

Chapter 11

MOTIVATED INACCURACY: PAST AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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In June of 1991, Bill Ickes and Jeff Simpson were sitting on a sandbar in Nags Head, North Carolina. While watching the waves hit the shore following a long day of conference talks, Bill recounted a story he had heard about a married man involved in a long-term extramarital affair. By all accounts, the man's wife was totally oblivious to his "extracurricular activities." She did *not* detect rather visible cues of his affair, such as unusual credit card charges and occasional "unexplained" time lapses. She was also oblivious to what her husband was constantly thinking about on a daily basis—his lover rather than her. It was almost as if she did not want to know what her husband was actually thinking and feeling, perhaps to protect what was left of her marriage or her self-esteem. A few moments after the story was finished, Jeff turned to Bill and said: "I wonder whether we could test this phenomenon in the lab with actual romantic couples?" The concept of motivated empathic inaccuracy was born.

As discussed in other chapters in this volume, empathic accuracy reflects the extent to which an individual accurately infers what his or her partner is thinking and feeling during a social interaction. An important feature of this definition is that empathic inferences center on states that exist *within* the partner (e.g., a target other's private thoughts, feelings, beliefs, moods) rather than characteristics that are external or visible (e.g., his or her physical attractiveness, stated attitudes or opinions). Empathic accuracy is one of several skills (e.g., nonverbal decoding, knowledge of what counts as tact and discretion in particular situations) that are collectively described as interpersonal sensitivity; these abilities and tendencies enable people to make appropriately nuanced responses to other people's words and actions.

Motivated empathic accuracy is evident when an individual has an incentive to accurately infer what her/his partner is thinking or feeling in a social interaction, based on certain features of the perceiver, the topic or issue being discussed, or the nature of the relationship. In this case, the perceiver's level of empathic accuracy is significantly higher than those displayed by other people in the same situation. In contrast, *motivated empathic inaccuracy* (the primary focus of this chapter) occurs when an individual has an incentive to *not* accurately infer what his or her partner is thinking or feeling, resulting in an empathic accuracy score that is significantly lower than those exhibited by others in the same situation.

In previous chapters, Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) have focused on two key relationship outcomes—relationship satisfaction and stability—that should be associated with different levels of empathic accuracy in certain social situations. They have also addressed how certain types of relationship-threatening events (e.g., attractive alternative partners) should affect empathic accuracy levels; how empathic accuracy levels may change across the course of a relationship; and some of the benefits and costs of being empathically *inaccurate* in certain situations. Nearly all of this prior theoretical and empirical work, however, has focused on established romantic couples and has used the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm (Ickes, Bissonette, et al., 1990) in conjunction with the standard empathic accuracy assessment procedure (Ickes, 2001; Ickes, Stinson, et al., 1990). In addition, there has been a limited consideration of how individual differences might moderate empathic accuracy or inaccuracy effects. Although there are a few notable exceptions to these underdeveloped areas of study (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, and Grich, 1999), these areas warrant further study, especially with respect to the phenomenon of motivated empathic inaccuracy.

Accordingly, the primary goal of this chapter is to move beyond prior research on motivated inaccuracy to generate new ideas and encourage further work in this fertile area. Several important questions remain unanswered. For example, what types of threats trigger the motivation to be empathically inaccurate? What types of individuals involved in what kinds of relationships are most likely to display empathic inaccuracy? Can motivated inaccuracy be conceptualized in different ways to better understand the role that it plays in different types of relationships? And how might additional research methods be used to inform and expand the kinds of questions one can ask about motivated inaccuracy?

Given its centrality to the theme of this chapter, we begin by reviewing the core tenets of the Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes and Simpson, 1997, 2001). We then discuss (a) how motivated inaccuracy is likely to emerge during different relationship stages; (b) how it may occur in response to partners' attempts to "redefine" relationships; and (c) how the construct of motivated inaccuracy might be explored using new and emerging research methodologies. As our focus on different relationship stages suggests, we believe that the Empathic Accuracy Model is relevant to all stages of relationships, from the initial acquaintance between two strangers to the intimate interactions of long-term married or cohabiting couples.

THE EMPATHIC ACCURACY MODEL

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), it is associated with *less* satisfaction and *less* stability in many

relationship-threatening situations (e.g., Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy, 1984; Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone, 1995). At first blush, these latter findings appear to be somewhat counterintuitive given that relationship threats might be more easily defused or better resolved if partners understand one another's thoughts and feelings more accurately.

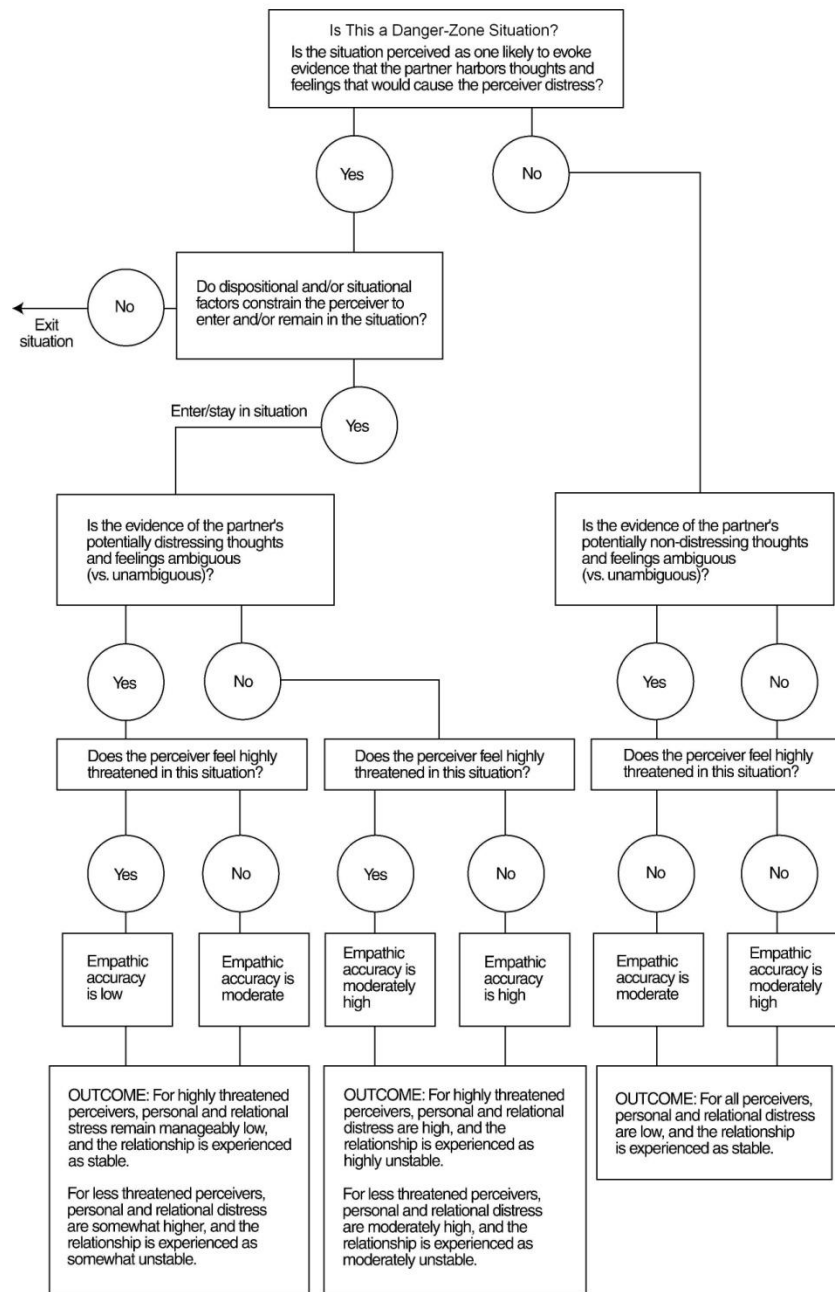


Figure 1. The Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes and Simpson, 2001).

To resolve this apparent paradox, Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) developed a model specifying how relationship partners might “manage” their levels of empathic accuracy in

relationship-threatening versus non-threatening contexts. The model identifies conditions under which: (a) empathic accuracy should help relationships (the general rule); (b) empathic accuracy should hurt relationships (the major exception to the rule); and (c) empathic *inaccuracy* may buffer individuals and relationships from harm (a complement of the exception to the rule).

According to the Empathic Accuracy Model, the potential 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 s/he displays cues that reflect his/her actual internal states), and (2) each partner's empathic ability (i.e., the degree to which s/he can accurately read his/her partner's valid behavioral cues). Within these broad boundaries, however, empathic accuracy ought to be "managed" differently, depending on the context of the interaction in which partners are currently engaged. The interaction contexts most relevant to the model are shown in Figure 1.

When relationship partners enter a situation, each individual first determines whether or not it could present a *danger zone* to the relationship. Danger zones are "sensitive topic" areas. In these areas, insights or revelations could easily emerge that would threaten the relationship if a perceiver accurately inferred his or her partner's true thoughts and feelings.

At the first branching point of the model, perceivers must decide whether a danger zone issue might be present or could emerge in the situation. If perceivers believe that they will discuss issues that are *not* relationship-threatening (see the right side of Figure 1), they should be motivated to be empathically accurate; personal and relational distress should remain low; and the relationship should remain stable. The logic behind these predictions is straightforward. To the extent that (1) mutual understanding facilitates the coordination of joint actions so that personal and relational goals can be achieved, and (2) the behaviors needed to achieve accurate understanding tend to be 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 1). More specifically, in situations where danger zones are not likely to arise (e.g., during everyday conversations about nonthreatening issues), perceivers should adopt an "accuracy" orientation that enables them to clarify minor misunderstandings, keep disagreements from escalating out of control, and gain a better understanding of their partner's views on these issues. These tendencies, in turn, should maintain or sometimes enhance relationship satisfaction and stability (see the middle-right portion of Figure 1).

Perceivers are not always motivated to attend to their partner's thoughts and feelings, however, and this is especially true in everyday interactions that are routine and largely driven by habit (Thomas, Fletcher, and Lange, 1997). In these habitual and non-threatening interactions, the perceivers' levels of empathic accuracy should typically be moderate rather than high (see the lower right side of Figure 1). Nevertheless, empathic accuracy should be positively correlated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability in situations of this type, consistent with the general rule that *greater empathic accuracy should help relationships* in relatively benign and non-threatening situations.

There are times, however, when individuals encounter situations in which danger-zone topics or issues might emerge that have the potential to destabilize their relationships (see the left-hand side of Figure 1). When these relationship-threatening situations arise, the initial response of most perceivers should be to try to avoid or escape from them, if possible. That is, averting or escaping from danger-zone situations should be the first "line of defense" that

perceivers could use to manage their empathic accuracy because it allows perceivers to avoid having to confront the direct evidence of their partners' potentially relationship-damaging thoughts and feelings.

Avoiding or escaping danger-zone issues is not always possible, however (see the left and middle portions of Figure 1). When perceivers decide that they must remain in a relationship-threatening situation, their second line of defense should be *motivated inaccuracy*—a conscious or unconscious failure to accurately infer the potentially harmful thoughts and feelings that are harbored by their partners. This branching point in the model—using motivated inaccuracy as a strategy to help minimize or defuse a potential threat to one's relationship and/or one's self-esteem—is the main focus of the current chapter.

The ultimate success of this strategy should depend on the degree to which the cues that are relevant to the partner's potentially damaging thoughts and feelings are ambiguous versus unambiguous. If the cues are ambiguous (see the middle-left side of Figure 1), perceivers can use motivated *inaccuracy* as a defensive maneuver. By tuning out, distorting, or re-framing potentially threatening information, or by employing other types of psychological defenses (e.g., denial, repression, rationalization), individuals can shelter themselves from recognizing the threatening implications of their partners' underlying thoughts and feelings, resulting in low (and, in some cases, very low) levels of empathic accuracy. The selective use of these defenses may actually benefit perceivers and their relationships by minimizing personal and relational distress and thereby helping to keep the relationship stable over time. Tracking this hypothesized process, the left-hand portion of the model illustrates the logical complement of the major exception to the general rule—that *motivated inaccuracy can help to sustain relationships in the face of threat*.

Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995) were the first to document people's use of the motivated inaccuracy strategy in relationship-threatening situations. They recruited a sample of about 80 heterosexual dating couples and asked each partner in the relationship to view, rate, and discuss slides of opposite-sex people on measures of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal. The dating partners did this task while seated side-by-side to each other. 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 scale, the partner who made the rating then discussed what s/he liked or disliked about each stimulus person with his/her partner. Immediately after the rating/discussion task, each partner watched their videotaped session and reported when during the interaction they had a specific thought or feeling. Their partner then watched the videotape and tried to infer each specific thought or feeling reported by the individual, which served as the measure of each partner's level of empathic accuracy during the interaction.

Consistent with the predictions of the Empathic Accuracy Model, partners assigned to the high threat condition were more empathically *inaccurate* than those in the low threat condition. That is, when faced with a somewhat ambiguous situation that could pose a threat to their relationships (i.e., rating highly attractive opposite-sex people in front of their current 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 was more important to keep the interaction pleasant and amicable rather than confront the potentially lustful thoughts and feelings that their partners might be having about the highly attractive stimulus persons they were evaluating. Even more interesting, four months later, *all* of the

couples in the high threat 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 that were harbored by their partners, individuals in the high threat condition were able to avoid unnecessary unpleasantness in the short-run and to keep their relationships more stable in the long-run.

What happens when individuals find themselves in relationship-threatening situations but cannot use motivated inaccuracy as a secondary strategy to reduce threat? According to the model (see the middle section of Figure 1), when cues signaling the relationship-threatening content of the partner's thoughts and feelings are unambiguous (e.g., the partner openly states that s/he is having an extra-marital affair), the sheer clarity of this information should force perceivers to have at least moderately high empathic accuracy, which should be accompanied by immediate and pronounced drops in relationship satisfaction and stability. In this instance, greater empathic accuracy should 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 per se harms relationships.

Motivated accuracy occurs when perceivers have a strong personal need to "know the truth" about what a partner is really thinking and feeling. This special case is not depicted in Figure 1. Need-based or disposition-based accuracy motives may at times override the initial tendency to avoid danger-zone issues or to use motivated inaccuracy to diffuse short-term relationship threats. Instances of this type 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.

One of the clearest examples of the use of motivated accuracy is a study by Simpson et al. (1999). In a re-analysis of the Simpson et al. (1995) dataset, Simpson and colleagues found that women who were more anxiously attached were most the empathically accurate precisely 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.

MOTIVATED INACCURACY AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THE RELATIONSHIP

As described above, how motivated *inaccuracy* allows people to deal with relationship-threatening information has previously been explored in the context of well-established romantic relationships (Ickes and Simpson, 1997, 2001; Simpson et al., 1995; Simpson et al., 2003). Participants in these studies are in dating relationships or often living together or married. There are, however, other relationship stages that occur before and after a couple decides to date exclusively that have yet to be examined in relation to motivated *inaccuracy*. The stages that will be discussed in this section include the initial attraction phase (prior to dating), the first date, and the break-up/rejection phase. Non-romantic dating situations will be considered as well.

Pre-Dating

Factors influencing the motivation to be empathically accurate at the pre-dating phase of a relationship are likely to be the same as those that influence the decision to date a partner in the first place; in other words, what qualifies as a relationship-threat is likely to be specific to the stage of the relationship. Physical attractiveness is one likely suspect for such a variable. As we review below, physical attractiveness strongly influences the way people are perceived during first encounters. Not only is attractiveness given greater priority over other characteristics, but it can also distort the way that other attributes are perceived. In the context of dating, the potential influence of attractiveness on the motivation to accurately perceive others may play a role when deciding whether or not to date these individuals.

According to Berscheid and Reis (1998), people who are perceived as being more physically attractive are more likely to be approached by others. This is likely to occur because people who are perceived to be physically attractive are often assumed to possess other positive characteristics as well (e.g. friendliness, sociability, trustworthiness; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, 1972). To test this finding in the context of ongoing social interactions, Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) examined the effects on men's perceptions of the perceived attractiveness of their female partner in an unstructured dyadic phone interaction. They found that men who believed they were interacting with an attractive woman rated her as being friendlier and more sociable than those who believed they were interacting with an unattractive woman. The mere perception of a physically attractive partner resulted in more enjoyable interactions and more positive feelings expressed toward the female strangers with whom the men interacted by telephone.

Effects related to physical attractiveness are, if anything, even more pronounced in face-to-face interactions between mixed-sex strangers whose level of physical attractiveness is more readily apparent (Garcia, Stinson, Ickes, Bissonnette, and Briggs, 1991). Garcia and her colleagues found that more attractive the female partner was, the more both partners talked to each other, looked at each other, asked each other questions, and started the conversation back up when it stalled. The women's attractiveness also predicted the degree to which the partners reported that the interaction was good and that they liked each other. The men's attractiveness played a similar but less pervasive role. The more attractive the male partner was, the more both partners smiled and laughed, and the less they referred to other people during their initial interaction.

At one end of the spectrum, being physically attractive may distort the partner's perception of certain characteristics that are typically perceived as negative and unappealing (e.g., being demanding, controlling, or pessimistic). At the other end of the spectrum, being physically unattractive may distort the partner's perception of qualities that are typically perceived as positive and appealing (e.g., being friendly, intelligent, and sociable). Thus, depending on what an individual wishes to gain from dating someone, they may be motivated to be inaccurate by focusing on a partner's attractiveness and ignoring their negative qualities. On the other hand, if an individual perceives a potential dating partner as unattractive, he or she may be motivated to overlook the partner's positive (i.e., dateable) qualities and instead choose to date someone else who is more physically attractive, but with less to offer to the relationship.

Just as perceived attractiveness and unattractiveness could evoke motivated inaccuracy in the ways we have proposed, other factors present during the pre-dating phase could have

similar effects. Physical attractiveness is only one of several factors that people focus on when determining whether or not someone is “dateable.” If, for example, having a dry sense of humor is considered an important attribute in a potential dating partner, its presence or absence may motivate someone to be inaccurate about a partner’s other qualities as a way of confirming how important it is to date someone who possesses that type of humor. In these examples, the threat presented that could be motivating the inaccuracy can be thought of as a threat to the validity of the heuristic at work (the mental short-cuts the perceiver has taken that allow attractiveness or having a dry sense of humor to stand in for other valued characteristics). Interestingly, some work has shown that when an individual is uncertain about whether his or her attraction to a potential dating partner is reciprocated, he or she will choose to approach a less attractive potential partner (Huston, 1973). This suggests that there may be instances in which “too much” partner attractiveness may be perceived as a potential cause of rejection (i.e., a threat) in pre-dating situations. Thus, attractiveness itself may be interpreted as a relationship threat and could generate inaccuracy motivations.

First Date

Once two people have started dating, knowing or not knowing how to relate to one another on the first date is likely to affect the future course of the relationship. When asked to list the specific behaviors and activities (i.e., scripts) expected to occur on a first date, men and women have very different ideas of what should happen (Morr Serewicz and Gale, 2007). Men tend to include more sexual behaviors (e.g., “more than kissing”) in their typical first date scripts than women do (e.g., “a goodnight kiss”). As a result, women may have a stronger need than men to try to “correct” their partner’s motivated inaccuracy if they are confronted with partners who expect more extensive sexual activity on a first date. This may be particularly difficult to achieve if the man’s motive to inaccurately infer his partner’s thoughts and feelings is strongly allied with his motive to believe that she would like to have sex with him as much as he wants to have sex with her. Accordingly, he may not want to think about her desire to: (1) avoid pregnancy or infection with a sexually transmitted disease; (2) conform to the traditional gender-role expectation that women should not engage in sexual behavior unless they are in a committed relationship (Milhausen and Herold, 1999); and (3) avoid any situation that has the potential to lead to sexual assault (Oswald and Russell, 2006).

In contrast to Ickes and Simpson’s (1997, 2001) model, in which the primary use of motivated inaccuracy is to preserve and protect one’s relationship from a temporary threat, motivated inaccuracy in this first-date scenario may be used to push the relationship to a level of intimacy that the male perceiver desires but that the female partner frequently does not. One may conceive of this situation as presenting a threat to the male—the threat that his desired type of relationship will not be achieved—which then prompts his inaccuracy. Ironically, however, this form of motivated inaccuracy might actually induce, rather than reduce, a threat to the woman’s relationship through the male partner’s attempt to change the status of the relationship from a pre-sexual one to a sexual one. The core sense of threat in this example is the discordance between each partner’s desire to change the relationship.

Break-Up/Rejection

Although dating partners may be initially attracted to each other, have a good first date, and begin dating exclusively, such relationships do not always last. Some relationships end because of external factors (e.g., one partner moves away, the partners simply grow apart), whereas others end because one partner's personal attributes are or become unacceptable to the other (e.g., being too demanding, bossy, controlling). Examples of motivated *inaccuracy* during this relationship stage are often apparent when the perceiver's own behavior or attributes are responsible for the break-up. When a person acknowledges his or her own role in a break-up, this can potentially be damaging to his or her pride, self-esteem, and self-image. In this case, the person may resort to motivated inaccuracy with regard to his or her own feelings, motives, and behavior rather than confront his/her personal failings and learn from what went wrong in the relationship. As Swann (1982) notes in self-verification theory, this response may be driven to a large extent by people's motivation to hold consistent views of themselves, regardless of how they are perceived by others. Thus, when people are confronted with undesirable aspects of themselves that they have not yet acknowledged but may have contributed to their break-up, they may become motivated to deny the accuracy of that information rather than damage the consistent and more positive view they harbor of themselves (see also Baumeister, 1998).

In general, the primary motivation to be inaccurate at the break-up/rejection stage may be to protect the self rather than to protect the relationship given that the threat at this stage is to the self. During this stage, many people are likely to be motivated to be inaccurate as a way of preserving their dignity and self-esteem. For some individuals, breaking up with a significant other is difficult enough without having to deal with the realization that they may have been responsible for the demise of the relationship. Ironically, however, this self-protective form of empathic inaccuracy may itself create a new threat capable of compromising the success of future relationships. This dynamic is illustrated in the film "He's Just Not That Into You," (Flower Films, 2009) in which a young woman continues to fail in her relationships until she finally accepts her own role in the frequent rejections she encounters. In this case, and consistent with Ickes and Simpson's (1997, 2001) original model, the benefit of being inaccurate following a break-up or rejection is only short-term. Although denying one's own responsibility for a series of bad relationship outcomes might provide a short-term salve to a person's self-esteem, one's repeated unwillingness to confront and learn from personally threatening information may cause similar problems to repeat themselves in future romantic relationships.

MOTIVATED INACCURACY IN RESPONSE TO ATTEMPTS TO REDEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP

If we venture beyond romantic relationships, we can find other relationship contexts that generate motivations to be empathically inaccurate. All of them, however, share the necessary elements of perceived threat and a restriction of one's ability to exit the situation. Consider, for instance, a pair of colleagues—Glenn and Lauren. Lauren lives with her longtime boyfriend, and Glenn is single and currently unattached. Glenn and Lauren share an office

and work together on several projects, and they have become good friends. Glenn, however, would like to have a romantic relationship with Lauren, and he begins to alter his behaviors to reflect this. The guilt that is potentially generated in the context of Glenn's unrequited (and unreciprocated) love for her (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton, 1994) may pose a significant threat to Lauren. To preserve the friendly nature of the relationship and to avoid the costs of acknowledging and coping with the mismatch in intentions, Lauren may simply not perceive a change in Glenn's feelings toward her. Interestingly, Glenn may be equally motivated to misperceive Lauren's intentions and feelings to avoid the self-esteem costs that would follow if he had to openly acknowledge that his affections for Lauren were unreciprocated.

Now consider another example—that of a boss and an employee, Emily and Nathan. Nathan enjoys his job and wants to get a promotion because his wife would like to have a baby. Emily, however, doesn't think he's ready for the promotion. As Emily attempts to send signals to Nathan that he won't be considered for the promotion, Nathan attempts to prolong the conversation and convince her otherwise. Accurately inferring Emily's true feelings about his prospects would be threatening to Nathan, potentially damaging his general competence his job-related self-concept, and interfering with his goals. On the other hand, accepting Nathan's true feelings and having to disappoint him may threaten Emily's impression of herself as a kind boss, and it may also threaten their good working relationship. In the short term, at least, the mutual inferences that Nathan and Emily make about each other's thoughts and feelings are likely to reflect some degree of motivated inaccuracy.

Interestingly, the same theme underlies each of the above examples and situations, both romantic and non-romantic. In each case, one member of the pair desires a *change* in how the relationship is defined, whereas the partner does not. The pressure exerted by one person for change and the associated mismatch in intentions that is likely to threaten the status quo of each relationship provides the motivation for each partner's motivated inaccuracy. In the short term, the power of one individual to prevent or enforce such a change may exacerbate the motivation toward inaccuracy. Eventually, however, the same asymmetrical power may bring the situation to a head and impose greater clarity about each partner's true feelings, motives, and beliefs, forcing both partners to see things more accurately and objectively.

Although these examples focus on relationships that are long-term and familiar, the motivation to be empathically inaccurate may extend to situations involving strangers as well. Consider a short-term professional relationship, such as that between a bank-teller and a client. If the teller (or client) wants to change the limited nature of the relationship, which may not be welcomed by the client (or teller), motivated inaccuracy regarding those desires may be the best and most face-saving course of action to keep the relationship on a straightforward, professional level.

Communal Versus Exchange Relationships

The research on communal versus exchange relationships offers empirical support for the notion that differences in partners' definitions of the relationship may threaten its status quo, potentially setting the stage for motivated inaccuracy. According to Clark (1985), relationships can be classified as either communal or exchange. Communal relationships are ones that are based on mutual obligation and responsiveness between members (e.g., the

relationships involving family members or close friends). In such relationships, members feel obligated and committed to meet each other's basic needs. Conversely, the people involved in exchange relationships do not feel responsible for or concerned about meeting each other's basic needs. These relationships are based on the expectation of mutual exchange of goods or services (e.g., the relationships of strangers, acquaintances, or business associates).

According to this conceptualization, depending on the kind of relationship that exists, partners will have different expectations regarding the kinds of behaviors that can—and should—occur. When these expectations are violated, the relationship may become strained. For example, in a study by Clark and Mills (1979), male participants were led to expect a communal or an exchange relationship with a female confederate. After being asked to help her with a specific task, participants were either offered repayment for their assistance or were not given any compensation. When participants were led to expect an exchange relationship, they liked the female confederate less when no compensation was given. When a communal relationship was expected, however, the female confederate was liked less when she offered participants a form of repayment. These results demonstrate that when an individual's behavior does not match the type of relationship that is expected or desired, people report less liking for him/her.

When the partners' expectations about the status of a relationship are in conflict, the degree to which the relationship is permanently impaired should depend on the "recipient" partner's willingness to alter the status of the relationship to fit the "redefining" partner's expectation. Therefore, if an individual is given the opportunity to alter an exchange relationship into one that is more communal (or vice versa), reactions about that opportunity should vary depending on the individual's own desire to change the status of the relationship. If the change in relationship status *is* desired, reactions toward change will most likely be positive. When a change in relationship status *is not* desired (e.g., changing from an exchange to a communal relationship), an individual may be motivated to distort, deny, or simply "tune out" the partner's overtures for change to avoid any unpleasantness. In sum, when a change in relationship status (from exchange to communal, or vice versa) is undesired by one partner in a relationship, motivated *inaccuracy* may be used as a short-term strategy to maintain the current status the relationship—ideally (but often not in practice) without hurting the other partner's feelings or damaging the relationship.

The Role of Personality in the Process: Some Examples

Motivations to be accurate or inaccurate during social interactions are likely to be influenced by several factors related to the partner (e.g., his/her physical attractiveness, first date expectations, willingness to alter the status of a communal/exchange relationship) and the perceiver (e.g., her/his need to protect self-esteem). Other partner-induced factors, which should also be considered in relation to motivated inaccuracy, include the respective personality characteristics of each partner. Motivations toward accuracy and inaccuracy differ in different types of relationships and/or with specific relationship partners. For example, individuals may be more inclined to perceive internal events inaccurately when interacting with their parents, but more inclined to perceive internal events accurately when interacting with their young children. Research comparing the same individual in close relationships of the same type (e.g., the same person in multiple romantic relationships) are very difficult or

impossible to conduct (e.g., the same person with multiple mothers). Research on strangers, however, suggests that some target characteristics, such as emotional expressivity (Zaki, Bolger, and Ochsner, 2008), affect the accuracy abilities of the perceived. Unfortunately, this research tells us little about perceivers' *motivations* to be accurate or inaccurate as a function of characteristics of the perceiver or target. To illustrate the role that personality characteristics may play in this process, consider how one partner's attempt to redefine the relationship might be experienced differently, depending on the other partner's attachment style.

Attachment security is considered to be an "inner resource" that enables individuals to use their relationships as a source of comfort and support, which in turn fosters healthy interdependence (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). There are two forms of attachment insecurity: *anxiety*, which is characterized by a strong desire for intimacy and a fear of abandonment by a partner, and *avoidance*, which reflects a desire for independence and autonomy coupled with discomfort with closeness and intimacy. As described earlier in this chapter, work by Simpson and colleagues (1995) has already shown that more anxiously attached individuals display the highest levels of empathic accuracy and the most distress during interactions when their partners are having relationship-threatening or damaging thoughts and feelings. Although motivated accuracy may result in undesirable feelings toward one's partner, it does not necessarily signal the desire to redefine or alter the relationship. If, however, we consider situations in which one partner wishes (and has the power) to *change* the nature of the relationship, we can make specific situation-by-person predictions concerning attachment styles.

Consider a dating couple, Lauren and Alex. Lauren has an anxious attachment style. Lauren and Alex have been dating for several weeks and are studying abroad together in a foreign country. Alex begins to realize he may not want an intimate relationship with Lauren, and he tries to convey this to her by spending more time alone. This behavior should be especially threatening to Lauren, given her attachment-related fear of abandonment. Because the couple is in a foreign country, Lauren may feel even less inclined to break-up with Alex (i.e., exit the situation). To preserve her valued and desired understanding of the relationship as one that is communal, intimate, and committed, Lauren may simply not perceive (or misperceive) the sudden changes in Alex's behavior. However, if we recast the above scenario such that Lauren is now an avoidantly attached person, she may be less bothered by Alex's sudden change in behavior and may readily perceive his interest in changing the relationship.

Although attachment insecurity provides one good example of how a tendency to perceive certain relationship threats ought to promote motivations toward inaccuracy, other viable individual differences also exist. Charania and Ickes (2007), for example, have suggested that two orthogonal dimensions of social orientation—*social absorption* and *social individuation*—tap the extent to which individuals become behaviorally interdependent (i.e., *absorbed*) by others or tend to cognitively *distinguish* themselves from others. With regard to predicting marital satisfaction, social absorption and social individuation have an impact on satisfaction above and beyond the effects of attachment styles (Charania and Ickes, 2007). In sum trait-like desires to become involved with others (social absorption) or to maintain psychological distance from them (social individuation) may be another source for differences in motivation to perceive others accurately versus inaccurately.

MOTIVATED INACCURACY AND NEW RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Maslow (1966) reminded us of the law of instrument: if our only tool is a hammer, we tend to see every problem as a nail. The methods we have used thus far to answer questions about motivated inaccuracy have, to some extent, determined both the types of results we have found and the types of theoretical models we have developed. For example, the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm (Ickes, Robertson, Tooke, and Teng 1986; Ickes, Bissonnette, et al., 1990) not only helped to define the area of empathic accuracy as a construct as well as a paradigm, but was crucial in providing some of the first and most compelling evidence for the phenomenon of motivated inaccuracy (e.g., Simpson et al., 1995; 1999; 2003).

The unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm, however, has some limitations that qualify its strengths. First, the paradigm is most useful for capturing fluctuations in people's *capacity* for accuracy rather than their *motivation* to be accurate. Participants are verbally instructed to be as accurate as possible in guessing their partners' thoughts and feelings, and this set of instructions may create a *motivational* "ceiling" that does not reflect the typical empathic inference-making that people display in their daily lives. Perhaps alternative methodologies could be identified in which individuals' motivation to be accurate could vary without this constraint.

Second, in the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm, the target's thoughts and feelings are always generated by the target himself/herself. Although this feature offers the important advantage of ecological validity, it limits the kinds of "target variables" in a way that might exclude particular ones that researchers might have an interest in studying. Researchers might, for instance, not be interested in *all* of the target person's thoughts and feelings, but only in those of a particular type (e.g., disloyal thoughts, egocentric thoughts, angry feelings, sad feelings). Alternative methodologies might permit a more specific focus on the target variables of interest. They might make it easier, for example, for researchers to determine whether certain threats influence the perceiver's motivation to be inaccurate with regard to a partner's angry thoughts or feelings, but not with regard to a partner's sad thoughts or feelings.

Third, the dyadic interaction paradigm operates within a specific and limited time-frame—the interactions typically last 5-10 minutes. By limiting the time-frame, we necessarily miss the opportunity to detect accuracy fluctuations over longer periods of time. Considering alternate methodologies offers another opportunity to think about how our understanding of motivated inaccuracy may be expanded. As examples of these alternative methodologies, we now turn to diary and internet-based chat methodologies specifically.

DIARIES

Given recent advances in technology, interaction diary methods have become less cumbersome to employ and are now viable alternatives to laboratory paradigms for capturing interpersonal phenomena (see Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli, 2003, for review). In their most basic form, diary studies require participants to complete a set of measures several times over

a period of time outside the lab. The number of entries in such studies range from once a day to several times day, and periods of study range from a couple of days to several weeks. Diary entries may be event-contingent (these are often called Interaction Diaries, which allow participants to complete an entry after a certain event has occurred), initiated by the experimenter (e.g., the participant is beeped randomly), or time-specific (e.g., the participant completes the diary at meal times). Diaries are beginning to be used in the study of empathic accuracy, but it is already clear that a unique picture of accuracy variations can be accessed with these methods.

In a recent study, Wilhelm and Perrez (2004) used experimenter-initiated diaries (i.e., they beeped the participants to signal the beginning of a diary entry) in order to assess accuracy between spouses. The experimenters signaled husbands and wives throughout the day and measured their moods. They found that the spouse's levels of accuracy regarding their *partner's* mood depended on basic knowledge about the partner and the level of assumed similarity. Interestingly, however, the results also depended on the gender of the partner (gender effects are not typically found in the dyadic interaction paradigm); the context (whether the partners were together, apart, at home, or at work); and the particular items being judged (e.g., feelings of fatigue versus feelings of satisfaction).

In another recent diary study of empathic accuracy, Howland and Rafaeli (in press) asked couples to complete a diary at the end of each day about their partner's mood as well as their own. Indexes of empathic accuracy at both the day-level and the person-level (i.e., aggregated across diary days) were distinguishable by target mood. In other words, accuracy about one mood was not necessarily associated with accuracy about another mood. Similarly, accuracy defined as agreement about the level of a mood experienced was distinct from accuracy defined as perceiving the overall pattern of a given mood across time.

Diary studies such as those above allow us to address some of the early concerns about using questionnaire methods to assess accuracy (Cronbach, 1955) by collecting multiple measures from each dyad. Furthermore, one can examine different facets of accuracy (e.g., accuracy in perceiving levels of a target variable vs. accurately perceiving relative patterns of a target variable). Diary data therefore allow us to more easily break down accuracy into its components and test their effects separately.

Interaction diaries—a method in which diary entries are event-contingent—have not been used so far in empathic accuracy research, but they represent a promising new element to the study of accuracy. In lab situations, we often attempt to create interactions between partners that represent the types of interactions we believe occur in the context of their daily lives. Studies employing diary methods that measure accuracy in the context of these events when they are actually occurring in participants' lives would significantly strengthen the impressive findings we are accumulating with lab paradigms.

Although the above examples focused on empathic *accuracy*, it is possible that these methods can be used to study instances of motivated inaccuracy as well. For example, diary methods could allow us to test the extent to which individuals *manage* their inaccuracy over time or in the wake of a conflict (e.g., do we “make up” for periods of motivated inaccuracy with periods of heightened accuracy?). If threat is a primary motivator of inaccuracy, does accuracy about certain targets fluctuate in response to all threats or only certain threats? When we feel threatened, are we motivated to be less accurate overall or are certain accuracies heightened, akin to a flight or flight response? Are all components of accuracy equally impacted by the presence of a threat? Diary methods offer ecological validity, and perhaps

most importantly, they allow us to test within-person and couple models of motivated inaccuracy over both short-term and long-term time periods.

Online Communication Technologies

Another method that is likely to expand our understanding of motivated inaccuracy is instant messaging in the lab. Over the past decade, the use of online communication has become a common feature of daily life. People now rely heavily on the use of e-mails, instant messaging, text messaging, and online "social connection" sites when communicating with family, friends, and strangers. However, because nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice, body language) are absent in these forms of electronic communication, the information that is exchanged can result in more opportunities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations to develop between on-line partners. Accordingly, one may wonder whether achieving an acceptable level of empathic accuracy is even possible in this medium.

To answer this question, Rollings (2009) randomly assigned participants who were not previously acquainted to mixed-sex dyads and had them interact for 15 minutes via computers equipped with an instant messaging program. Similar to the unstructured interaction paradigm, the participants were given the freedom to talk about anything they wished. At the end of their interactions, the dyad members were instructed to read a printed transcript of their conversations and mark the specific points where they remembered having had a particular thought or feeling. They then wrote down the content of each thought or feeling on a standard thought/feeling recording form. Then, in the next phase of the study, each dyad member tried to infer the specific content of each of the thoughts and feelings reported by his or her partner.

Rolling's (2009) results revealed that the on-line partners' average empathic accuracy scores were similar to those found in earlier studies that recorded face-to-face interactions using the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm (e.g., Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, and Garcia, 1990). Despite the lack of nonverbal cues, participants still achieved normative levels of empathic accuracy. Although motivated *inaccuracy* was not examined in this study, Rollings (2009) found that the dyad members who reported liking each other more at the end of their interactions were more empathically accurate than those who liked each other less. This finding may have important implications for the study of motivated inaccuracy in online communication. If motivated accuracy is related to likeability, would on-line members who dislike each other be motivated to misread or misinterpret the information exchanged between them?

Another advantage of the instant messaging technology is that it could be used to realistically manipulate the kind of threat that motivates one or both of the on-line members to *inaccurately* infer their partner's thoughts and feelings. Although similar manipulations could be achieved through phone conversations, it would be clear that a participant was not talking to their romantic partner. Instant messaging, however, allows for more realistic assumptions of each partner's role. For example, if we are interested in assessing Lauren's motivations toward inaccuracy in the lab, we can manipulate "Alex's" responses to her in order to initiate a relationship threat. Because of the control afforded by studying instant messaging interactions in a laboratory setting, it is possible to vary the nature and timing of experimentally imposed threats in ways that are less easily achieved in studies of unstructured, face-to-face interactions. An additional benefit of using instant messaging is its

ability to isolate the differences in empathic accuracy in relation to content, rather than being confounded by the verbal cues present in phone conversations, and the nonverbal cues present in face-to-face interactions.

Although each of the above methodologies—diary methods and IM approaches—has its own distinct advantages, they represent merely two of many possible new paradigms that can shed light on inaccuracy motivations. Other technological advancements, such as text messaging, communications on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), or combinations of these methods, could greatly advance our understanding of accuracy processes.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this chapter, we have proposed new avenues for the study of motivated inaccuracy. Although the use of motivated inaccuracy in response to ambiguous, threatening information has been well established in the context of romantic relationships, its use in other domains deserves attention as well. Thus, we proposed that the reasons for engaging in motivated inaccuracy (i.e., the sources of threat and what is likely to be considered a “danger zone” topic or issue) differ not only across different stages of romantic relationships, but also vary depending on the people and/or types of relationships that are involved.

Instead of continuing the traditional focus on established romantic relationships when discussing the use of motivated inaccuracy, we focused on other stages of romantic relationships, namely the initial attraction (pre-dating) phase, the first date, and the break-up stage. Not only does each stage provide a new way to look at motivated inaccuracy, but the motivations for using this strategy is likely to differ from one stage to another. Finally, we identified a number of non-romantic relationship situations in which motivated inaccuracy may also play an important role. It is worth noting that we chose hetero-gender examples to illustrate our points in this chapter, mainly for ease of understanding; however, we do not believe that such interactions are limited to hetero-gender pairs. Another worthy avenue for research is how the Empathic Accuracy Model plays out in same-sex pairs.

As an important theoretical generalization, we have suggested that situations in which one relationship partner desires to redefine or alter a relationship from its current “status quo” might be particularly likely to engender motivated inaccuracy, particularly if one partner has the unilateral power to make such a change to the relationship. We have also suggested that, depending on a relationship’s current status (communal vs. exchange), as well as partners’ adult attachment styles (avoidant vs. anxious), one’s motivation for accuracy or inaccuracy in the context of such a relationship “redefinition” will well vary from one individual to another. The way one wishes to proceed in such situations will most likely influence each partner’s level of satisfaction as well as the stability of the relationship. A closer examination of these dynamics should further our knowledge regarding the effects of motivated accuracy and inaccuracy that occur at both the individual level and at the level of the relationship.

Finally, in an attempt to broaden and diversify the way in which the construct of empathic accuracy has been studied, we proposed two new methodologies. The first approach is the diary method, which allows for a less restrictive study of empathic accuracy, greater ecological validity, and allows one to examine multiple facets of accuracy along with changes in empathic accuracy and inaccuracy over longer time-frames. The second method involves

the medium of online instant messaging, which now represents one of the more common ways that people communicate with others. Both methods have shown to yield average empathic accuracy scores that are comparable to those reported in studies using the traditional face-to-face interaction approach. Moreover, both have distinct advantages that could enrich our understanding of how accuracy and inaccuracy function in relationships.

By approaching the study of empathic accuracy from these different and novel perspectives, we may find that this phenomenon is more widespread than the present body of literature would suggest. The creative application of these new techniques may also help us better understand how and why certain relationship dynamics occur in such a wide variety of relationship and situational contexts.

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