Deception in romantic relationships

Conventional wisdom maintains that honest communication is an essential part of any healthy relationship. Within the context of a heterosexual romantic relationship, efforts at communication are often complicated by gender-based differences in communication styles (Wood & Dindia, 1998). Unfortunately, honest communication in romantic relationships may also be obscured by deception, half-truths, and outright lies from one or both of the people in the relationship.

There are several possible explanations for this type of intentionally deceptive behavior, including the desire of individuals to present themselves as ideal relationship partners (Wildermuth, Vogl-Bauer, & Rivera, 2006) and the fear that telling the truth about a particular issue might create conflict in the relationship (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). Conversely, the suspicion that a partner has been dishonest erodes the trust of the other partner and can eventually undermine the foundations of the relationship. In some cases, however, accusations of dishonesty may be unfair, if not completely unfounded.

When weighing the truthfulness of what their partner has said, men and women who value their relationship should consider gender differences, differences in communication styles, and the underlying intent of the message that was communicated before accusing their partner of intentional deception. Research indicates that men and women tell lies at about the same rate; the expectation that women would be more honest because they are more relational than men appears to be a myth that is not supported by the evidence (DePaulo, Kashy, Kierkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996).

There does, however, appear to be a difference in the kinds of lies that men and women tell. The women in this study were more likely to tell what DePaulo, et al. , refer to as " kind lies", or lies that are designed to spare the other person's feelings, and fewer lies about themselves. The women were more likely to tell kind lies when they were talking to other women than they were when they were talking to men. The men in this study were more likely to use lies to inflate their accomplishments or to save themselves from embarrassment.

The difference between men and women is not in the number of lies that are told, but in the purpose of the lie. DePaulo, et al. , did not discuss the potential implications of their research within the context of a romantic relationship. At first glance, it could be argued that if women are more likely to lie to spare the feelings of the other person, then women might be expected to be more honest about potentially big problems like infidelity. However, it may also be true that women would lie about infidelity if they believed that the lie would keep their partner from experiencing pain.

Furthermore, DePaulo, et al. (2006) noted that women were less likely to tell kind lies when they were interacting with men. While this observation may change within the context of a romantic relationship, it may become more true as the romance fades. In some cases, the damage to the relationship may not be caused by a lie, but by the perception that a lie has been told. Edwards and Shepherd (2004) noted that individuals use either expressive, conventional, or Rhetorical models of communication. These communication design models provide the structure for what the individual wishes to

communicate and determine the manner in which the message will be communicated.

Expressive communicators are guided by the need for clear communication, with literal interpretations and messages that are not affected by change in context, emotion, or expression. Expressive communicators tend to deal in absolutes; for people who prefer the Expressive communication design, messages are either objective and honest or they are a lie (Edwards & Shepherd (2004, p. 214). For Conventional communicators, the meaning of what is communicated is rooted in the context of the communication. Messages that are communicated in one context may not have the same meaning as the same words used in a different context.

Rhetorical communicators employ a more elaborate communication design logic in which context is not fixed, but may be changed to enhance the strength of the message. According to Edwards and Shepherd (2004), individuals who prefer a Rhetorical logic design tend to have more success in highly complex or difficult interactions. Edwards and Shepherd (2004) studied the interaction of communication models, Expressive, Conventional, and Rhetorical, and the individual's philosophy of human nature and world view.

According to their research, people who prefer an Expressive communication style tend to be more cynical and tended to interpret messages and events more negatively than other communicators. The Expressive communicators also appear to be less well received than other communicators; in the study by Edwards and Shepherd, Expressive communicators were described by

others as " insensitive, inadequate, or annoying" and were responded to " with anger, indifference, or insensitivity in return" (Edwards & Shepherd, 2004, p. 214).

In contrast, Rhetorical communicators were more persuasive, more willing to negotiate, and were more successful in creating a consensus with others. The findings by Edwards and Shepherd have significant implications for romantic relationships. Partners who have an Expressive communication style might be more inclined to believe that their partners are lying or that they are somehow being deceived. Conversely, partners with a Rhetorical style may find the paranoid cynicism of their Expressive partners tedious and annoying, especially if the Rhetorical communicator is accused of being dishonest. This charge is not without some merit.

In the eyes of the Expressive communicator, the Rhetorical partner's use of changing context, metaphoric language, and other non-literal uses of language probably do seem dishonest and deceptive. For the Rhetorical communicator, these are simply more advanced applications of language that are used to provide emphasis and clarification. The Expressive communicator is not the victim of dishonesty as much as he or she is the victim of the perception of deceit. Just as there are different communication styles, there are also differences in beliefs and expectations about love and romantic relationships.

These differences are often referred to as differences in " love styles. " Lee (1977, cited by Levin, Strzyzewski, & Park, 2006) identified six love styles. Eros is characterized by emotional intensity and strong commitment. Storge,

which is typically the result of a long-term friendship, relies less on physical attraction. People with a Ludus love style view love as a game that may include multiple partners. For the purposes of this paper, it is noteworthy that Ludic lovers view deception and manipulation as acceptable tactics in their love game and consider commitment, jealousy, and strong emotional attachment as unacceptable.

Agape love is altruistic and focused on the needs of others, while Pragma love relies on logic and reasoning to determine whether a relationship partner would be a good fit. Finally, a Manic love style is characterized by high degrees of dependency, uncertainty, jealousy, and the need for repeated reassurance. Levin, Strzyzewski, and Park (2006) emphasized that there is no ideal love style and that people may experience different aspects of love at some point in their lives or even during the course of a relationship.

Levin, et al., (2006) noted the significant affect of love styles in romantic relationships and how an individual's love style affects communication. For example, in the introductory phases of a relationship, Pragmas responded best to direct lines such as straightforward introductions or invitations to a specific activity; Manics and Agapes responded more positively to innocuous lines, defined as ambiguous lines which in another context may not be taken as an effort to start a romantic relationship at all; while Ludics and Agapes responded favorably to cute or flippant lines, such as clever " pick up" lines or jokes (Levin, et al. , 2006, p. 279).

Eros, arguably the love style that believes the most in love at first sight, had an equal response to all types of opening lines, possibly because of this love style's preoccupation with physical appearance and other intangible aspects of attraction (Levin, et al. , 2006). Levin, et al. , also investigated the strategies that people with various love styles used to intensify their relationships and their communication preferences in an ongoing relationship.

People with an Agape love placed a higher value on honesty and trust than those with Ludic love styles, who were more interested in sexual performance (Levin, et al. , 2006). It is interesting to note that all of the respondents in this study indicated that they valued honesty in their relationships, although in the case of the Ludics, one would suspect that this response was a nod to social expectations of valuing honesty over sexual performance and not necessarily a valid response.

The study by Levin, et al. , also has significant implications for honest communication within a relationship. Agapes who place a higher value on honesty would tend to be more likely to be hurt when they suspect or learn that their partner has been dishonest with them. Ludics who are not as concerned about honesty and who themselves believe that dishonesty is acceptable within the context of a romantic relationship would be less likely to be concerned about whether their partner was lying to them.

Manics, who need nearly constant reassurance, could be shattered if they suspected that their partner was lying to them. Conclusion As DePaulo, et al. , (1996) noted, everybody lies and they do so with alarming regularity.

However, it is also true that much of what we may suspect to be deception is more likely a case of miscommunication. Couples can help their relationships by not jumping to conclusions about the truthfulness of their partner and by learning to understand the communication preferences and love style of their partner.