

# Lying to the one you love: The use of deception in romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to explore the use of deception in romantic relationships and relate the use of such behavior to relational outcomes. Three possible explanations underlying the use of deception in romantic relationships were tested. It was expected that deception would be related to the reciprocal exchange of information, the desire to avoid punishment, and individuals' attachment beliefs. Two hundred and fifty-six individuals (128 couples) completed questionnaires regarding their own communicative behaviors, as well as their partners' behavior. Support for all three explanations regarding the use of deception was obtained. The results are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications.

KEY WORDS: attachment behavior • deception • reciprocity

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Intimate relationships are not built on the truth and nothing but the truth. Most individuals (92%) admit having lied to a romantic partner (e.g., 'You're the best,' 'You're the biggest,' 'I love you,' Knox, Schacht, Holt, & Turner, 1993) or can recall an occasion where they were not completely honest (Metts, 1989). When not explicitly deceiving partners, many people acknowledge withholding information (Roloff & Cloven, 1990) or trying to avoid certain issues altogether (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Adding insult to injury, lovers apparently reserve their most serious lies for each other (DePaulo, Ansfield, Kirkendol, & Boden, 1997 cited in Anderson, Ansfield, & DePaulo, 1999). Without a doubt, complete disclosure fails to depict the nature of communication between romantic partners.

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Although lovers lie and scholars speculate that deception may serve as a 'social lubricant' (Saxe, 1991, p. 414) that 'safely separates' partners and their thoughts (Solomon, 1993, p. 34), little research has examined the role that deception plays in the regulation of intimacy within romantic attachments. To date, most research has focused on people's ability to detect when lovers are lying. This research indicates that romantically involved individuals have a difficult time detecting deception and tend to assume that the truth is being told (Levine & McCornack, 1992; Stiff, Kim, & Ramesh, 1992). Scholars have also investigated what happens when deception is uncovered. Not surprisingly, detecting deception often results in negative emotional reactions, especially when the information and lies uncovered are considered to be significant (McCornack & Levine, 1990a).

Research that explores the use of deception across relational types provides further insight on deception and romantic attachments. Specifically, this research indicates that deception is relatively common in romantic dyads in comparison with other types of relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Lippard, 1988). Related research indicates that deception among romantic partners is more likely to be motivated by a concern for the relationship and for a partner, when compared with the motives underlying the use of deception in other types of relationships (Metts, 1989). While these comparative studies demonstrate that deception varies across relational types (strangers, acquaintances, friends, romantic partners), they fail to provide sufficient information regarding the different ways that individuals use deception within any particular context. Although we know that deception among romantic partners occurs regularly and is problematic when uncovered, key questions remain unanswered. To what extent does deception vary within romantic relationships? What possible explanations account for this variation? And, how is deception related to relational functioning? While these issues have been addressed across relational types (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Lippard, 1988; Metts, 1989), it is hoped that investigating these basic questions within romantic dyads will further our understanding of deceptive behavior in this specific context. The goal of this study is to address these basic issues.

### **Potential explanations underlying deceptive behavior within romantic relationships**

Theoretical work on relational development and interpersonal communication provides several explanations underlying the use of deception in close relationships. Specifically, three interrelated explanations are offered in an attempt to gain additional insight regarding the use of misleading communication between romantic partners. All of these explanations are linked, directly or indirectly, to a social exchange perspective (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), in that they assume that individuals are less likely to tell the truth when the costs involved become prohibitive.

**Reciprocity.** The first explanation is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocity involves the adjustment of resources exchanged vis-à-vis the allocation of others' contributions – a 'TIT FOR TAT' transaction (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981, p. 1393). Such exchange has likely been a part of human interaction for millions of years and is a cross-species phenomenon (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). In personal relationships, evidence indicates that the tendency to reciprocate is strong and it involves the exchange of both positive and negative resources such as affection, respect (Gaines, 1996), hostility, and criticism (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997).

Examining the nature of reciprocal exchange may help us understand the use of deception in romantic relationships. In its most simple form, the norm of reciprocity states that people should return favors and avoid incurring debts (Gouldner, 1960). Building on this general principle, resource theory articulates the specific nature of the transactions that occur. Essentially, there are six broad categories of interpersonal resources (i.e., love, status, information, money, goods, and services; Foa, Converse, Tornblom, & Foa, 1993) and people prefer to repay or retaliate with the same kind of resource that was given or withheld (Converse & Foa, 1993). Other research indicates that, in addition to exchanging equivalent resources, individuals also try to decrease their level of dependence on non-cooperative partners. Through *locomotion*, people attempt to move away or become less involved with those who fail to cooperate (Van Lange & Visser, 1999). In short, people tend to match others' contributions in a reciprocal manner. However, when partners fail to play by the rules, individuals engage in retaliatory and/or distancing behavior.

Applying principles of reciprocity to the use of deception, perceived partner dishonesty should be seen as the withdrawal of an important relational resource. Disclosing information is viewed as a commodity in interpersonal relationships (Rettig, Danes, & Bauer, 1993) and people expect significant others to tell the truth (Miller, Mongeau, & Sleight, 1986). Just as perceptions of pro-relational behaviors are related to increased satisfaction, investments, and ultimately commitment (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Agnew, & Foster, 1999), perceptions of partner dishonesty should have a reverse effect (see McCornack & Levine, 1990a). In short, people will view a partner's use of deception as being costly and such perceptions will result in declines in commitment and satisfaction. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1:* Relational commitment and satisfaction are inversely related to the belief that a partner engages in deception.

While perceptions of trust lead to increased investments (Wieselquist et al., 1999), the inverse should also be true: perceptions of partner dishonesty should result in the withdrawal of relational resources. Given the desire to retaliate with a similar resource (Converse & Foa, 1993), it is likely that individuals will seek compensatory retribution by matching their partners' deceptive behavior. Simply put, partners thought to engage in deception are

probably not entitled to the same resource that they are believed to withhold (i.e., the truth). Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

*H2:* One's use of deception is related to the belief that a partner is dishonest.

Finally, individuals do more than simply retaliate against non-cooperative partners. People also try to become less involved with such individuals (Van Lange & Visser, 1999). Therefore, when commitment to a partner decreases (*H1*), individuals should be more likely to engage in behaviors that weaken interdependence and restore autonomy. Ironically, deception may help people accomplish this goal. It is likely that withholding or distorting information helps individuals to manage relational boundaries (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Petronio, 1991), regulate their independence (Solomon, 1993), and keep others at a comfortable distance (Buller & Burgoon, 1998). In line with this reasoning, cross-relational research indicates that the use of deception is inversely related to emotional closeness (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Hence, when people decide to forego commitment, deception may be called upon to achieve this outcome. Reciprocal deception may serve two functions, direct retaliation (*H2*) and locomotion (*H3*):

*H3:* Lower levels of commitment will be related to the use of deception.

In summary, the reciprocal use of deception is based on the following ideas. Believing that a partner is dishonest is relationally costly; hence, such perceptions will result in a decline in commitment and the desire to retaliate. Decreased commitment is also expected to contribute to the use of deception as a means of exerting greater relational independence. Put more simply, relational partners should play by the rules, or not expect to play at all.

This proposed reciprocal model of deception raises an interesting question: Are individuals' perceptions of their partners' misleading behavior warranted? While a reciprocal model of deception is based on the idea that *perceptions* of partner dishonesty will tempt individuals to engage in deception, knowing the extent to which such perceptions are accurate will further our understanding of deception in romantic relationships. Thus, the following research question is asked:

*RQ1:* Are perceptions of a partner's dishonesty related to the extent that a partner engages in deception?

**Avoiding punishment.** Another potential explanation for the use of deception focuses on the partner-imposed costs associated with telling the truth. At least two options are available to relational partners when exchanging information. Partners can reveal the truth as they see it or they can mislead significant others through concealment and fabrication (Ekman, 1985). Both options are associated with potential advantages and disadvantages within romantic relationships.

With respect to telling the truth, important benefits accrue to disclosing information in personal relationships. Sharing information can be a rewarding experience (Altman & Taylor, 1973) that may lead to increased intimacy and the feeling of being understood (Cahn, 1990; Reis & Patrick, 1996). However, telling the truth is not always in one's best interest.

Research on self-disclosure indicates that there are many risks associated with revealing information to others (Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Confidants may share private information with others (Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996) or react in an adverse, judgmental manner (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Petronio, 1991). In romantic relationships, confidentiality may not be as critical as a partner's reaction to unwelcome information. Most concealment that occurs within romantic attachments involves information to which others are already privy (Cole, manuscript in preparation). Additional research suggests that deception is most likely to be motivated by fear of a partner's disapproval. In particular, the willingness to lie appears to be issue and target specific. People are more likely to lie about a topic when the behavior in question violates a specific target's expectations (Millar & Tesser, 1988). Concerns for confidentiality, however, would predict a different pattern of results: the truth should be told to trusted individuals rather than varying according to a partner's set of expectations. Based on the evidence available, hiding the truth appears to be driven by a partner's reaction to the truth rather than the fear that a partner will disclose this information to others.

Deceiving a partner, however, may produce several positive relational outcomes. First, successfully hiding costly information while exaggerating one's many virtues may help foster a positive image in the eyes of a beholder. And people who hold such idealistic beliefs about their partners tend to be more satisfied (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Apparently, people are happiest when they fail to see things as they really are and this may be especially true when relationally threatening information is involved (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). It is not too hard to imagine how deception may help nurture these illusions (e.g., 'No, I'm not attracted to him.' 'Yes, I missed you.'). Second, deceptively appeasing a partner may help couples avoid conflict (Buller & Burgoon, 1998) and promote relational harmony (Saxe, 1991). Along the same line, Solomon (1993) argues that deception may be critical to relational functioning, providing a safe barrier between individuals and their negative thoughts.

Taken together, telling the truth may contribute to feelings of closeness and intimacy, while partners' adverse reactions to such information may tempt individuals to engage in concealment and distortion. Assuming that people take such costs and rewards into account, several predictions can be made regarding the use of deceptive communication in romantic relationships. First, as the partner-imposed costs for telling the truth increase, people will be more likely to engage in deception. As such, the following hypothesis is advanced:

*H4:* A positive relationship exists between deceptive behavior and the extent to which romantic partners are perceived to react negatively when receiving unwanted information.

Furthermore, if the decision to engage in deception is based on the costs and rewards involved, people who frequently mislead their partners should receive fewer of the benefits associated with telling the truth and incur more of the costs underlying the use of deception. Individuals who rely on deception should experience less intimacy and closeness in their relationships. Consequently, the following relationship is expected:

*H5:* Deceiving one's partner will be inversely related to one's own reports of intimacy and perceived understanding.

By implication, deception should also have an impact on message recipients. If a person's decision to deceive is based on the costs involved (a target's negative reaction), then misleading information should be tailored to appease a relational partner. Misleading messages should be constructed in such a way that intimate partners are being told what they want to hear. Consequently, deception may help foster positive illusions regarding those who successfully deceive. In line with this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H6:* Being successfully misled is related to satisfaction with and commitment to one's partner.

**Intimacy needs.** The final explanation focuses on individuals' differing needs for intimacy and closeness. The application of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) indicates that individuals' relational beliefs vary in a fundamental way. Attachment needs can be thought of in terms of an individual's level of discomfort with intimacy (an *avoidance* dimension) and with respect to his/her anxiety regarding a partner's availability and responsiveness (an *anxiety* dimension; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Avoidant attachment is characterized by a lack of trust, fear of intimacy, and discomfort with closeness (Brennan et al., 1998). By contrast, a preoccupation with intimacy, longing for closeness, and chronic anxiety about partners not meeting their needs epitomize anxious attachment (Brennan et al., 1998).

Although attachment beliefs have not been linked directly to the use of deception, it is likely that individuals uncomfortable with intimacy use deception to keep others at a safe distance. Through deception, people attempt to control the amount of personal information they reveal to others (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Failing to disclose pertinent information or misleading others allows individuals to manage the boundary between themselves and their relational partners (Derlega et al., 1993; Petronio, 1991) and protect their privacy (Anderson et al., 1999). Furthermore, fabricating information may help people develop a sense of autonomy or relational independence (Solomon, 1993). As such, the following hypothesis is advanced:

*H7*: Fear of intimacy is positively related to the use of deception.

In contrast, individuals anxious about their partners' commitment and availability might use deception to regulate their partners' interest, closeness, and devotion. Deception can play a role in the management of one's impression (Goffman, 1959) and people often practice deception as a means of influencing another's attitudes and feelings towards oneself (Bell & DePaulo, 1996; DePaulo et al., 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996), especially in romantic contexts (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998). As noted previously, deceptively appeasing a partner may help individuals avoid conflict (Buller & Burgoon, 1998) and promote relational harmony (Saxe, 1991). Thus, anxiously attached individuals are likely to secure a relational partner through appeasement and manipulation in addition to creating a false image of themselves. Specifically, the following hypothesis is offered:

*H8*: Fear of abandonment is positively related to the use of deceptive communication.

**Combined explanations.** The three explanations offered are probably not independent; rather, they reflect three different ways of partitioning the notion that telling the truth can be costly. Namely, the truth can be expensive when partners do not engage in a similar exchange of information (reciprocity), react poorly to it (avoid punishment), or when honesty does not help people fulfill their attachment needs (intimacy needs). To explore the possible overlap among the explanations proposed, the following research question is asked:

*RQ2*: Do the explanations offered contribute to our understanding of the use of deception when they are simultaneously considered?

## Method

### Overview

The data for this study were collected as part of a broader research project on communication patterns in romantic relationships. The larger research project examined the extent to which individuals engage in deception, as well as communicative strategies relating to compliance gaining, conflict management, relational maintenance, and affinity seeking.

### Participants

One hundred and twenty-eight heterosexual couples participated in this study. Couples were recruited from a midsize, urban university through class announcements, e-mail messages, fliers posted on and around campus, and advertisements in the campus newspaper. To participate in the study, couples were required to have been dating for at least four months and partners had to agree to complete the questionnaire at the same time. Couples were offered \$15 for their participation and as an extra incentive one of the couples was randomly

selected to win an additional \$750. On average, couples had been together 27 months (median) and 17 of the 128 couples were engaged (13.3%), while 9 were already married (7%). The self-reported ethnicity of the participants was predominately Caucasian (72.5%), followed by African-American (9.8%), Hispanic/Latino (9%), Asian (5.9%), and other (2.7%). The median age of the participants was 21 years (range 17–35).

### Questionnaire construction

**Overview.** As noted earlier, the measures were obtained as part of a larger research project. Consequently, only descriptions of the pertinent variables are provided. To reduce the possibility of an order effect, the questionnaires were constructed so that the measurement of each variable was counterbalanced across participants.

**Use of deception.** A 9-item scale was created from a pilot study to determine how often people engage in deception in their romantic relationships. Nine items were chosen from a larger set of questions on the basis of their clarity and their high inter-item consistency. The purpose of these items was to assess the extent to which people conceal information, mislead, and/or deceive their partners (see Appendix A). Participants were instructed to answer these questions while keeping in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. The participants were also asked to provide complete and accurate answers in order to gain a better understanding of the role that 'misleading communication' plays in close relationships. These items were intermixed with the *perceived partner deception* items and other questions regarding misleading communication (not used in this study). A 2-point scale was used to measure these items in which '1' represented *strongly disagree* and '7' represented *strongly agree*. The reliability of these 9 items was acceptable ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ).

**Perceived partner deception.** Four items were created to assess the extent to which participants believe their partners engage in misleading communication (see Appendix B). These items were also selected on the basis of a pilot study using the criteria identified earlier. These items were combined with the *use of deception* items. Consequently, the same instructions and 7-point scale used for the *use of deception* questions apply to these items as well. Again, an acceptable inter-item reliability was obtained for these four items ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

**Perceived partner reaction.** To measure the extent to which partners are perceived to react adversely when receiving unwanted information, Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), as modified and described by Cloven and Roloff (1993), was used. This 14-item instrument measures both *symbolic aggression* (e.g., swear, insult, sulk, threaten), as well as the tendency of individuals to respond in a violent manner – *physical aggression* (e.g., hit, kick, push, slap; Cloven & Roloff, 1993). This measure has been used successfully to assess the extent to which individuals think their partners will react aggressively when confronted about their controlling behavior (Cloven & Roloff, 1993) or are the recipient of other complaints (Solomon & Samp, 1998). In the current study, this scale was used with some minor modifications. First, participants were instructed to think about how their partners generally respond when receiving



*unwelcome information*. Second, a 7-point scale was used with these items in which '1' represented *extremely uncharacteristic* and '7' indicated *extremely characteristic*. These items were scored in line with previous research (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon & Samp, 1998). The items related to a *perceived partner symbolic aggression* were reliable ( $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), as were those for *perceived partner physical aggression* ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

**Attachment.** To measure individuals' attachment beliefs, the Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment was used (Brennan et al., 1998). This instrument was chosen because the 36 items on the scale were derived from a comprehensive review of the literature and these items have been thoroughly screened for their reliability and appear to be valid measures of attachment. Furthermore, this scale provides dimensional scores in terms of attachment *avoidance* (the extent to which people are uncomfortable with intimacy) and attachment *anxiety* (the extent to which people fear being alone, unloved). Participants were asked to respond to the items in terms of how they generally feel about romantic relationships. Again, the items were measured on a 7-point scale '1' represented *strongly disagree* and '7' indicated *strongly agree*. The 18 items corresponding to *attachment avoidance* had an acceptable level of reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .91$ ), as did the 18 items representing *attachment anxiety* ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

**Relational indicators.** All of the relational indicator variables were measured using the 7-point agreement scale described earlier. *Commitment* to a relational partner was measured using a version of Rusbult's (1980, p. 182) commitment scale as modified and described by Solomon and Samp (1998). The reliability for this scale was good ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). *Relational satisfaction* was assessed using Hendrick's (1988) 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). Adequate reliability was obtained for the RAS items ( $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 6.10$ ,  $SD = .88$ ). *Intimacy* was measured using Rubin's Love Scale (Rubin, 1973) and the reliability of this 9-item scale was adequate ( $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 5.84$ ,  $SD = .83$ ). *Perceived understanding* was measured using the Subjective Closeness Index (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto 1989). This scale was chosen because feeling understood is implicated in perceptions of closeness. The reliability for this scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 6.50$ ,  $SD = .92$ ).

### Procedures

Over a 6-week period, couples reported to the researcher's office. Upon arrival, couples were reminded that the purpose of the study was to explore communication patterns in romantic relationships. The partners were told that they would be separated from each other and asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their communicative behaviors and those of their partner. All participants were asked to provide complete and candid answers to the questions and were told that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants were given the additional reassurance that their partner would not be allowed to see their responses. Next, relational partners were separated and taken to different locations where they were given time to complete the questionnaire on their own. When both parties were finished, each couple was paid \$15 and entered into a random drawing for \$750.

**TABLE 1**  
**Cross-couple correlations**

Variable	Correlation coefficient
Use of deception	.13
Perceived partner deception	.31**
Anxious attachment	.12
Avoidant attachment	.17*
Perceived partner symbolic aggression	.45**
Perceived partner physical aggression	.42**
Perceived understanding	.20*
Intimacy	.32**
Satisfaction	.44**
Commitment	.35**

*Note.* Cross-couple correlations were calculated by correlating partners' scores. The degrees of freedom for each test were 126.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Results

### Overview of analyses

Given the dyadic nature of the data collected, it was likely that partners' scores were nonindependent (Kenny, 1996). And an examination of the cross-couple correlations on the measures obtained indicates that partners' scores on many of the variables were related (see Table 1). In light of these correlations, the data were analyzed with a partner effects model using a pooled regression technique (Kenny, 1996). This technique assesses the extent to which an individual's (an actor's) score on an independent variable influences his or her own outcome on a dependent measure (*an actor effect*), while taking into account how a partner's response on the same independent measure influences the actor's dependent variable (*a partner effect*). In other words, how is my relational satisfaction influenced by my use of deception (an actor effect) taking into account my partner's use of deception (a partner effect)? Although this method of analysis is considered to be dyadic, the degrees of freedom are always higher than the number of couples, but lower than the number of individuals (Kenny, 1996, p. 284).

### Reciprocity

Several analyses were performed to test the hypotheses regarding the reciprocity of deception. First, two separate pooled regression analyses were conducted to test whether relational commitment and satisfaction are inversely related to perceived deception by a partner (*H1*). Thus, *relational satisfaction* served as the dependent variable in one analysis and *commitment* in the other. *Perceived partner deception* was the independent variable in both analyses. The results were consistent with the research expectations (see Table 2). An actor effect was obtained for both satisfaction and commitment. Specifically, thinking that a partner is dishonest was related to lower levels of these two variables.

**TABLE 2**  
**Pooled regression results testing for actor and partner effects**

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Actor effect			Partner effect			df
		H	Beta	t-value	H	Beta	t-value	
Commitment	Perceived partner deception	H1	-.133	-3.33***		-.132	-3.29***	252
Satisfaction	Perceived partner deception	H1	-.195	-5.36***		-.155	-4.27***	252
Use of deception	Perceived partner deception	H2	.464	7.62***		.132	2.16*	222
Use of deception	Commitment	H3	-.528	5.43***		-.054	-.560	234
Perceived partner deception	Use of deception		.436	8.53***	RQ1	.202	3.95***	252
Use of deception	Perceived symbolic aggression	H4	.164	2.47**		.049	.739	247
Use of deception	Perceived physical aggression	H4	.117	1.86*		.056	.887	252
Intimacy	Use of deception	H5	-.150	-4.29***		-.021	-.602	238
Perceived understanding	Use of deception	H5	-.182	-4.71***		-.032	-.829	250
Satisfaction	Successful deception		-.023	-.626	H6	.068	1.78*	164
Commitment	Successful deception		-.032	-.847	H6	.029	.772	179
Use of deception	Avoidant attachment	H7	.675	7.63***		.045	.513	250
Use of deception	Anxious attachment	H8	.279	3.76***		.092	1.24	252

*Note.* A pooled regression technique was used for a dyadic analysis of the data (Kenny, 1996). One-tailed tests were used to examine hypothesized relationships. Several actor and partner effects were not hypothesized and therefore two-tailed tests were used to interpret those results. Degrees of freedom were identical for testing both actor and partner effects.

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

This pattern held even when taking into account a partner's level of perceived distrust. Although not predicted, these partner effects were also significant for both analyses. In short, satisfaction and commitment were inversely related to an individual's as well as his/her partner's level of skepticism.

It was also expected that an individual's use of deception would be related to the belief that a partner is dishonest (*H2*). Support for this prediction was obtained. Individual's use of deception was associated with the belief that one's partner engages in deception (an actor effect), taking into account the mistrust experienced by a partner (a partner effect). Although not predicted, the partner effect was also significant.

Finally, a series of analyses was conducted to determine whether the use of deception was related to lower levels of commitment (*H3*). The *use of deception* scores served as the dependent variable and *commitment* was entered as the independent variable. As predicted, the use of deception was related to lower levels of commitment (an actor effect) while taking into account a partner's level of commitment.

To determine whether skepticism regarding a partner's honesty was related to a partner's actual use of deception (*RQ1*), a pooled regression analysis was calculated with *perceived partner deception* serving as the dependent variable and *use of deception* as the independent variable. As the results in Table 2 indicate, actor and partner effects were obtained. Thus, the perception that a partner is dishonest is related to a partner's actual use of deception.

### Denigrative vs. reciprocative model

Whereas these results are consistent with a reciprocity-based model of deception, they do not rule out alternative explanations. In particular, experimental research indicates that people question the honesty of those they mislead as a means of protecting their self-esteem (Sagarin, Rhoads, & Cialdini, 1998). Consequently, additional analyses were conducted to explore the possible differences between a denigrative (Sagarin et al., 1998) and a reciprocative model of deception. If the perceived reciprocity findings obtained are indicative of a denigrative model, then individuals might be more likely to estimate that their partners engage in more deception than themselves (i.e., I'm more honest than my partner). A reciprocal model, based on principles of social exchange, however, would predict that individuals prefer to think that they engage in more deception than their partners do (i.e., I incur lower costs than my partner does).

To determine which model the data support, a paired-samples *t*-test was performed on the items pertaining to individuals' reports of their own lies and individuals' estimates of their partners' lies during the course of a week (item 6, Appendix A and item 1, Appendix B, respectively). These two items were selected for comparison because the units involved are equivalent. Although this test treats the individual as the unit of analysis, this is not problematic given that the intraclass correlations for these two variables are close to or below .30 ( $\hat{\rho} = .107$ , intraclass correlation between reported number of own lies with partners' reported number of lies;  $\hat{\rho} = .320$ , intraclass correlation comparing partners' estimates of their partners' lies; Kashy & Kenny, 2000, p. 459). As the results indicate, individuals reported that they engage in *more* lies than their partners do during the course of a week ( $t[254] = -4.14, p < .001$ ).

### **Avoiding punishment**

Another set of analyses was conducted to test the idea that deception is related to the fear of a partner's negative reaction to the truth (*H4*). Two separate pooled regression analyses were performed with the *use of deception* scores serving as the dependent measure in both of these tests, while *perceived partner symbolic* and *perceived partner physical aggression* served as the independent variables across the two analyses. A significant actor effect was obtained between the *perceived partner symbolic aggression* and the *use of deception* scores (see Table 2). A relatively small, although significant, relationship was obtained between *use of deception* and *perceived partner physical aggression*. Both of these actor effects were obtained controlling for partners' level of perceived aggression. The fairly small size of the relationship between *perceived partner physical aggression* and the *use of deception* was probably due to the floor effect underlying the *perceived partner physical aggression* scores (the distribution for this variable was positively skewed,  $M = 1.51$ ,  $Skewness = 2.86$ ).

To test the idea that people who engage in deception experience fewer relational rewards associated with telling the truth (*H5*), the pooled regression technique was used on the *use of deception*, *intimacy*, and *perceived understanding* scores. The *intimacy* scores were entered as the dependent variable in one analysis, while the *perceived understanding* scores served as the dependent variable in the other analysis. Across both tests, the *use of deception* scores were entered as the independent variable. The expected actor effects were obtained in both analyses. As the results in Table 2 indicate, lying was related to lower levels of *intimacy* and *closeness*, even when taking into account a partner's use of deception.

Implicated by an avoidance of punishment model, people who were *successfully* misled were expected to experience greater relational satisfaction and commitment (*H6*). To test this hypothesis, first, *successful deception* scores were created by taking an individual's *use of deception* score and subtracting his/her partner's *perceived partner deception* score. Positive scores indicate that individuals are believed to be more honest than they actually are (successful deception). Next, pooled regression analyses were conducted with *relational satisfaction* and *commitment* serving as the dependent measures in two separate analyses with the *successful deception* scores serving as the independent variable in both tests. It was expected that there would be a significant, positive partner effect. Moderate support was obtained for this idea. Individuals were more satisfied when their partners were successful liars. Being successfully misled by a partner, however, was not related to individuals' commitment to the relationship.

### **Attachment needs**

The last explanation offered focused on the relationship between deception and an individual's level of comfort with intimacy and closeness. According to this theoretical perspective, fear of intimacy was thought to be related to the use of deception in romantic relationships (*H7*). To test this hypothesis, the *use of deception* scores served as the dependent measure and *avoidant attachment* was the independent variable in a pooled regression analysis. An actor effect was expected such that one's own fear of intimacy would be related to the use of deception. As the results in Table 2 illustrate, being uncomfortable with intimacy was related to the *use of deception*, even when controlling for a partner's avoidant attachment orientation.

**TABLE 3**  
**Multiple predictor test of independent variables on the use of deception scores**

Independent variable	Actor effect		Partner effect		df	R <sup>2</sup>
	Beta	t-value	Beta	t-value		
Perceived partner deception	.295	4.54***	.129	1.99*	225	.057
Commitment	-.256	-2.59**	.111	1.12	221	.036
Perceived symbolic aggression	-.016	-.239	.062	.952	239	.005
Perceived physical aggression	.072	1.06	-.050	-.744	242	.011
Avoidant attachment	.431	4.57***	-.093	-.982	240	.094
Anxious attachment	.169	2.42**	-.047	-.673	230	.028

*Note.* A multiple pooled regression technique was used for simultaneously testing actor and partner effects of the independent variables (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). One-tailed tests were used to determine the significance of the expected actor effects. Partner effects were not anticipated and therefore two-tailed tests were used to interpret those results. The  $R^2$  values represent the combined influence of the actor and partner effects for each independent variable. The combined independent variables accounted for 30.2% of the variance in the use of deception scores. Degrees of freedom were identical for testing both actor and partner effects.

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

It was also predicted that people who fear being abandoned might engage in more deception (*H8*). In this analysis, *use of deception* was the dependent variable and *attachment anxiety* served as the predictor variable. As expected, an actor effect was obtained between the *use of deception* and the fear of being unloved, controlling for the partner's level of relational anxiety.

### Combined models

While all three explanations were supported, it is possible that not all of the predictor variables contribute to our understanding of deceptive behavior when their impact is jointly considered. To address this issue (*RQ2*), the variables related to the use of deception (see Table 3) were simultaneously regressed on the *use of deception* scores using a multiple predictor actor-partner effects model (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). This technique examines the actor effects for all of the independent variables simultaneously, while also controlling for all of the possible partner effects. As the results in Table 3 indicate, variables related to a partner's negative reaction did not contribute to the *use of deception* in light of the other predictors. All of the other independent variables, however, contributed uniquely to our understanding of the use of deception even when taking into account partners' scores on the independent measures. Specifically, *perceived partner deception*, *commitment*, *avoidant attachment*, and *anxious attachment* jointly accounted for approximately 30% of the variance in the use of deception scores.

### Discussion

The goal of this research was to explore the use of deception in intimate relationships. Three explanations were offered in an attempt to account for

deceptive communication among romantic partners. The results related to each theoretical explanation are discussed below.

### **Reciprocity**

The first explanation was based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Taking into account principles of interdependence (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and resource theory (Converse & Foa, 1993), several predictions about relational deception were offered. First, attributions of partner dishonesty were expected to be related to lower levels of satisfaction and commitment and the desire to retaliate by denying partners access to a similar resource (i.e., truthful information). Moreover, lower levels of commitment were also thought to relate to individuals' greater reliance on deception as a means of restoring autonomy and distancing themselves from uncooperative partners (Van Lange & Visser, 1999). Support for all of these predictions were obtained. Perceptions of partner dishonesty were associated with lower levels of relational satisfaction and commitment. People apparently expect honesty from romantic partners and view partners' use of deception as a relational cost. Also as expected, one's deceptive behavior could be explained by the perception that a partner is dishonest (direct retaliation) and with regard to an individual's lower level of relational commitment (attempt to withdraw from the relationship). Taken together, this pattern of results supports the idea that deception is based on principles of reciprocity. When confronted with a misleading partner, individuals appear to even the score and establish some distance/autonomy from uncooperative romantic partners.

Ironically, while individuals assume that their deceptive behavior matches their partners' behavior, this was not entirely the case. In fact, partners did not actually match each other in terms of their misleading behavior (see cross-couple correlations in Table 1). How is it that individuals are aware of their partners' deceptive behavior (*RQ1*), believe they match their partners' behavior (*H2*), and yet fail to actually do so (see correlation in Table 1)? Perhaps the relatively weak relationship between the perception of partner dishonesty and a partner's actual deceptive behavior (see Table 2) provides enough slippage for individuals to mistakenly think they engage in reciprocal deception. This pattern of results, nevertheless, is consistent with other reciprocity-based behaviors, namely, self-disclosure in which people also tend to view the exchange of information as being more symmetrical than it really is (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980).

The claim that deception is based upon the reciprocal exchange of resources is tempered by an important caveat: because the data were collected using self-reported measures, the causal order among the variables could not be determined. In fact, experimental research indicates that people question the honesty of those they mislead as a means of protecting their self-esteem (Sagarin et al., 1998). Do the results presented here merely reflect the desire to believe that one's deceptive practices are no worse than a partner's behavior? Several factors suggest that this is not the case. First,

the finding that perceptions of partner dishonesty were actually related to a partner's actual use of deception seems to indicate that evaluations of others are based on more than just the desire to feel good about oneself vis-à-vis a partner's behavior. In fairness, it could also be argued that the use of deception makes one more suspicious of partners (denigrative effect) and, in turn, this increased suspicion makes individuals more accurate lie detectors (see McCornack & Levine, 1990b). In contrast, however, perceptions of partner dishonesty were related to a partner's deceptive behavior even when controlling for one's own level of deception. Thus, an entirely denigrative account for this perceptual accuracy seems unlikely. And given even a little perceptual accuracy, the causal order is likely to unfold in line with a reciprocal model as well. In other words, if individuals accurately perceive their partners' deceptive behavior, it is unlikely that they are simply going to overlook their partners' misdeeds without taking some retributive action. Second, further analysis indicated that individuals report telling *more* lies than they think their partners do. This finding is inconsistent with a denigrative model of deception and more consistent with principles of social exchange. Apparently, people like to think their costs are lower than their partners', rather than claiming the moral high ground. In sum, while the exact direction of the influence between deception and perceptions of a partner's dishonesty can not be discerned from the data collected here, the findings nevertheless highlight the notion that relational costs are associated with the practice of deception. People apparently adjust their level of deception to match their perceived partners' behavior, change their beliefs about their partners' use of deception to match their own behavior, or they may use both strategies to level the playing field.

These findings not only provide support for the extensive body of research on reciprocity and the matching exchange (or denial) of relational resources (Converse & Foa, 1993), but they offer several practical implications for individuals in romantic relationships as well. Speculating from the evidence obtained, using one's level of deception to judge a partner's use of deception may not be warranted. Romantic partners do not actually match each other's use of misleading communication; they only *think* they do. Consequently, people who assume that partners are equally guilty of engaging in deception may be in for a surprise if they decide to reveal the truth based on this assumption. In contrast, an individual's level of trust may be a reliable indicator of his/her own inclination to mislead rather than an accurate reflection of a partners' deceptive misdeeds [as shown in Table 2, an actor's deceptive behavior (.436) was twice as influential as a partner's behavior (.202) with respect to attributions of partner dishonesty]. Furthermore, assuming that perceived reciprocity plays a role in deception, convincing a partner that one is honest may have an impact on a partner's propensity to deceive. At the very least, convincing a partner that one is relatively honest should cause distress for those who still choose to deceive. These generalizations, however, are based on the *perception* of honesty, more so than actually being honest with a partner.



### **Avoiding punishment**

According to this second explanation, individuals would be more likely to mislead partners who have the tendency to respond to unwelcome information in a hostile, aggressive manner. And people who mislead their partners were thought to experience fewer of the rewards associated with telling the truth (feelings of intimacy and closeness). Finally, assuming that people tailor their deceptive messages to appease their partners, it was thought that actually being *successfully* misled would be related to positive relational outcomes. The results revealed that people *are* more likely to engage in deception when they think that their partners are going to react in an aggressive manner. And, as people become more dependent on the use of deception, they tend to experience less intimacy and perceived understanding. Also as expected, being successfully misled by a partner had a positive impact on relational satisfaction (there was no noticeable impact on commitment).

Overall, these results support the idea that individuals assess partners' reactions when deciding to opt out of telling the truth, and they extend the 'chilling effect' (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon & Samp, 1998) to deceptive communication. The results of this investigation demonstrate that deception, in general, is used when dealing with overly aggressive partners.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that deception is probably not an optimal solution for handling aggressive partners. Although successful deception may pacify relational partners, one's own use of deception is associated with increased feelings of isolation and declines in intimacy. And, as noted earlier, the frequent use of deception may increase the odds that a partner will eventually uncover the truth and this may lead to a variety of other relational problems (e.g., a partner's retaliation and withdrawal). Simply put, if one is going to engage in deception, one should accept the costs involved and try hard not to get caught. In addition, if individuals want to be told the truth in the future, they should refrain from reacting aggressively when confronted with unsettling information.

### **Attachment needs**

The final explanation focused on individuals' differing needs for intimacy and closeness in their romantic relationships. Based on adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the desire for intimacy varies along two dimensions that were thought to underlie to the use of deception. First, individuals vary in terms of their attachment avoidance, which represents the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with intimacy and strive to maintain their autonomy (Brennan et al., 1998). It was expected that deception would be related to attachment avoidance as a means of keeping romantic partners at a comfortable distance. The second dimension, attachment anxiety, represents the extent to which people are concerned about their partners' level of commitment (Brennan et al., 1998). Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety are chronically worried about their partners' willingness and ability to meet their relational needs (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). It was expected that anxious individuals would also engage

in higher levels of deception in a desperate attempt to secure and maintain a relational partner.

Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were both related to the use of deception in romantic relationships. And, in light of the results presented earlier, deception may help avoidant individuals achieve their goal with regard to increased autonomy. In contrast, while deception may help anxious individuals appease their romantic partners, it likely prevents them from achieving their ultimate aim – intimacy and a partner's enduring commitment. Ironically, successful deception may draw a partner closer, but its use may lead to one's own feelings of decreased intimacy and understanding. Such a paradox may heighten the relational anxiety that anxiously-attached individuals tend to experience. Furthermore, if these individuals' deceptive practices become uncovered, their worst fears may come true. Partners may withdraw from the relationship. Overall, deception may help avoidant individuals accomplish their goals more so than it helps anxious individuals meet their own relational needs. Finally, the link between attachment beliefs and misleading communication suggests that deceptive practices may represent a relatively stable aspect of individuals' behavioral repertoire. Unlike the other two explanations offered, an attachment perspective implies that people have a tendency to engage in misleading communication across relational partners.

### **Combined explanations**

The three explanations offered are similar in that they assume that individuals will avoid telling the truth when it is costly to do so. Specifically, the truth may be costly when it is not reciprocated, when partners react negatively to it, or when people fear the truth will not help them achieve their relational needs. To determine if the predictor variables related to these explanations accounted for unique amounts of variance when they are simultaneously considered, the independent variables were used in a multiple actor-partner effects regression (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). The results indicated that perceived aggressive behavior (both symbolic and physical) did not contribute to our understanding of deceptive behavior when the impact of the other predictor variables was taken into account (see Table 3). It is possible that the variance explained by *perceived aggression* is better accounted for by the belief that a partner is being dishonest. Being suspicious of a partner may be a more encompassing attribution than the belief that a partner responds poorly when confronted with unwelcome information. That is, individuals may think that responding aggressively to information is an indicator of a larger problem – the inability to *deal* with the truth altogether (both hearing it and telling it). The remaining variables, however, all made unique contributions to our understanding of deceptive behavior, jointly accounting for approximately 30% of the variance in deceptive communication among romantic partners. In sum, the truth appears to be costly for a variety of relationally and individually based reasons.

The results may also provide insight into the nature of the truth bias. The

finding that individuals report telling *more* lies than they *estimate* their partners tell may shed additional light on this phenomenon. Specifically, this result is consistent with the idea that individuals prefer not to see their partners' deceptive behavior because the cost of entertaining such a belief is relationally prohibitive (Anderson et al., 1999). Perhaps principles of social exchange are the driving force underlying the truth bias. If this is true, then we should expect that the truth bias would be more prominent in *voluntary interdependent* relationships rather than in non-interdependent and/or involuntary relationships. For example, the truth bias is probably less likely among involuntary or non-interdependent relationships because individuals can easily *justify* the costs associated with assuming that such individuals are being dishonest (I'm forced to deal with them or their deceptive behavior has little impact on me). However, such beliefs are more difficult to justify when it comes to the case of involuntary and highly interdependent partnerships. How can individuals rationalize the belief that they are willingly involved with someone who is betraying them? Hopefully, future research can explore the extent to which the *voluntary interdependence* is the causal mechanism underlying judgements of others' deceptive behavior.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results obtained, several other broad conclusions can be tentatively offered about relational outcomes and the use of deception. First, people experience the most positive relational outcomes when they do not engage in deception and they believe that their partners refrain from such behavior as well. Actually using deception, however, is related to negative outcomes for oneself, but it has a modest positive impact on a partner, unless of course it is detected. Fortunately, the results indicate that people are only partially aware of their partner's deceptive practices and individuals tend to assume that partners are more honest than themselves. However, believing that a partner is engaged in deception is related to negative outcomes for *everyone* involved. As scholars have suspected, a little suspicion appears to go a long way in intimate relationships (Miller et al., 1986). Conceivably, suspicion may tempt one to engage in deception, ultimately sending the relationship on a downward trajectory of decreased relational outcomes, increased suspicion (Sagarin et al., 1998), and more deception. Finally, the fact that one's use of deception was related to lower levels of relational characteristics seems to indicate that deception, broadly speaking, is used as a means of coping with relational problems. While some deception may be functional, the extensive use of deception appears to be an indicator of overall relational distress.

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## **Appendix A**

### *Deception items*

The following items were used to assess the extent to which participants mislead their partners. These nine items were randomly dispersed with other items related to misleading communication in romantic relationships. The reliability for these items was adequate ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

1. I disclose everything to my partner, both good and bad (reverse scoring).
2. I sometimes find myself lying to my partner about things I have done.
3. I sometimes lie to my partner.
4. I tell my partner the complete truth, even things he/she does not want to hear (reverse scoring).
5. I try to hide certain things that I have done from my partner.
6. Please estimate the number of times you lie to your partner during the course of a week. \_\_\_\_
7. There are certain issues that I try to conceal from my partner.
8. There are certain things I try to mislead my partner about.
9. When I don't live up to my partner's expectations, I always tell him/her what I've done (reverse scoring).

## **Appendix B**

### *Perceived deception by partner*

The following items were used to assess the extent to which participants thought their partners mislead them. These four items were randomly dispersed with other items related to misleading communication in romantic relationships. The reliability for these items was adequate ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

1. Estimate the number of times you think your partner lies to you during the course of a week. \_\_\_\_
2. I think my partner is very honest with me (reverse scoring).
3. I think that my partner tries to mislead me.
4. I think that my partner withholds important information from me.

