

## CHAPTER 14

# Partner Knowledge and Relationship Outcomes

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Individuals base some of life's most important decisions on the knowledge they have—or *assume* they have—about themselves, close others, and the world around them. Most of the chapters in this book address how knowledge about the self impacts a diverse array of important life outcomes. In this chapter, our primary focus is somewhat different. Instead of focusing on people's beliefs about their *own* traits, attitudes, and emotions, we focus on people's beliefs about the traits, attitudes, and emotions of their romantic partners, which eventually become part of the self, as well as their relationship beliefs, which help to define the self. We review how knowledge about one's current romantic relationship and especially one's romantic partner (e.g., what individuals believe their partner is thinking or feeling during important social interactions) is associated with significant relationship outcomes, such as how satisfied individuals are and whether their relationship is likely to endure. As we shall see, knowledge about partners and the relationship exists at different levels, ranging from specific inferences about what one's romantic partner is thinking or feeling at specific moments during a critical discussion to more global assessments of a partner's defining traits and personal attributes. One of our primary goals is to explain how and *why* accurate versus inaccurate knowledge of the *partner* at different levels of measurement is related to important relationship outcomes.

The chapter has four sections. In the first section, we discuss how people typically acquire knowledge about their partners and relationships, focusing on the concepts of relationship awareness (Acitelli, 2002) and minding in relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997, 1999). In the second section, we review what has been learned about the "knowing process," highlighting recent research on self-expansion processes in close relationships (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). The third section examines the

conditions under which accuracy and bias affect partner and relationship knowledge. We focus on the importance of the “global bias, specific accuracy” pattern for good relationship functioning (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005), as well as how mean-level bias and “tracking accuracy” (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010) can influence relationship outcomes. The fourth section, which is the centerpiece of the chapter, addresses how *empathic accuracy*—the degree to which an individual accurately infers what his or her partner is thinking or feeling during an important social interaction—is linked to relationship outcomes. We review Ickes and Simpson’s (1997, 2001) empathic accuracy model, and then discuss several laboratory studies that have tested predictions derived from this model.

## Acquiring Relationship Knowledge

Various authors have theorized about the different ways in which individuals acquire knowledge about their partners and relationships. These theoretical approaches incorporate similar components and address similar outcomes, but they vary in their scope and emphasis. In this section, we review two major theories of the relationship knowledge acquisition processes: Acitelli’s (2002) model of relationship awareness, and Harvey and Omarzu’s (1997) theory of minding.

### Relationship Awareness

At its most basic level, relationship awareness involves paying attention to one’s relationships by thinking or talking about them with others. In the 1980s, several studies documented positive relations between romantic partners’ relationship satisfaction and their self- and partner-related awareness (e.g., Franzoi, Davis, & Young, 1985). Inspired by these preliminary findings, Acitelli (2002) developed a process model to organize existing research linking relationship awareness with satisfaction. Acitelli’s model of *relationship awareness* incorporates individual, situational, and sociocultural factors that influence relationship awareness and its connection to relationship satisfaction (see Figure 14.1).

It is easiest to work through the model starting with factors that exist prior to two individuals meeting or interacting, specifically their individual characteristics and predispositions (2A, 2B in Figure 14.1). These individual factors can influence each person’s thoughts about the self, the partner, and the relationship (3A, 3B), which in turn can influence the partners’ discussions about their relationship (3X). These discussions can also feed back to influence each individual’s thoughts (3A, 3B). This tendency to think about the relationship constitutes “relationship awareness.” Over time, relationship awareness can impact each individual’s satisfaction with the relationship (4A, 4B), which typically influences relationship stability (4X).

This entire relationship awareness process takes place within a broader sociocultural context; that is, sociocultural factors can affect how relationship-oriented discussions feed back on relationship awareness, how relationship awareness is related to satisfaction, or any other processes outlined in the model. Acitelli (2002) describes five sociocultural factors that are most likely to influence relationship awareness: ethnicity, acculturation, sex role ideology, religiosity, and socioeconomic status (1A, 1B

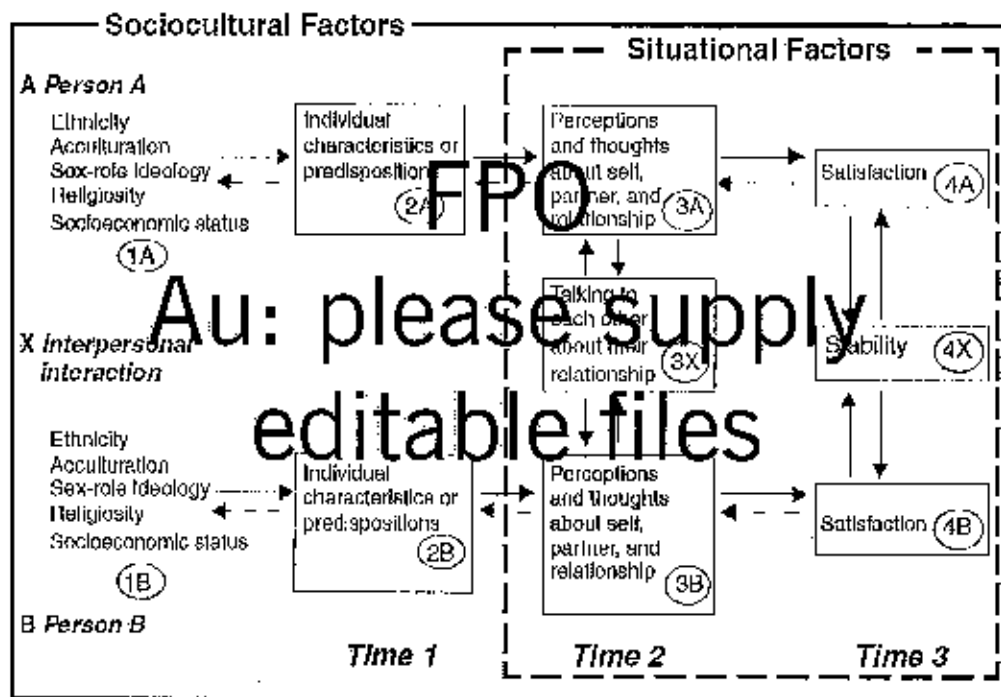


FIGURE 14.1. Acitelli's (2002) model of relationship awareness.

in Figure 14.1). The relative importance of these factors and the degree to which they affect relationship outcomes varies across individuals and relationships.

Working through the entire model (from left to right in Figure 14.1), individuals are raised in certain cultures and are socialized to hold certain values and beliefs (1A, 1B). These sociocultural factors impact individuals' characteristics (2A, 2B) to varying degrees. When two individuals meet, they become aware of their relationship (3A, 3B) and eventually begin to talk about it (3X). These discussions frequently have an impact on the subsequent thoughts that individuals have about themselves, their partner, and/or the relationship (3A, 3B), which contributes to greater relationship awareness. Over time, relationship awareness can affect each individual's satisfaction with the relationship (4A, 4B), which in turn affects the long-term stability of the relationship (4X). This entire process always takes place within a specific sociocultural milieu that can influence one or several steps of the relationship awareness process.

Acitelli and her colleagues have tested various components of the relationship awareness model. Most of this research, however, has focused on one individual factor: gender. For example, Acitelli (1988) has found that women view relationship-oriented discussions as serving different functions and purposes than men do; women value talking about their relationships in pleasant and unpleasant situations, whereas men value relationship talk only as an instrumental means to solve problems. This gender difference may explain why women are generally more aware of their relationships than most men are (Acitelli & Holmberg, 1993). Research has also revealed that relational variables, especially relationship-oriented talk, are more important to

women's than to men's well-being and relationship satisfaction (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). However, the link between relationship awareness and relationship satisfaction tends to be driven more by relational identity than by biological sex (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999). Therefore, this link is perhaps stronger for women because they have a more relationship-oriented sense of self (Acitelli & Holmberg, 1993).

The proposition that women are more aware of their relationships is somewhat at odds with other theorizing and research on relationship and partner knowledge. Harvey and Omarzu (1999), for example, do not think that there are overall differences between men and women in minding activities. Additionally, Tekes (2003) has not found consistent gender differences in his extensive research on empathic accuracy. Indeed, some of the gender differences found by Acitelli and colleagues may be a by-product of the specific types of behaviors they have measured rather than global differences in relationship awareness. Acitelli and colleagues have typically defined *attending* to one's relationship as talking or thinking about the relationship. Men, however, may attend to their relationships through shared activities with their partners (Wood & Inman, 1993). By broadening their exploration of relationship awareness to include shared activities, Acitelli and Carlson (1997) found that attending to the relationship was associated with positive relationship outcomes for both sexes. Therefore, it appears that both men and women are aware of their relationships; they may just go about achieving this awareness in different ways.

### ***Minding in Relationships***

Whereas Acitelli's (2002) relationship awareness model incorporates both the predictors and consequences of *relationship-oriented* thoughts and discussions, Harvey and Omarzu's (1997, 1999) theory of minding focuses specifically on *partner-oriented* thoughts, attributions, and behaviors. Harvey and Omarzu (1997, p. 224) define *minding* as a "reciprocal knowing process" in relationships, one that incorporates thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that facilitate closeness and relationship stability. Minding has five components: (1) behaviors facilitating disclosure, (2) relationship-enhancing attributions, (3) acceptance and respect, (4) reciprocity, and (5) continuity.

The first component of minding involves *behaviors that facilitate the knowing process*, particularly those that encourage disclosure on the part of one's partner. By attentively listening and responding to partners when they disclose information, individuals can create an environment that promotes further disclosure, in terms of both the breadth and depth of topics discussed. Self-disclosure, coupled with behaviors that facilitate partner disclosure, ultimately fosters greater intimacy between relationship partners. However, simply gaining knowledge about one's partner does not, by itself, constitute minding.

Individuals must also make *relationship-enhancing attributions* for their partners' statements and behaviors; that is, in well-minded relationships, individuals perceive their partners' relationship-relevant behaviors as being caring and well intentioned. One way to accomplish this is to attribute negative behaviors enacted by one's partner to fleeting, external causes (e.g., "She yelled at me because she had a bad day at work") and to attribute positive behaviors to stable, internal causes (e.g., "He made dinner because he cares about me"; Harvey, Pauwels, & Zickmund, 2002). In

well-minded relationships, individuals use their knowledge about their partners in the careful formulation of attributions regarding their partners' behaviors.

Other important aspects of the minding process involve *acceptance* of newly acquired information about one's partner as well as *respect* for the sensitivity and privacy of the information. Sustained self-disclosure relies heavily on trusting one's partner to not take advantage of the disclosed information; therefore, acceptance and respect are especially important early in relationship development. Additionally, the minding process must be *reciprocal*. Continued imbalances between partners in the degree of minding may cause one partner to feel a sense of dependence or obligation and may cause the other partner to feel taken advantage of. An imbalance in minding may also make relationship-enhancing attributions more difficult to do, as one partner may conclude that the other is not motivated or able to engage in minding behaviors. Most importantly, reciprocity facilitates the last component of minding: *continuity*. It usually takes considerable time to establish the minding process and, once established, the process remains ongoing. Because individuals change over time, relationship partners must continually update their knowledge of each other. As Harvey and colleagues (2002) conclude, "minding is a process . . . not an ultimate destination" (p. 429).

Most of the evidence supporting the minding model has been indirect, typically through research exploring concepts related to the five components of minding. For example, Gottman (1994) has found that couples who engage in positive social behaviors tend to be more satisfied in their relationships. This includes respect for and acceptance of partners' thoughts and feelings during social interactions, which can also help prevent the types of negative behaviors that are often destructive to relationships. Indeed, acceptance and respect are the basis for a form of marital therapy known as *acceptance therapy*, which is effective with couples who have been unsuccessful with other forms of therapy (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Instead of trying to change behavioral patterns, acceptance therapy focuses on accepting a partner's traits and behaviors that one has found annoying in the past. This technique is consistent with Harvey and Omarzu's (1997) emphasis on accepting partners' flaws and having accurate partner representations. Additionally, the importance of reciprocity in minding is supported by research showing that individuals in inequitable relationships are less satisfied than those who view their relationships as more equitable (Van Yperen & Buunk, 1991). Although Harvey and Omarzu (1999) review other preliminary evidence that supports their model of minding, most hypotheses regarding connections between various components or potential outcomes of minding have not been directly tested.

## Outcomes of the Knowing Process

Both Acitelli (2002) and Harvey and Omarzu (1997, 1999) discuss how increased partner- and relationship-oriented knowledge can increase closeness between romantic partners. Once a certain degree of closeness has been achieved, relationships may also begin to affect how individuals perceive themselves. One prominent theoretical model that addresses how and why relationships can affect self-perception processes and vice versa is the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 2001).

### **The Self-Expansion Model**

According to the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 2001), when an individual enters a close relationship, the social, informational, and material qualities of the relationship partner become, in some respects, one's own qualities. According to this model, individuals are motivated in part to forge close relationships because these newly acquired qualities can bolster one's self-efficacy and competence. An unconscious by-product of this blending of resources and qualities is a restructuring of the cognitive system, such that the perspectives and identities of the relationship partner become incorporated into one's *own* self-representation. This phenomenon is called *inclusion of other in the self*. These overlapping cognitive representations between the self and other are a hallmark of close relationships. Indeed, according to the model, this overlap is what it means to be close to another person (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

### **Evidence for Self-Expansion**

The self-expansion model claims that individuals experience a broadening of the self-concept when a new relationship is formed. This "broadening of the self" often should result in greater self-efficacy and higher self-esteem. To test this premise, Aron, Paris, and Aron (1995) followed individuals who were likely to meet a new partner and fall in love (first-year and second-year undergraduates) for 10 weeks. Aron and his colleagues found that individuals who had fallen in love developed more diverse self-concepts and showed more self-concept change than did those who had not fallen in love. In addition, individuals who had fallen in love experienced increases in self-efficacy and self-esteem.

If people typically experience self-expansion after entering a new romantic relationship, it stands to reason that the self should also "contract" when a close relationship dissolves. Indeed, Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, and Kunak (2006) found that individuals who had recently lost a self-expanding relationship experienced a considerable contraction of the self-concept. Viewed together, these two lines of research indicate that close relationships can and do play important roles in both the expansion and contraction of individuals' self-concepts.

### **Including the Other in the Self**

According to the self-expansion model, closeness blurs distinctions between one's own resources and one's partner's resources. Indeed, research by Aron and colleagues (1991) suggests that individuals tend to forgo personal financial gains in order to allocate money equitably to close others, suggesting that individuals may view the resources of close others as if they are their own resources. They also found that participants allocated equal amounts of money to themselves and their best friends, even when they knew that their friends did not know how the money was divided up and could not reciprocate the gesture.

Additional research suggests that this "blurring of distinction" between self and other is pervasive. In fact, we often perceive the world from the perspective of close others. Aron and his colleagues (1991) tested this hypothesis using a clever noun-

recollection paradigm. They reasoned that when individuals perceive the world from the first person (an individual-centered perspective), objects are the figure and they are the ground (e.g., when one imagine oneself holding a cup, one attends to the cup, which is the figure). However, when individuals watch others interacting with objects, the actor and the object are both the figure. Thus, when individuals imagine themselves interacting with objects, their memories for these objects are poorer than their memories for imagined objects interacted with by others. Aron and colleagues reasoned that if individuals view the world from the perspective of their partners, then their recollection of imagined objects interacted with by their partners should be as poor as their recollection for imagined objects interacted with by themselves because, in both cases, the actor should be more ground-like. This is precisely what they found. Thus, individuals tend to view the world through the eyes of close others.

In addition to perceiving the world from the vantage point of close others, individuals may also begin to incorporate their cognitive representations of their partners into their own cognitive representations. One implication of this is that individuals may, at times, confuse themselves with their partners. Consistent with this logic, individuals find it more difficult to identify traits that are distinctive to their partners (i.e., traits their partners have that they themselves do not have) than traits that are distinctive to non-close others (Aron et al., 1991). Mashek, Aron, and Boncimino (2003) asked participants to rate traits according to how well each trait described the self, a close other, and a non-close other. Later, participants were asked to recall which person each trait best described. Individuals displayed more source confusions between the traits of close others and the self (i.e., erroneously claiming that a trait rated as highly descriptive of a close other earlier was descriptive of the self) than between the traits of non-close others and the self. Importantly, closeness, rather than familiarity or similarity, was responsible for these effects.

## Accuracy and Bias in Relationship Beliefs

Not all of the information that people acquire about their partners or relationships is accurate. The consequences of holding accurate versus inaccurate representations of one's partner have been hotly debated in the relationships literature. Some researchers have claimed that positive relationship outcomes are associated with accurate perceptions of relationship partners (e.g., Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Others have concluded that harboring "positive illusions" of one's partner is critical to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Recent work, however, suggests that these two views are not mutually exclusive; both accurate and positively biased partner perceptions may be systematically related to positive relationship outcomes.

Luo and Snider (2009), for example, examined accuracy, similarity bias, and positivity bias in four domains (the Big Five, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, emotional expressivity, and attachment styles) as possible determinants of relationship satisfaction. They found that all three perceptual processes contributed to relationship satisfaction. Specifically, positivity bias was associated with greater satisfaction with the self, whereas accuracy and similarity bias predicted both self-

satisfaction and the partner's satisfaction. Thus, both accuracy and bias can have beneficial effects on relationship outcomes.

### **Global Bias, Specific Accuracy**

Other researchers have investigated the operation of accuracy and bias at different levels of abstraction. Neff and Karney (2002, 2005), for example, distinguish between accuracy and bias for specific versus global evaluations of one's partner. Adopting this perspective, they have found that individuals in satisfying marriages tend to describe their spouses' positive traits in broader, more global terms. Conversely, happy individuals tend to be more specific when describing their partners' negative qualities. Individuals in satisfying marriages also tend to be more accurate about their partners' specific traits than their global traits (Neff & Karney, 2002).

To investigate the impact that deviation from the "specific accuracy/global bias" pattern has on relationship outcomes, Neff and Karney (2005) followed newlyweds over time. They found that nearly all newlyweds held similarly positive perceptions of their partners' global traits. However, there was more variation in newlyweds' perceptions of their partners' specific traits. For example, wives' (but not husbands') accurate perceptions of their spouses' specific qualities predicted more positive relationship outcomes, such as more supportive behavior and a lower likelihood of eventual divorce. This pattern of results suggests that the most successful relationships are based on global adoration of the relationship partner coupled with a realistic recognition of his or her unique strengths and weaknesses.

### **Mean-Level Bias and Tracking Accuracy**

In a recent meta-analysis, Fletcher and Kerr (2010) distinguish between two independent forms of accuracy: mean-level bias and tracking accuracy. *Mean-level bias* reflects mean differences between the perceived qualities of one's partner and his or her actual qualities. *Tracking accuracy*, in contrast, is the extent to which correlations among a set of qualities are correctly perceived (similar to profile correlations). Consider the following example (adapted from Fletcher, 2002) of a hypothetical couple, Mary and Stephen. On Likert-type scales (where 1 = *not at all like my partner* and 7 = *very much like my partner*), Mary rates Stephen as highly sensitive (7), very warm (6), very sexy (6), and moderately ambitious (5). Now assume that we have another set of valid benchmark ratings of Stephen that represent *perfectly* valid and accurate ratings of him. These benchmark ratings are sensitive (6), warm (5), sexy (5), and ambitious (4). Comparing the two sets of ratings, Mary has a positively biased but fairly accurate view of Stephen; that is, the mean level of Mary's judgments (6) is one unit higher than the mean of the valid benchmark ratings (5), yet her ratings accurately track (perfectly parallel) the benchmark traits ( $r = 1.0$ ). If, however, Mary gave Stephen ratings of 6, 7, 5, and 6, respectively, this would reflect the same level of positivity bias (because the mean level of her judgments are still one unit higher), but no accuracy (because these judgments do not track the relative levels across the different traits).

Using this definition of accuracy and bias, Fletcher and Kerr's (2010) meta-analysis revealed a substantial and reliable effect size of tracking accuracy across



98 studies of relationship partners ( $r = .47$ ). The effect size of positive mean-level bias across 48 studies was also reliable, but somewhat lower ( $r = .09$ ). Fletcher and Kerr also found positive mean-level bias for personality traits as well as relationship-relevant memories and predictions. With respect to individuals' perceptions of their partners' relationship-relevant beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, they found *negative* mean-level bias. These findings make sense from the perspective of error management theory (Haselton & Buss, 2000), in that people might have more to lose by being positively biased about the degree to which a relationship partner loves them and forgives them for their transgressions. In the case of personality traits, memories, and predictions, there is little to lose (and, in fact, possibly much to gain) by holding such positive biases.

The Fletcher and Kerr (2010) meta-analysis also found that greater positive mean-level bias was associated with more positive perceptions of relationship quality, whereas tracking accuracy was unrelated to perceived relationship quality. This effect, however, was moderated by the stage of the relationship. Specifically, the connection between relationship satisfaction and positive mean-level biases decreased with relationship length. This suggests that when a relationship is blossoming and passion runs high, individuals are more motivated to be positively biased about their partners/relationships. This positive bias early in relationships may serve an adaptive function, insofar as it fosters closer bonds between new partners. However, as the relationship develops and passionate love is displaced by companionate love, positive biases toward the partner/relationship become less critical in maintaining relationship quality.

In summary, the Fletcher and Kerr (2010) meta-analysis reveals that individuals tend to be quite accurate in their perceptions of their relationship partners, at least with regard to the specific relations *among* their partners' traits. A certain degree of bias is also beneficial to relationship outcomes, at least when relationships are new. As relationships develop, however, bias tends to become more weakly related to overall perceptions of relationship quality.

## Partner Knowledge in Relationships: Empathic Accuracy

When individuals interact with their romantic partners, the information they usually "act on" is not necessarily what their partners thought, felt, or did; it is what they *perceive* their partners thought, felt, or did. For this reason, it is important to understand where "partner knowledge" comes from, as well as the circumstances in which it is "acted upon" in relationship contexts.

Empathic accuracy (Ickes, 2001) reflects the extent to which an individual accurately infers what his or her partner is thinking and feeling during a given social interaction. Although greater empathic accuracy tends to be associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability in situations that pose little or no threat to relationships (e.g., Kahn, 1970; Noller, 1980), empathic accuracy is associated with *less* satisfaction and *less* stability in many relationship-threatening situations (e.g., Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). At first blush, these findings seem somewhat counterintuitive given that relationship threats could be more easily defused or better resolved if each partner simply understood what the other was thinking and feeling more accurately.

To resolve this paradox, Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) developed a model of how relationship partners “manage” their levels of empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening versus nonthreatening contexts. As we shall see, the model identifies conditions under which (1) empathic accuracy should help relationships (the general rule); (2) empathic accuracy should hurt relationships (the major exception to the rule); and (3) empathic *in*accuracy may buffer individuals and relationships from potential harm (a complement of the exception to the rule).

### **The Empathic Accuracy Model**

According to the empathic accuracy model (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001), the upper and lower limits of empathic accuracy during a specific interaction are constrained by (1) each partner’s “readability” (i.e., the degree to which he or she displays cues that reflect his or her true internal states), and (2) each partner’s empathic ability (i.e., the degree to which he or she can accurately read his or her partner’s valid behavioral cues). Within these boundaries, however, empathic accuracy can be managed differently depending on the context of an interaction. The interaction contexts that are most relevant to the empathic accuracy model are shown in Figure 14.2.

When relationship partners enter a situation, each individual first determines whether it might be a *danger zone* to the relationship. Danger zones are sensitive topic areas to one or both partners. In these areas, insights or revelations that emerge might easily threaten the relationship if a perceiver accurately inferred his or her partner’s actual thoughts and feelings.

At the first branching point of the model, perceivers must decide whether a danger zone issue is present or might emerge in the situation. If perceivers believe they will discuss issues that are *not* relationship-threatening (see the right-hand side of Figure 14.2), they should be motivated to be empathically accurate, personal and relational distress should remain low, and the relationship should remain stable. That is, to the extent that (1) mutual understanding facilitates the coordination of joint actions so personal and relational goals can be achieved, and (2) the behaviors needed to achieve accurate understanding have been reinforced over time, most perceivers should be motivated to achieve moderately high levels of empathic accuracy in most non-relationship-threatening situations (see the far right-hand path of Figure 14.2). More specifically, in situations where danger zones are not likely to occur (e.g., during everyday conversations about nonthreatening issues), perceivers should adopt an “accuracy” orientation that allows them to clarify minor misunderstandings, keep disagreements from boiling over, and gain a clearer understanding of their partners’ views on these issues. These tendencies, in turn, should maintain or sometimes even enhance relationship satisfaction and stability (see the middle-right portion of Figure 14.2).

However, perceivers are not always motivated to attend to their partner’s thoughts and feelings, especially during interactions that are routine and become habitual (Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). In these habitual and non-threatening interactions, the perceivers’ levels of empathic accuracy should be moderate rather than high (see the lower right-hand side of Figure 14.2). Nonetheless, empathic accuracy should still be associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability in these

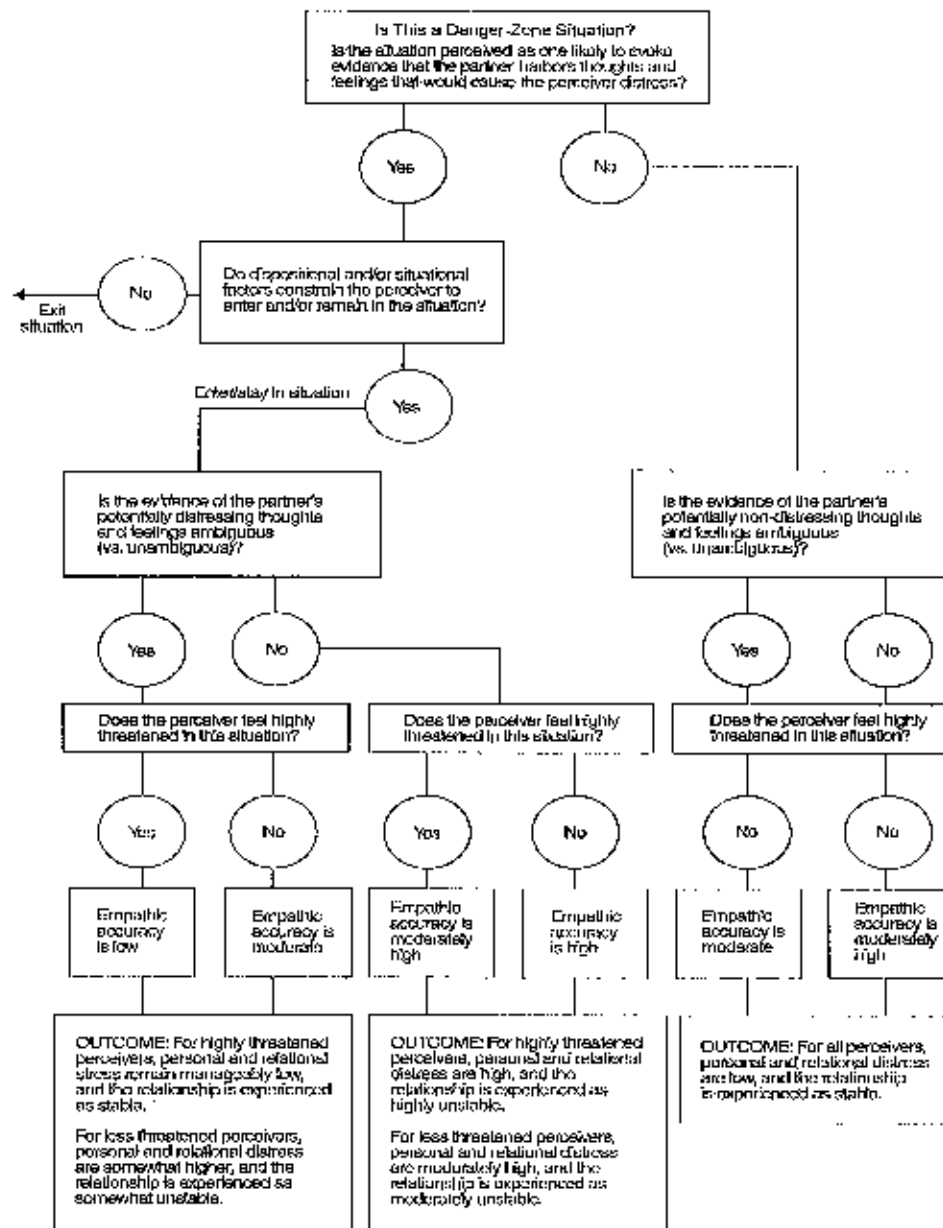


FIGURE 14.2. Ickes and Simpson's (2001) empathic accuracy model.

situations, consistent with the general rule that *greater empathic accuracy should help relationships* in benign, nonthreatening situations.

However, there are times when individuals encounter situations in which danger zone topics or issues could emerge and might destabilize their relationships (see the left-hand side of Figure 14.2). When these situations are encountered, most perceivers should try to avoid or escape from them if they can; that is, averting or escaping from danger zone situations should be the first tactic that most perceivers attempt to use to manage their empathic accuracy because doing so allows perceivers to avoid having to deal with evidence that their partner might be harboring relationship-damaging thoughts or feelings.

Avoiding or escaping danger zone issues, of course, is not always possible (see the left and middle portions of Figure 14.2). When perceivers must remain in a relationship-threatening situation, their second tactic should be *motivated inaccuracy*—a conscious or unconscious failure to infer accurately the potentially harmful thoughts and feelings that their partners might be having. Motivated inaccuracy is most likely to be an effective tactic when relationship threats are temporary or fleeting, they cannot be easily fixed or resolved, and they are unlikely to occur again in the future. The success of this strategy should hinge on the degree to which the cues of the partner's potentially damaging thoughts and feelings are ambiguous versus unambiguous. If the cues are ambiguous (see the middle left-hand side of Figure 14.2), perceivers can use motivated inaccuracy as a defensive tactic. By disregarding, distorting, or reframing potentially threatening information, or by using other psychological defenses, such as denial, repression, or rationalization, individuals can shelter themselves from the threatening implications of their partners' private thoughts and feelings, resulting in low (and sometimes very low) levels of empathic accuracy. The selective use of these defenses may benefit perceivers and their relationships by minimizing personal and relational distress, thereby keeping the relationship more stable over time. The left-hand portion of the model illustrates this logical complement of the major exception to the general rule—that *motivated inaccuracy can sometimes sustain relationships faced with threat*.

### Tests of the Empathic Accuracy Model

There have been several formal tests of the empathic accuracy model, the most relevant of which are discussed below. Simpson and colleagues (1995) first documented the use of motivated inaccuracy in relationship-threatening situations. They recruited heterosexual dating couples and asked each individual (partner) to view, rate, and then discuss slides of opposite-sex people on measures of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal *with his or her partner*. Dating partners completed this task while seated next to one another. Half of the couples were randomly assigned to view slides of highly attractive people (the high-threat condition), and half viewed less attractive people (the low-threat condition). After stating the attractiveness and sexual appeal rating of each stimulus person aloud (on a 1- to 10-point scale), the dating partner who made the rating then discussed what he or she liked or disliked about each stimulus person with his or her partner. After the rating and discussion task, each partner watched his or her videotaped session and reported when during the interaction he or she had a specific thought or feeling. The partner then watched

the videotape and tried to infer each thought or feeling reported by his or her partner, which was the measure of each partner's level of empathic accuracy during the interaction.

In line with the empathic accuracy model, partners in the high-threat condition were more empathically *inaccurate* than those in the low-threat condition. In other words, when confronted with a somewhat ambiguous situation that might pose a threat to their relationships (i.e., rating highly attractive opposite-sex people in the presence of their partner), individuals choose to not "get in the heads" of their partners. Given the temporary and inescapable nature of this threatening situation, individuals reacted as if it were more important to keep the interaction pleasant and amicable rather than recognize the lustful thoughts and feelings that their partners might be having about the highly attractive stimulus persons they were evaluating. Four months later, *all* of the couples in this specific condition were still dating, whereas nearly 30% of the other couples in the study had broken up. Thus, by *inaccurately inferring* the relationship-threatening thoughts of their partners, individuals in the high-threat condition were able both to avoid unnecessary unpleasantness in the short run and to keep their relationships stable in the long run.

What happens when individuals are in relationship-threatening situations but cannot use motivated inaccuracy as a tactic to reduce threat? According to the empathic accuracy model (see the middle section of Figure 14.2), when cues signaling the relationship-threatening content of the partner's thoughts and feelings are unambiguous (e.g., the partner states he or she is having an extramarital affair), the sheer clarity of this information should force perceivers to have at least moderately high empathic accuracy, which should be followed by sharp declines in relationship satisfaction and stability. In this situation, greater empathic accuracy should actually harm relationships. However, because perceivers are forced to be accurate by virtue of the clarity of the available information, it is not a case in which *motivated* accuracy hurts relationships.

*Motivated accuracy* occurs when perceivers have a strong personal need to "know the truth" about what a partner is really thinking and feeling. As we discuss below, individuals who harbor insecurities about their value or worth as romantic partners (e.g., anxiously attached or low self-esteem individuals) should be particularly likely to display motivated accuracy. This special case is not shown in Figure 14.2. Need-based or disposition-based accuracy motives might occasionally override the initial tendency to avoid danger zone issues or to use motivated inaccuracy to dampen short-term relationship threats. These situations are a special case of the major exception to the general rule—that *motivated accuracy can hurt relationships when partners' thoughts and feelings are relationship-threatening*, just as unmotivated (situationally constrained) accuracy can.

The first study to demonstrate motivated accuracy was conducted by Simpson, Ickes, and Grich (1999). After recoding and reanalyzing the Simpson and colleagues (1995) dataset, Simpson and his colleagues (1999) found that more anxiously attached women were the most empathically accurate when their relationships were *most* threatened. Being more empathically accurate at "the worst times" led these women to report and experience the greatest emotional distress. Thus, by failing to rely on a motivated *inaccuracy* strategy in this relationship-threatening context, highly anxious women suffered considerable emotional costs.

Other research has confirmed that higher levels of empathic accuracy forecast larger pre- to postdiscussion declines in the feelings of closeness during stressful discussions. Simpson, Oriña, and Ickes (2003) videotaped married couples as they attempted to resolve a nagging problem in their marriage. Consistent with the empathic accuracy model, when the partner's thoughts and feelings were relationship-threatening (rated by both partners and trained observers), heightened empathic accuracy on the part of the perceiver predicted larger pre- to postdiscussion declines in the perceiver's feelings of subjective closeness to his or her partner/relationship. The reverse was true when the partner's thoughts and feelings were nonthreatening.

The tendency to use motivated accuracy or motivated inaccuracy tactics should be associated with certain individual differences, especially anxious and avoidant attachment orientations. Highly avoidant individuals are motivated to maintain independence and autonomy in their close relationships, and one way they do so is by limiting the amount of personal information they know about their romantic partners (Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, & Friedman, 2007). Highly anxious individuals, in contrast, are motivated to become closer and feel more secure in their relationships, which they accomplish by more closely monitoring their romantic partners when they (anxious individuals) feel threatened (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Simpson and colleagues (2011) conducted two social interaction studies to test how highly anxious and highly avoidant people managed empathic accuracy in discussions that differed in level of threat. In one study, married couples discussed threatening or nonthreatening relationship problems that centered on intimacy or jealousy issues; in the second study, dating couples tried to resolve a major or minor conflict in their relationship. In both studies, highly avoidant people displayed lower levels of empathic accuracy than less avoidant (more secure) people on average. The empathic accuracy levels of some highly avoidant participants, in fact, were barely above zero, reflecting complete inaccuracy. Many avoidant people, in other words, simply refused to "get into the heads" of their partners in order to maintain comfortable psychological distance. Across both studies, highly anxious individuals displayed greater empathic accuracy than less anxious (more secure) individuals, but only when they discussed relationship-threatening issues, illustrating motivated accuracy. Perhaps in an attempt to protect themselves or their relationships from exposure to harmful information, less anxious (more secure) people experienced slight decreases in empathic accuracy when relationship-threatening problems were being discussed, illustrating motivated inaccuracy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what people know—or what they *believe* they know—about their partners and their relationships can have a strong bearing on the quality and stability of their romantic relationships. According to the empathic accuracy model, relationships should be happier and more stable when partners display motivated inaccuracy in *select* situations (Ickes & Simpson, 2001), especially those that pose temporary problems that cannot be "fixed" and are not likely to reoccur (Simpson et al., 1995). Not everyone, however, is able or willing to use this "turn a blind eye" tactic. Motivated accuracy is more likely to be the tactic of choice by some, such as

highly anxious individuals, who feel compelled to know exactly what their partners are thinking and feeling, especially in relationship-threatening contexts (Simpson et al., 2011). Across time, we suspect that relationships may benefit the most from a situationally sensitive mix of controlled confrontation and discreet circumvention with respect to what one's partner is thinking and feeling in different situations. Highly secure individuals, who are motivated to build deeper and well-balanced intimacy with their romantic partners, may be most adept at managing this situational mix, knowing when to "turn on" and "turn off" partner monitoring.

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