The Role of Mental Imagery and Emotion in Imagined Interaction

Kenneth S. Zagacki, Renee Edwards, and James M. Honeycutt

Imagined interactions, internal dialogues experienced as conversations with significant others, are conceptualized as a form of social cognition. Imagined interactions have important affective components and mental imagery. Results of an investigation demonstrate that verbal imagery is associated with self-dominance, rehearsal and understanding while visual imagery is associated with more pleasantness. Pleasant imagined interactions are lower in self-dominance and more similar to actual communication than unpleasant imagined interactions. The results are explained in terms of information processing and relational communication; two categories of imagined interaction reflecting verbal and mixed imagery are also proposed.

KEY CONCEPTS  Social cognition, imagined interaction, interpersonal communication, mental imagery, emotion, planning

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Communication researchers from both mentalist and cognitive perspectives have investigated the form and content of message planning behavior (Berger, 1988; Greene, 1984; Mead, 1934; Schutz, 1962; Honeycutt, Zagacki & Edwards, 1989). These explorations begin to answer an important question posed by Arnold and Frandsen (1984): How do actors experience themselves qua communicators and as others prior to, during, and after communication? In other words, how do communicators represent information relevant to the preparation or the retroactive evaluation of their message behaviors? And what, more specifically, is the nature of this representation? One construct especially useful for responding to these inquiries is the “imagined interaction.” Previous studies and theoretical positions on imagined interaction (Edwards, Honeycutt & Zagacki, 1988, 1989; Honeycutt, 1989, 1991; Honeycutt et al., 1989, 1990; Honeycutt, Edwards & Zagacki, 1989–1990; Zagacki, Edwards & Honeycutt, 1988) have suggested that communicators envision or think about encounters with significant others before and after actual communicative episodes, and that this mental activity serves important interpersonal as well as cognitive functions. Still, little is known about either the imagistic or emotional nature of these phenomena and therefore about how the mental, intentional content of imagined interactions may impact upon interpersonal communication behavior.

The purpose of the present study is to examine further imagined interactions and their role in communication. The theoretical basis of the imagined interaction construct and
recent empirical research on the characteristics and functions of imagined interactions are summarized. Possible relationships of imagined interaction to mental imagery and emotions are then proposed and tested.

**The Construct of Imagined Interaction**

Imagined interaction refers to a process of social cognition whereby actors imagine and therefore indirectly experience themselves in anticipated and/or past communicative encounters with others (Honeycutt et al., 1989; 1989-90). Imagined interactions focus and organize individuals’ thoughts on communication, on the actors involved in specific acts of communication and on the communicative context.

Imagined interactions have their theoretical foundation in the work of symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists, especially Mead (1934), Dewey (1922) and Schutz (1962). Mead discussed the “internalized conversation of gestures.” Here actors are able consciously to monitor social action by reviewing alternative endings of any given act in which they are involved. Actors use internal dialogues to “test out implicitly the various possible completions of an already initiated act in advance of actual completion of the act,” and thus to choose “the one which it is most desirable to perform explicitly or carry into overt effect” (p. 177). Similarly, Schutz describes Dewey’s notion of deliberation as planning activity which precedes action; actors plan by imagining a future instance where an action will have already been accomplished “and reconstruct[ing] the future steps which will have brought forth this future act” (1962, p. 69). For Schutz, deliberation is “a dramatic rehearsal in imagination of various competing possible lines of action” (1962, p. 69). Hence, in their subjective experience, actors envision desirable and undesirable future states of affairs and imagine ways in which to obtain or avoid these states.

In addition to (perhaps by virtue of) their planning capacity, we can speculate that imagined interactions are related to cognitive structures similar to interaction schema and procedural records (Edwards et al., 1988; Honeycutt et al., 1989; Zagacki et al., 1988). Cognitive theorists have posited that procedural knowledge for real world events and actions is inscribed into cognitive structures (Berger, 1988; Greene, 1984; Schank, 1982), yet there has been surprisingly little speculation about how this knowledge is accessed into and consequently experienced within phenomenal awareness or direct consciousness.

Cognitive researchers argue that much information is stored, retrieved or represented (sometimes unconsciously) in propositional form; the way in which information is processed is generally called “computational thinking” (see, for example, Pylyshyn, 1981). Yet propositional information located deep within cognitive structures may itself be transferred to or represented in phenomenal awareness in a variety of ways (Gardner, 1985). One way, we suggest, is through imagined interaction. Thus, when actors experience imagined interactions, they may, in essence, be experiencing a representation of scripted or partially scripted knowledge, with the information being brought directly into explicit awareness for review. Here activating the script through an imagined interaction may help to reconstitute the existing script. Singer (1985) makes a similar point, arguing that while many of our thought processes occur outside consciousness in cognitive structures or other cognitive mechanisms, many of the influences of these structures and mechanisms “upon our thought and action are not permanently unretrievable but . . . recur regularly as part of the ongoing conscious stream in the form of fleeting thoughts [and] fantasies” (p. 3). He suggests that researchers “identify the numerous occurrences . . . in phenomenal awareness of imagery, fantasies and interior monologues which are often rehearsing and reshaping established schemas and personal scripts or gradually building new ones” (p. 3).
Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986) have referred to imagined interactions as instances in which actors imagine themselves discoursing with significant others. They argue that imagined interactions are similar to real conversations: imagined interactions are fragmentary, extended, rambling, or repetitive; they may be coherent or incoherent; they occur frequently during the course of an actor's day, and involve actors in conversations with significant others.

**Characteristics and Functions of Imagined Interaction**

Recent work has identified eight characteristics and three functions of imagined interaction (Honeycutt et al., 1990). The characteristics are activity (how frequently persons experience imagined interactions); pleasantness (how enjoyable they are); discrepancy (whether imagined encounters are different from real-life counterparts); self-dominance (that the self dominates the talk in imagined interactions); proactivity (whether imagined encounters precede real-life encounters); retroactivity (whether imagined interactions follow real-life encounters); specificity (the amount of detail in imagined interactions); and variety (the number of different topics and partners experienced). Three primary functions of imagined interaction include increased understanding (of self and other), rehearsal (planning for anticipated interaction), and catharsis (relieving tension).

Research has demonstrated that imagined interactions tend to occur prior to actual encounters rather than after them and that imagined interactions are less functional for lonely individuals. Additionally, sex differences in imagined interactions parallel those for actual communication (Edwards, Honeycutt & Zagacki, 1988, 1989; Honeycutt et al., 1990; Honeycutt, Edwards & Zagacki, 1989–1990). For example, women report having more frequent and more pleasant imagined interactions than do men. Other research has linked imagined interaction directly to planning. Allen (1990) demonstrated that off-line planning takes the form of imagined interaction and enhances speech fluency and message complexity. Gotcher and Edwards (1990) found that cancer patients report using imagined interactions to plan upcoming conversations with physicians and family members.

In summary, individuals possess many ways to represent information to themselves and cognitive theorists typically focus on the propositional nature of information and the ways in which this information is encoded into and retrieved from cognitive structures. Our view is that alternative means for representing information exist that have important consequences for actual behavior, and that one of these means is imagined interaction. Imagined interactions are cognitive representations where anticipated or previous communicative episodes are simulated directly in consciousness; knowledge about how one might proceed in these episodes is probably retrieved from and returned to scripts or other cognitive structures. Imagined interactions afford actors opportunities to consider (and even mentally envision) the act of discoursing with others, to anticipate and react to their responses, and to assume others' roles.

**Mental Imagery and Imagined Interactions**

Much cognitive research concerns the nature and types of representations involved in cognition. A significant portion of this research argues for the presence and utility of two modes of mental representation—one mode is in the form of mental pictures or images, the other mode is similar to propositions or verbal statements (Kosslyn & Pomerantz, 1977). In general, we believe that mental imagery exists and that people often think in terms of imagery. If cognitive theorists are correct, one can reasonably postulate an important relationship between mental imagery and imagined interaction: mental images accompany
imagined interactions as individuals use these interactions to think about and to visualize prospective or retroactive communicative encounters.

But what form might these images take within an imagined interaction? What functions could they serve? Conceivably, actors form mental images of the scene of anticipated encounters, they may image others, and/or they may image themselves, with functions and outcomes of the imagined interaction varying with the mode of imagery. These mental images and their verbal components may be coherent or, as Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986) maintain, they may be quite fragmentary and obscure. Furthermore, individuals may have omniscient or direct images (Honeycutt et al., 1989). The omniscient perspective occurs when individuals see themselves and others, while the direct perspective entails individuals seeing only other interactants much as they would during real conversation.

Perhaps the most important imaging consideration concerns the distinction between verbally (i.e., propositionally) based and visual imaging-based imagined interactions. Clearly, individuals can think verbally about their discoursing—without forming mental images of the interactive scene, the other, or themselves. And yet, should they shift from a primarily verbal mode into a more visual-based mode, to what extent is this shift predicated on the content of the imagined interaction itself? That is, does information about the self, the other, the topic discussed in the imagined interaction, or the nature of the relationship between the self and other determine in any significant way the mode in which one experiences an imagined interaction?

While the precise connection of verbal information to visual information in imagined interactions is unclear, it is plausible that information stored verbally serves a different function than information encoded visually. In fact, some support for the functional nature of mental images in relation to social action is provided by Lord (1979; see also Anderson, 1983). Lord demonstrated that individuals process information about the self in verbal or propositional form (e.g., “I am honest”), whereas information about others is interpreted and reconstructed using visual images. This is because, Lord argued, information about others is more visually prominent to actors than information about the self; moreover, actors must constantly interpret visual information about others while not having direct visual access to similar information as it relates to the self. In the latter case, actors rely on more verbally based data.

In view of Lord’s findings, we anticipate that individuals utilizing visual imagery will have different types of imagined interactions than will individuals who have less visual imagery. Specifically, we anticipate that verbal and visual imagery will be related to the characteristics and functions of imagined interaction. Lord’s research permits a directional hypothesis concerning imagery and self-dominance but not for the other characteristics and functions of imagined interaction.

H1: Verbal imagery will be more associated with self-dominance in imagined interaction than visual imagery.

RQ1: Is the mode of imagery of imagined interaction associated with its varying characteristics and functions?

Affective Content

A substantial number of studies conclude that affective and cognitive systems are closely intertwined (Gilligan & Bower, 1984; Singer & Kolligan, 1987; Zajonc, 1980) although the relationship between them is complex and not very well understood (Isen, 1984). Kuhl (1987) argues that the content of any planning activity involves intentions, expectations, desires, and obligations. Each of these content areas informs planning activity and has different effects on actors’ emotional and cognitive states and on behaviors. In
addition, Berger (1988) speculates that the activation and realization of plans are associated with varying degrees of emotional arousal and that specific emotional states may be embedded in a plan. Because imagined interactions are conceptualized as planning activities containing corresponding intentions and expectations, imagined interactions should also be associated with affective components.

Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986) speculated that emotional catharsis was one of the functions of imagined interactions. In related work, Gergen (1987) reported that individuals thinking about "imaginal relationships" wrote about increased feelings of well-being and security, while Caughey (1984) noted that individuals who were thinking about recent, significant conversations experienced emotions of catharsis. Edwards et al. (1988) found that imagined interactions generally involve strong emotional arousal, while Honeycutt et al. (1989–1990) found that pleasant emotions are associated with having numerous imagined interactions and having imagined interactions that are similar to actual encounters.

The present study seeks to examine further the relationship between affective content and features of imagined interactions by posing the following research question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between affective processing and the characteristics and features of imagined interaction?

**Method**

**Subjects**

The instrument was administered to 290 students enrolled in a multi-section basic course in interpersonal communication at a large southern university. All participation was voluntary. Some respondents completed the instrument during class time; others did not. Some received class credit for participating while others did not. The sample consisted of 44 percent males and 56 percent females; 20.0 was the mean age.

**The Survey of Imagined Interaction**

The survey instrument presented respondents with a moderately detailed written introduction. Imagined interactions were defined for respondents as "those 'mental' interactions we have with others who are not physically present." The introduction then described some "possible" characteristics of imagined interactions (e.g., "they may be ambiguous or detailed") and requested demographic information from the respondents. The remainder of the questionnaire was divided into two major sections.

Section 1 included 44 statements about characteristics of "typical" imagined interactions to which subjects responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very strong agreement" to "very strong disagreement." These items measured the eight general characteristics of activity (Cronbach's alpha = .76), pleasantness (alpha = .85), discrepancy (alpha = .84), self-dominance (alpha = .77), proactivity (alpha = .73), retroactivity (alpha = .80), specificity (alpha = .73) and variety (alpha = .67). Table 1 presents several items which represent each dimension. Scores on these characteristics are derived by averaging across the items that assess them. In a categorical item, respondents were also asked if their typical imagined interactions are primarily verbal, visual, or a combination of verbal and visual.

Using primarily open-ended questions, Section 2 examined the topics and relational partners of imagined interactions and focused on the most recently-recalled, specific imagined interaction provided by the respondent. Subjects described a specific imagined interaction by indicating the topic, the relational partner, and when and where they
TABLE 1 Sample Items from the Survey of Imagined Interaction

Activity: I frequently have imagined interactions. I rarely imagine myself interacting with someone else.*

Pleasantness: My imagined interactions are usually quite unpleasant.* My imagined interactions usually involve happy or fun activities.

Discrepancy: My imagined interactions are quite similar to the real conversations that follow them.* More often than not, what I actually say to a person in a real conversation is different from what I imagined I would say.

Self-dominance: When I have imagined interactions, the other person talks a lot.* I dominate the conversation in my imagined interactions.

Proactivity: Before important meetings, I frequently imagine them. Before I meet someone important, I imagine a conversation with them.

Retroactivity: After important meetings, I frequently imagine them. I often have imagined interactions after interacting with someone of importance.

Specificity: My imagined interactions are very specific. When I have an imagined interaction I often have only a vague idea of what the other says.*

Variety: Most of my imagined interactions are with the same person.* My imagined interactions tend to be on a lot of different topics.

Increased Understanding: The imagined interaction helped me in clarifying my thoughts and feelings with the interaction partner. The imagined interaction helped me understand myself better.

Rehearsal: I had the imagined interaction in order to practice what I was actually going to say to the person. The imagined interaction helped me plan what I was going to say for an anticipated encounter.

Catharsis: The imagined interaction helped me relieve tension and stress. The imagined interaction helped me to reduce uncertainty about the other’s actions and behaviors.

Satisfaction with Imagined Interaction: I was very satisfied with the imagined conversation. I enjoyed the imagined conversation.

Note. Reverse-coded items are marked with an asterisk.

experienced it. Subjects then reconstructed the imagined interaction by writing out sample lines of dialogue from it. This is an interesting measure because it also reflects the extent of verbal imaging. Honeycutt (1990) has discussed how some individuals are not able to report dialogue lines while indicating that their imagined interactions are more visually based. Still, others sometimes indicate that the dialogue is too intimate or personal and they would rather not reveal the content. They then were asked if they reexperienced the imagined interaction as they wrote it down, and responded to 12 scaled items which measured the functions of the specific, reported imagined interaction (increased understanding, alpha = .70; rehearsal, alpha = .75; and catharsis, alpha = .51) and four items measuring the satisfaction accompanying it (alpha = .89). Items measuring satisfaction were adapted from Hecht's (1978) Communication Satisfaction Inventory. Table 1 presents sample items for these variables.

Content Analysis

Responses to the open-ended questions in the survey were coded according to partner and topic. The responses to the open-ended questions in the Survey were content analyzed by three undergraduate coders. Categories were taken from the earlier research by Edwards et al. (1988) which used an identical population and procedures. The coders read through
each protocol and inductively derived a coding scheme for identifying who the II partner was and the topics that were imagined during the interaction.

1. **Partner.** Subjects were asked to identify the partner with whom they had the imagined interaction which they report. Responses were coded into 10 categories: romantic partner, family member, friends, work related, roommate, authority figures, ex-partners, strangers, prospective partners/acquaintances, and miscellaneous. Fewer than 10% of the sample reported multiple partners that were coded in more than one category. The most common co-occurrence was “work/job related” and “people in authority”. When more than one partner was listed by the respondent, the first partner was used in subsequent analysis due to the rank ordering.

2. **Topic.** Subjects listed the topics they discussed in their imagined interaction. Topics were coded into 11 categories based on common themes: conflicts/problems, dating, school/class, work/job, activities, family, money, friends, ex-partners, small talk, and miscellaneous. A slight majority of the sample (56%) reported discussing multiple topics in their imagined interactions. The most common case was conflict as the first reported topic followed by a relational topic such as dating followed by family and friends. The first reported topic was used in the analyses because it appeared to be the most salient for the respondents.

**Recency of Imagined Interaction**

Subjects indicated how recently they experienced their reported imagined interaction. Almost one-fourth indicated that their imagined interaction occurred on the day they filled out the survey; 18% reported yesterday; 41% reported experiencing it in the past week; and 17% more than a week ago. Sixty-eight percent reported that they reexperienced their imagined interaction as they wrote it down. Topics and partners of the imagined interactions did not vary as a function of time frame.

The validity of using self-report measures of imagined interaction has been discussed by Honeycutt et al. (1989) as well as by Caughey (1984). Ericcson and Simon (1980) also provide guidelines for collecting survey data by providing information about context and examples to aid the respondent in accessing memory. Newell and Simon (1972) add that questions directed to respondents about the task will supply strong indications of the adequacy of verbalized reports. For these reasons the survey of imagined interaction is designed to contextualize respondents by prompting them to think about the concept of imagined interaction.

**Results**

**H1 and RO1: The Effects of Mode of Imagery on Imagined Interactions**

Ninety respondents indicated that their imagined interactions are primarily verbal while 188 indicated that theirs are a mixture of verbal and visual. Only 12 subjects said they were primarily visual. On this basis, groups of verbal and mixed subjects were contrasted on the eight features and three functions of imagined interaction. A series of t-tests revealed several differences (See Table 2). Imagined interactions that are primarily verbal are associated with less pleasantness and more self-dominance than are imagined interactions that include a mixture of verbal and visual imagery (p < .005). In addition, primarily verbal imagined interactions appear to be related to increased understanding and greater rehearsal (p < .05). No significant effects were found for activity, discrepancy, proactivity, retroactivity, variety, specificity or catharsis.
TABLE 2 Imagined Interaction Features Associated with Verbal and Mixed Imagery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Verbal/Visual</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pleasantness</td>
<td>4.59 (.90)</td>
<td>5.31 (.97)</td>
<td>-3.51</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>5.03 (.91)</td>
<td>4.58 (.85)</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>4.77 (.90)</td>
<td>4.44 (1.15)</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal</td>
<td>5.25 (1.13)</td>
<td>4.91 (1.23)</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

RO2: Affective Processing and Imagined Interactions

Satisfaction was dichotomized and crosstabulated with topic and partner. Significant relationships were found for partner (Chi-square = 18.20, df = 7, p < .02; See Table 3) and for topic (Chi-square = 19.86, df = 7, p < .01; See Table 4). Imagined interactions are most satisfying when the imagined partners are friends, prospective partners or strangers, and least satisfactory when the partners are family members or roommates. The topics associated with greatest satisfaction are dating and recreation/activities, while conflict is associated with the least satisfaction.

The final analyses compared groups of individuals reporting positive, negative, and mixed emotions on the eight scaled characteristics of imagined interaction. The univariate F-ratios revealed significant effects for the variables of activity, pleasantness, discrepancy, self-dominance, and retroactivity. No significant differences were found for proactivity, specificity or variety. Table 5 presents the Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc tests. Individuals with positive feelings reported less imagined interaction activity and less retroactivity than individuals with mixed feelings. In addition, individuals with positive feelings reported their imagined interactions were less discrepant from real interaction than individuals reporting negative feelings. They also reported less self-dominance than those with negative feelings. Individuals identifying negative feelings in their reported imagined interaction scored lower on pleasantness than did the positive and mixed groups. This finding further indicates that the specific reported imagined interaction protocol is representative of subjects' general imagined interactions with regard to affect.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to answer Arnold and Frandsen's (1984) question concerning how communicators experience themselves and others before, during, and after communication; it sought to answer this question by examining the role of mental imagery and emotion in imagined interactions. The hypothesis and first research question focused on

TABLE 3 Satisfaction by Dialogue Partner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Satisfaction</th>
<th>High Satisfaction</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dating/Romantic</td>
<td>47 (50.9)</td>
<td>54 (50.1)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-partners</td>
<td>12 (10.1)</td>
<td>8 (9.9)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>24 (17.1)</td>
<td>10 (16.9)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18 (24.7)</td>
<td>31 (24.3)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/Job</td>
<td>12 (11.1)</td>
<td>10 (10.9)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>11 (7.1)</td>
<td>3 (6.9)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority Figures</td>
<td>7 (6.5)</td>
<td>6 (6.5)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strangers/Prospective Partners</td>
<td>5 (8.6)</td>
<td>12 (8.4)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Chi-square = 18.20, df = 7, p < .02. Expected frequencies are in parentheses.
the mode of imagery and its relationship to imagined interaction characteristics and functions. Few subjects reported their mode of imagery to be primarily visual, suggesting that imagined interactions are generally propositional or verbally based. However, a comparison of subjects reporting mixed verbal and visual imagery to those who use primarily the verbal mode revealed a pattern of differences. We found that subjects reporting some visual imagery as part of their imagined interactions also report their imagined interactions to be more pleasant. However, imagined interactions that are primarily verbally based are associated with the self taking a greater role in the imagined interaction, and are used more for understanding and rehearsal of communication.

The second research question concerned emotion and imagined interaction. Mixed emotions are associated with greater imagined interaction activity and greater retroactivity than positive emotions. Negative emotions are associated with less pleasantness, more discrepancy and greater self-dominance. Particular topics and partners are associated with the satisfaction level of imagined interactions.

Imagined interactions associated with positive emotions occur less frequently and with less retroactivity than those with mixed emotions. This finding is somewhat surprising, insofar as we might expect individuals to dwell upon pleasant communicative episodes in order to extend their positive feelings. Yet our findings suggest something different. Perhaps pleasant communicative experiences, once acknowledged, are simply taken-for-granted and not recalled frequently in the form of an imagined interaction. Another possibility is that an individual’s desire for internal (emotional) consistency leads one to circumvent much review of pleasant communicative episodes in the form of imagined interaction. To do so

### TABLE 4  Satisfaction by Topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Low Satisfaction</th>
<th>High Satisfaction</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>47 (34.4)</td>
<td>18 (30.6)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>19 (23.8)</td>
<td>26 (21.2)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>13 (12.7)</td>
<td>11 (11.3)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>10 (12.2)</td>
<td>13 (10.8)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>5 (10.1)</td>
<td>14 (8.5)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>9 (9.5)</td>
<td>9 (9.5)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Talk</td>
<td>4 (5.8)</td>
<td>7 (5.2)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>11 (9.5)</td>
<td>7 (8.5)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Chi-square = 19.86, df = 7, p < .01. Expected frequencies are in parentheses.

### TABLE 5  Imagined Interaction Characteristics Associated with Positive, Negative and Mixed Emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>SNK Contracts</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>5.23 (.88)</td>
<td>5.49 (.81)</td>
<td>5.56 (.93)</td>
<td>1 &lt; 3</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasantness</td>
<td>5.19 (.79)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.06)</td>
<td>5.00 (.95)</td>
<td>1,3 &gt; 2</td>
<td>19.49</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>3.89 (.94)</td>
<td>4.27 (1.04)</td>
<td>4.05 (.96)</td>
<td>1 &lt; 2</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Dominance</td>
<td>4.55 (.88)</td>
<td>5.09 (.89)</td>
<td>4.75 (.93)</td>
<td>1,3 &lt; 2</td>
<td>7.30</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactivity</td>
<td>5.51 (1.00)</td>
<td>5.59 (.91)</td>
<td>5.64 (.92)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retroactivity</td>
<td>4.73 (1.17)</td>
<td>5.02 (1.07)</td>
<td>5.19 (1.12)</td>
<td>1 &lt; 3</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity</td>
<td>4.93 (.89)</td>
<td>4.89 (.95)</td>
<td>4.88 (.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>4.82 (.91)</td>
<td>4.82 (1.05)</td>
<td>4.69 (.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.602</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SNK ranges are for the .050 level.
might create the possibility that one would discover potentially discrepant information, therefore leading to an emotionally unpleasant state.

Imagined interactions with friends are associated with the greater satisfaction, while family members are associated with less satisfaction. Interestingly, imagined interactions with dating partners are almost equally associated with high and low satisfaction, suggesting that the romantic notion that intimate relationships are continuously pleasant is mistaken. Individuals experience both satisfaction and conflict in their relational communication; and they are likely to replay this tension within their imagined interactions, perhaps searching for the sources of relational satisfaction or ways of alleviating their interpersonal conflict. Future research might in fact explore the extent to which satisfactory and unsatisfactory imagined interactions predispose individuals to expect and/or to overlook real conflict in their relational messages.

Conflict was associated with low satisfaction with the imagined interaction. This finding may at first appear inconsequential. However, it indicates that at least some individuals do not use imagined interactions to think through their conflict toward more satisfactory conclusions by composing alternate message scenarios for future use, but instead review and rehearse the negative dimensions of actual experience. A possible deleterious effect of this tendency might be that these individuals do not learn more satisfying or more socially accommodating conflict management strategies.

These results confirm the importance of investigating emotion and mental imagery in imagined interaction. The data concerning mental imagery provide further support for Lord's (1979) and Anderson's (1983) findings that verbal cues are more efficient for encoding information about the self and that imagery is more effective for information about others. Our results reveal that the self is more likely to dominate imagined interactions when they occur in the verbal mode as opposed to a mixed mode which incorporates visual imagery. This may suggest that verbal and mixed imagined interactions are used to plan for different types of actual encounters. Verbally based imagined interactions, with the self dominating the talk, may be used to prepare for situations in which the self must present a point of view or argument, while mixed imagined interactions may relate to encounters in which the self plays a more passive or reflective role.

In addition, the results indicate that emotion is an important feature of imagined interactions. The emotion associated with imagined interactions is integrally and systematically related to the partner with whom the conversation is held and to the topic of the imagined interaction. Indeed, these findings may point to the sophisticated mental operations involved in the reduction of uncertainty related to interaction expectancy. Gilligan and Bower (1984), for instance, argue that prevailing moods influence thoughts and that particular thoughts elicit relevant mood states. Possibly, imagined interactions help individuals identify and clarify emotional responses to situations. Furthermore, Swann, Griffin, Predmore and Gaines (1987) argue that cognitive responses ultimately reconstruct affective responses. Thus, individuals who experience retroactive imagined interactions probably recast the original impression of the communicative encounter with each successive imagined interaction. In this way, individuals may use imagined interactions to reflect over the initial encounter. Such retroactive imagined interactions could also allow individuals to gain additional insights about the communicative episode. These cognitions may in turn contribute to the emotional evaluation of the past experience and thereby reduce uncertainty related to individuals' assessments concerning this experience.

This speculation is consistent with the research by Tesser and Leone (1977) who found that thinking about a person results in fostering a pedantic perspective on that person. Imagined interactions might not only afford the chance for individuals to consider the
characteristics of others, they may simultaneously strengthen emotions (and once again reduce uncertainty) associated with relational partners or situations.

These findings suggest a functional analysis of imagined interaction in relation to emotion and type of imagery, and reveal that imagined interactions may fall into two broad-based categories. Mixed imagined interactions are primarily pleasant and include visual imagery as well as verbal information. These imagined interactions include mental renderings about recreational activities and dating, but may also concern work, school, friends and small talk. These imagined interactions are more likely to take place with friends, dating partners and prospective partners. They occur less frequently, the self is less dominant and they are less likely to concern earlier occurring events compared to imagined interactions that are primarily verbally based. These kinds of imagined interactions are less similar to actual communication events compared to verbal imagined interactions.

Verbally based imagined interactions are less pleasant. These imagined interactions concern conflict and are most likely to occur with family members, roommates, and ex-relational partners. The self talks more in these imagined interactions and uses them to achieve greater understanding and to rehearse upcoming actual communication. Verbally based imagined interactions are more emotionally intense and less similar to the actual communication they represent than are mixed-imagery imagined interactions. In verbally based imagined interactions, the self may use the mental event as a forum for self-expression and control by talking more than the imagined partner.

This analysis of categories assumes that the nature of imagined interaction is a function of the situational experiences of communicators. If an individual is not engaged in particularly stressful activities or relationships, imagined interactions are likely to be of the mixed imagery variety. If the person is experiencing conflict (for example, with a family member, lover, or roommate), the accompanying mental activity reviews and/or rehearses communication in a primarily verbal mode. Clearly, this finding lends further support to the idea that imagined interaction serves an important planning function, particularly when the communicator is engaged in a conflict situation (Allen, 1990). However, taken together, these findings also suggest the rather curious prospect that individuals process conflict versus non-conflict information through different modes of representation. We say curious because one might hope that individuals engaged in conflict would activate and search various dimensions of recalled or anticipated experience in order to gain more information and thereby reduce uncertainty about the conflict situation, rather than depending on a single mode. Reduction of uncertainty through multi-mode processing, it could be argued, would better help to alleviate the conflict situation. But our analysis indicates that individuals experiencing relational conflict rely upon the single mode of verbal processing. This leads us to suspect either that the verbal mode entails certain unaccounted for advantages to interpreting conflict information, or that individuals reveal a general mental “laziness” when it comes to examining conflict information through multi-mode means.

The present study examined the nature of mental imagery and emotions in imagined interactions. Future research should compare primarily visual imagery with the verbal and mixed modes to clarify their similarities and differences. It might also explore the visual cues of imagined interactions in more detail to determine whether they include subtle nonverbal behaviors of interactants and whether these cues influence the verbal interaction. The present analysis also suggests that the mode of representation in imagined interactions is a function of the topic and the purpose of that imagined interaction. However, future research might consider the extent to which these modes of representation are related to certain cognitive styles or personality variables. Some individuals may be more inclined toward using visual imagery in their mental processing than others. Finally, the “vividness”
of imagined interactions can be examined. Nisbett and Ross (1980) argue that the vividness of information processed by actors is a function of its emotional impact, its concreteness, and the nature of the images elicited by this information. One might argue that the intensity (i.e., the vividness) of negative or positive emotions are associated with specific kinds of mental images constructed in imagined interactions, and that these images go on to affect planning or expectancy formation.

FOOTNOTES

1Fewer than 35 subjects completed the questionnaire outside of class. T-tests and crosstabulations revealed no differences with subjects who completed the questionnaire in-class. Future research may examine the effect of the presence of others on responses to the survey of imagined interaction using larger sample sizes.

REFERENCES


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