond well to pencil-and-paper measures, preferring to eat them), the construal of teasing among humans is considerably clearer. The research presented here suggests that teasers construe specific instances of teasing differently than do the individuals whom they tease. As such, teasing appears to be similar to other varieties of aversive interpersonal interactions, such as bullying (Besag, 1989; D. M. Ross, 1996), and hurtful exchanges more generally (Baumeister et al., 1990; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998), in that perpetrators and targets often perceive the very same interaction quite differently.

Of key importance, this research also investigated some of the causes of this rift. Although teasers often tease with the best of intentions, those intentions tend to be less salient, and less relevant, to the target. As a consequence, targets come away from the tease with a more negative appraisal of it than do teasers.

Several findings borne our analysis out. First, in several of the studies, we asked participants to evaluate not only the tease, but also the intentions behind it and the perceived importance of those intentions (i.e., the extent to which having good intentions mitigates the negative content of the tease). We consistently found that targets perceived the intentions behind the tease to be less positive, and less relevant, than did teasers. Of key importance, these factors

<sup>4</sup> The degrees of freedom were reduced in this analysis because several targets indicated “not applicable” when asked this question.

<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that there was no main effect between the IV (role) and the DV (tease construal), which, according to Judd et al. (2001), is a prerequisite for testing mediation (see also Baron & Kenny, 1986). However, because we did not expect an overall main effect of the IV on the DV given our experimental manipulation, we followed the advice of Shrout and Bolger (2002) and waived this prerequisite (see also MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002).

statistically mediated the difference between teasers and targets in their construal of the tease.

Second, in Study 4, we found that simply making the intentions of the target known to an observer attenuated the rift between teasers and observers in their construal of the tease. This was true despite the fact that observers merely learned the intentions stated by the teaser, which may have been interpreted somewhat cynically (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004).

Third, in Study 5, we compared the tease construal of targets and teasers with the construal of a neutral party uninvolved with the tease. To the extent that targets construe teasing more negatively than teasers because targets are unaware of the good intentions of the teaser, then the observers should tend to agree with the target rather than the teaser. That is precisely what we found.

Finally, in Study 5, we experimentally manipulated the intentions of the teaser. Our reasoning was that if the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing stems from the differential awareness (and perceived relevance) of good intentions, that rift should be attenuated—indeed, reversed—if the intentions of the teaser are negative rather than positive. Here, too, that is precisely what we found.

#### *Moderators: On Gender, Valence, and Subject*

Along the way, we also explored several potential moderators of the proposed rift, including gender (of both the teaser and, separately, the target), tease valence, and the subject of the tease. Although these data were exploratory and not central to our thesis, we found several interesting effects (and one equally interesting null effect). First, in Study 3, we found that the more negative the tease (as assessed by independent coders), the more negatively it was perceived by the target, as one might expect. However, the opposite was true for the instigators of the tease: The more negative the tease, the more positively it was rated by the teaser. Although paradoxical, future work is necessary to find out whether these findings are reliable.

We also examined the subject of the tease, to see whether certain types of teases are more prone to misunderstanding than others. As Table 3 shows, we found that teases involving physical appearance or relationships were associated with a bigger rift between teasers and targets than were other types of teases, such as those critical of behavior.

Finally, we explored gender as a potential moderator in Studies 2 through 5. The results were decidedly mixed. In Study 3, there was some evidence that the rift between teasers and targets was larger for men than for women. However, this was not true in Studies 1 or 5, nor was it true in Study 4 (to the extent that the yoked observers serve as a proxy for targets), the latter of which included over 600 participants and thus presumably had enough power to detect such a difference if it existed. These results are perhaps not surprising in light of the inconsistent findings observed in other studies of gender and teasing (see Keltner et al., 2001, p. 242).

Perhaps the biggest moderator of the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing is also one of the mediators: intentionality. To the extent that an individual does not have good intentions when he or she teases someone—that is, is not really kidding at all but instead intends to hurt, humiliate, or harass—there is little reason to expect targets to construe the tease more

negatively than teasers. Indeed, in Study 5, we found that in such cases, targets actually construe the tease more positively than teasers.

#### *Alternative Interpretations*

Are there any alternative interpretations that could account for our results? One possible alternative is that a demand characteristic or self-serving bias may have produced the effects. For instance, one of the reasons we may have observed a rift between teasers and targets in their perceptions of teasing is that teasers may have been motivated to downplay the severity of the tease. Although we do not doubt that such a motive may exist, we do not believe that this can account for our results. First, note that teasers likely faced an opposing demand or self-presentational motive. Although for teasers, the motive may have been to deny the negativity of the tease (increasing the rift), for targets the motive may have been to deny that the tease was cruel (decreasing the rift). Second, it is not entirely clear (to us, anyway) in which direction a demand or self-presentational motive might operate even in the case of teasers. Rather than toning down the negativity of the tease, the experimental demand for teasers may have been instead to come up with a particularly good zinger. If so, teasers might have exaggerated, rather than attenuated, the negativity of the tease. Finally, note that this demand characteristic explanation presumably cannot explain the mediational analyses of Studies 2 through 5, nor the experimental results of Studies 4 and 5, nor the fact that when the tease was delivered with negative intentions, the difference in tease construal was reversed. In short, although we do not doubt that a self-serving bias may contribute to the rift between teasers and targets in their construal of teasing, it cannot account for the data presented here.

A second potential alternative concerns Study 3 in particular, in which we obtained the perceptions of either the teaser or target involved in a particular tease, but not both. As such, it is possible that the differences observed were due not to genuine differences in tease construal on the part of teasers and targets, but rather to a tendency for teasers to bring to mind qualitatively different types of teases when asked to recall a tease than when targets were asked to do so. Although we cannot rule out this possibility conclusively, we do not believe that it presents a serious threat to the interpretation of Study 3 for two reasons. First, note that this alternative cannot explain the results of the other studies, which mirrored the results of Study 3. Second, recall that in Study 2, we varied whether the teaser or target came up with the tease and included this variable as a factor in the analysis. We found that this had no influence on either the teaser's or the target's perceptions of the tease.

#### *Implications and Conclusions*

That said, there are clear caveats to the results worth considering. First, there is the artificial nature of some of the studies. Seldom, for instance, do people tease one another because they have been instructed to do so by an experimenter, as were participants in Study 5. Although necessary from the standpoint of internal validity, this and several other features of the design of that study do limit its external validity.

As well, note that the studies presented here focused almost exclusively on college students and exclusively on individuals in their relative youth (the oldest individual in our research was a venerable 36). Although we see little reason to expect the findings to be categorically different among older (or younger) individuals, the fact remains that this is an open question that only future research can answer. We suspect that if anything, the rift may be slightly bigger in the case of the young. To the extent that perspective taking is more difficult among children (Flavell, 1977; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), they ought to be even less able to discern the true intention of the teaser when in the role of target. This may be one of the reasons why elementary schoolchildren report more negative emotions to teasing than do junior high schoolchildren (Shapiro et al., 1991).

As well, there are unanswered questions worth answering. For instance, although we found that teasers tend to give themselves more credit for their intentions behind the tease than do targets, less clear is the source of this differential weighting. Although other explanations are possible, one explanation for this finding is that teasers and targets differ in their motive for considering intention; that is, teasers may be looking for information that mitigates their otherwise negative actions, a motive that may not be present for targets. If so, then it may be that whereas teasers overweight their benevolent intentions relative to targets, that tendency may be reduced or eliminated in the case of malevolent intentions. Although we saw no evidence for this tendency in Study 5, in which we observed that teasers weighted their intentions more heavily than targets regardless of the valence of those intentions, future research is necessary to examine this possibility more fully.

Are there any intervention implications of this research? One clear implication is that targets of teasing would do well to remember that teasers likely have more noble intentions than it might appear on the surface. In each study, we found that teasers had more positive intentions than the targets of the tease realized. Accordingly, to the extent that teasers do not wish to offend, they would be wise to make their good intentions behind the tease clearer. On the other hand, the results also suggest that even if such intentions are made explicit, as they were in Study 4, the rift is not likely to disappear completely. Although there are several reasons why this might have been the case, the reason suggested by this research is that good intentions do not mitigate the negative content for targets to the same extent as they do for teasers. In short, teasers should be mindful that when it comes to teasing, "just kidding" just isn't good enough.

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