

# Tell Me Sweet (And Not-So-Sweet) Little Lies: Deception in Romantic Relationships

Jennifer Guthrie & Adrienne Kunkel

*Deception undoubtedly plays a complex role in romantic relationships. While honesty and openness are desirable traits among romantic partners, partners may nonetheless use deception in order to meet personal or relational goals. This study provides a richer understanding of the extent to which deception is used in romantic relationships and the common motives for deceiving partners. The diary-based, qualitative responses of 67 participants were examined for instances of, and reasons for, deception. Results revealed the nuanced and sometimes contradictory nature of deception in romantic relationships as participants reported that they use deception as a means to maintain the relationship, to manage face needs, to negotiate dialectical tensions, and to establish relational control, and also that they perceive deception to function in both positive and negative ways.*

*Keywords: Deception; Dialectical Tensions; Facework; Relational Maintenance; Romantic Relationships*

Although most of us would like to believe that our romantic relationships are built on absolute truth and openness, “it is not uncommon for people to recognize that even in close relationships, there are likely to be situations in which honesty will not be practiced” (Knapp, 2006, p. 519). Knox, Schacht, Holt, and Turner’s (1993) study of university students’ use of deception revealed that 92% of their participants

---

Jennifer Guthrie is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. Adrienne Kunkel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. This study is based on the first author’s MA thesis, which was directed by the second author. A version of this study was presented at the 2012 International Association for Relationship Research Convention in Chicago. Correspondence to: Adrienne Kunkel, Department of Communication Studies, University of Kansas, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Room 102, Lawrence, KS, 66045-7574, USA. E-mail: adkunkel@ku.edu

had lied to, or were not completely honest with, their sexual partners. In Metts' study of deception in close relationships, only 33 of 390 participants "could not recall an occasion when they were 'not completely truthful'" with a close relational partner (1989, p. 164). When not directly lying to their romantic partners, many people acknowledge that they withhold information from their romantic partners or use avoidance strategies to evade discussion of certain issues (Metts, 1989).

Although researchers know that lovers deceive, most research regarding deception focuses on the *extent* to which people use deception (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; George & Robb, 2008; Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004), abilities to *detect* whether others are lying (e.g., Buller, Strzyzewski, & Hunsaker, 1991; Burgoon & Buller, 1994; Levine, Shaw, & Shulman, 2010), or *consequences* following the discovery of deception (e.g., Burgoon, Buller, Dillman, & Walther, 1995; McCornack & Levine, 1990). While numerous studies address participants' motives for using deception (see Dunbar & Jensen, 2011; Knapp, 2006; and Seiter, Brusckhe, & Bai, 2003, for reviews), Seiter and Brusckhe state that "consensus has not emerged around a single typology of motives" (2007, p. 3). Moreover, while DePaulo's diary studies are widely cited, this work is rooted in psychology. Thus, the current study aims to replicate DePaulo et al.'s (1996) diary studies while grounding the study in communication and proposing a typology of motives for deception that highlights the communicative and relational aspects of deception.

## Review of Literature

### *Identifying Deception*

O'Hair and Cody define deception as "the conscious attempt to create or perpetuate false impressions among other communicators" (1994, p. 183). Though using deception may be a "conscious" attempt to reach certain goals, romantic partners often deceive each other with little effort or planning; in fact, the use of deception is often governed by emotion (Cole, 2006; McCornack, 1992). Along these lines, O'Hair and Cody state that "deception is a message strategy much like other forms of communication in that it is purposeful, often goal directed, and frequently functions as a relational control device" (1994, p. 181). Thus, deception provides false impressions in the service of goals aligned with the needs of the deceiver or the one being deceived.

Deception researchers have strived to categorize its forms and strategies (e.g., Buller & Burgoon, 1994; Hopper & Bell, 1984; Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975). The current study uses Turner et al.'s (1975) five categories of deception (*lies*, *exaggerations*, *half-truths*, *secrets*, and *diversionary responses*) because a pilot study revealed that this typology best helped participants conceptualize and apply their own various forms of deceptive behavior. According to Turner et al. (1975), *lies* are messages that falsify the truth; they provide explicitly untrue information. *Exaggerations* are messages that stretch the truth or modify the extent of the truth; they afford more information than that which is actually true. *Half-truths* are messages that conceal the whole truth and withhold pieces of information to minimize effect. *Secrets* occur when the truth is completely withheld; they are a form of keeping entirely silent about

something. Finally, *diversionary responses* are avoidance tactics used in order to divert attention away from otherwise available information (Turner et al., 1975).

### *Motives for Deception in Romantic Relationships*

Motives for deception may be broadly classified with regard to whose interests are being served by the deception. “Other-benefiting” acts of deception are those that serve the interest of the deceived, while “self-serving” acts of deception serve the interests or goals of the deceiver (Knapp, 2006). Cole (2001) suggested that deception in romantic relationships is likely inspired by concern for the relationship and for the partner (see also, Metts, 1989; and DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). However, participants’ self-reports of altruistic deception have complex implications. Kaplar and Gordon note several reasons for this complexity: “lie tellers may not be fully aware of what actually motivated their behavior”; participants might report altruistic motives to “justify a positive construal for the lie” or for social desirability; and “although lie tellers claim their lies were altruistically motivated, lie receivers may construe things differently” (2004, p. 490). In addition, Knapp (2006, p. 522) considers this distinction “problematic” because “the demarcation between self and other in close relationships is, by definition, fuzzy,” and a romantic partner may tell a self-serving lie that benefits the other partner as well. Accordingly, this study frames its examination of motives within relational communication concepts.

### *Relational maintenance*

Although deception might threaten trust between romantic partners (Bok, 1999), the use of deception may be more desirable than complete honesty at times. As Saxe explained, “An individual obsessed with being totally honest might, in fact, become a social isolate” and “complete honesty could make relationships tedious, if not conflict laden” (1991, p. 414). Being completely honest at all times could possibly make one difficult to be around because of the conflict, awkward situations, or hurt feelings he or she may incur.

Moreover, Spitzberg and Cupach state that “lying in intimate relationships functions to avoid relational trauma and conflict, processes that might be substantively more dysfunctional than deceptions” (2007, p. 15). Although romantic partners may value trust and honesty, deception may serve positive functions in romantic relationships. For example, Horan and Booth-Butterfield state that participants who used deceptive affectionate communication with their partners “may have believed they were doing a greater good for the relationship by expressing affection, but not in a totally authentic manner. In essence, they may have believed the deception was beneficial to the relationship and the partner” (2011, p. 99; see also Horan & Booth-Butterfield, in press).

### *Managing face needs*

The concept of *facework* enriches our understanding of why romantic partners may deceive. Cupach and Metts define “face” as “the conception of self that each person

displays in particular interactions with others” (1994, p. 3). A face threat occurs “when a person’s desired identity in a particular situation is challenged” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 4). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people have two types of universal face needs: positive and negative face. Positive face is the “desire to be liked and respected by the significant people in our lives” and negative face is the “desire to be free from constraint and imposition” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 5). Accordingly, romantic partners may deceive in order to support their own positive face or that of their partner (e.g., telling the partner that a new haircut is attractive when it is not or blaming someone else for one’s own embarrassing mistake). Deception may also be utilized to protect oneself from a negative face threat (e.g., faking illness to avoid attending a romantic partner’s business party).

### *Relational dialectics*

Deception in romantic relationships may stem from the dialectical tensions partners experience in their relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996), drawing heavily from Bakhtin, contend that relationships consist of ongoing tensions between desires that are simultaneous yet contradictory. These three major relational dialectical tensions are openness/closedness, autonomy/connection, and novelty/predictability.

Research has demonstrated that romantic partners need both expression and privacy to maintain relational satisfaction (Baxter, 1988, 1990); thus, romantic partners may be motivated to use deception in order to maintain privacy (e.g., not disclosing secrets) or to enhance expression (e.g., exaggerating a story to foster conversation). A second dialectical tension, that of autonomy and connection, may also motivate romantic partners to deceive. As Baxter explains, people need to “sacrifice some individual autonomy” for relationships; however, “too much connection paradoxically destroys the relationship because the individual identities become lost” (1988, p. 259). Romantic partners may choose to deceive in order to protect their autonomy (e.g., not revealing plans to go out without one’s partner) or to create additional connection (e.g., feigning interest in a partner’s hobby). The third opposition in relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 1988, 1990) regards predictability and novelty. Partners may use deception to honor a disliked but expected tradition or to ensure that something new and exciting is being pursued.

Cole (2006) argues that there is a need for deception in romantic relationships because romantic partners can be overly constrictive of one another and overly inquisitive into the personal lives of each other. Thus, “deception is often the best way to deal with the constraints that intimacy creates” (Cole, 2006, para. 13). By using deception to mitigate these dialectical tensions, romantic partners may perceive more satisfaction in the relationship.

### *Relational control*

O’Hair and Cody suggested that deception may be utilized as a “relational control device” (1994, p. 181). Drawing from Cole’s (2006) argument above, partners may use deception in order to *avoid* constrictive, overly inquisitive partners, but they

may also use deception to *be* constrictive or coercive in order to ensure that their partners behave or feel how they want them to. For example, a partner might conceal the fact that the couple was invited to a party because he knows she will want to go, but he does not.

Further exploring the motives for using deception will increase our understanding of the relational functions of deception in romantic relationships. In order to fully examine the extent to which deception is used as well as the motives for deception in romantic relationships, this study asked:

RQ1: To what extent do individuals in long-term romantic relationships use deception?

RQ2: What are the motives for using deception in long-term romantic relationships?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were undergraduate and graduate students recruited entirely through word-of-mouth or direct solicitation at a large Midwestern university. The university institutional review board approved all methods and procedures for the study. Further, all participants received class or extra credit for participating in the study. Initially, 91 diary packets containing all materials needed for the study were distributed. Sixty-eight out of 91 packets were returned yielding a response rate of 74.73%. One of the 68 packets was deemed unusable because the participant did not complete the diary as instructed, leaving a total of 67 diaries viable for analysis. Of the 67 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.51$  years,  $SD = 2.44$ ; age range = 18–36 years), 52 (77.61%) were female and 15 were male (22.39%). All were in romantic relationships ( $M_{\text{relationship length}} = 22.5$  months;  $SD = 23.47$ ; relationship length range = 1 month–168 months or 14 years) at the time of diary completion. Sixty (89.55%) participants were not cohabitating with their romantic partners, while seven (10.45%) were ( $M_{\text{cohabitation length}} = 16.29$  months;  $SD = 11.4$ ; cohabitation length range = 4 months–36 months). Participants reported that their relationship statuses were dating ( $n = 63$ ; 94.1%), engaged ( $n = 3$ ; 4.48%), or married ( $n = 1$ ; 1.49%). The ethnic composition of the sample was: 56 (83.58%) Caucasian, three (4.48%) White-Hispanic, two (2.99%) Asian, two (2.99%) African American, one (1.49%) American Indian, one (1.49%) Hispanic, and two (2.99%) Other. Participants were 20 (29.85%) freshmen, 16 (23.88%) sophomores, 16 (23.88%) juniors, 10 (14.93%) seniors, and two (2.99%) graduate students. Three participants did not identify their year of education.

### *Procedures*

Participants received information about the study, the materials needed, and instructions for how to complete the diary entries. In accordance with DePaulo et al.'s

(1996) methods, participants were told that the researchers do not condone nor condemn deception. Additionally, the forms of deception were referred to as “communication patterns” to reduce negative connotation. They each attended an hour-long training session either individually or in small groups where they were instructed to identify any behavior (verbal or nonverbal) that *intentionally* misled their romantic partners. As with DePaulo et al.’s (1996) methods, participants were told that if they were not sure a behavior was deceptive, they should record it anyway.

Participants were also given behavioral examples for each of Turner et al.’s (1975) categories of deception in order for them to be able to better conceptualize and to report acts of deception. Turner et al.’s (1975) categories were utilized because the purpose of the study was not to create further taxonomies of deception but to examine the *extent* to which deception occurs and *why* it is used. Moreover, employing a preexisting taxonomy of deception helped participants recognize and identify their own acts of deception. Each participant was given written instructions that included the deception categories.

Participants were given pocket-size notebooks and were instructed to complete diary entries every time deception was used with their romantic partner for seven days. During this phase, participants recorded the date and time that any of the following forms of deception was used with their romantic partners: half-truths, exaggerations, diversionary responses, lies, or secrets (RQ1). They both described the nature and context of the deceptive act and labeled it as the form of deception they believed it to be. Participants also recorded their motives for utilizing each deceptive form (RQ2). Furthermore, participants were asked to include any additional thoughts they wanted to provide at the bottom of each entry. Participants were encouraged at the initial meeting to write complete entries in their diaries (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and to not share their diary entries with their partner.

### *Data Analysis*

Two separate methods of analysis were utilized to examine the diary data. First, a deductive coding process utilizing Turner et al.’s (1975) predefined deception categories was used to identify the types of deception listed by participants (RQ1). The first author was the primary coder and counted the number of times particular types of deception were used in all of the diaries. In some cases, further analysis revealed that participants incorrectly identified particular forms. For example, if a participant noted “half-truth” as the form of deception, but the diary entry clearly explained that he or she would never tell one’s partner the information, then the form was changed to “secret” in accordance with Turner et al.’s (1975) definitions.

In order to ensure counting (and, in some cases, interpretation) accuracy, the second author also counted the amount of times each form of deception was utilized. Each set of codes generated by the two authors was compared for total instances of agreement and disagreement. Cohen’s Kappa method for analyzing reliability was computed to be .91. According to Fleiss (1981), a Cohen’s Kappa score of .75 or higher is indicative of excellent agreement.

Second, an inductive data analytic technique of open and axial coding was used to analyze the responses given regarding the reasons or motives (RQ2) for using deception. Rather than from preexisting categories, codes and categories were formed and created by what emerged within the discourse (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, the first author went through the data line by line and open coded all open-ended diary data. The open-coding process was based on multiple discussions the first and second author had about how the data would be coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding process continued with a generation of a list of recurring themes across diary responses. After an initial list of themes was generated, the data were then examined multiple times. The open-coding process required multiple iterations as a coding scheme was developed. Throughout this process, the authors collaborated to negotiate, to renegotiate, and to revise the themes through constant comparison, and these themes were further collapsed into categories vis-à-vis the axial-coding process (Charmaz, 2006). Overall, this revision process allowed for the development of more concise categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

### *RQ1: The Extent to Which Deception is Used in Romantic Relationships*

Across the diaries, the 67 participants produced a total of 327 acts of deception during their seven days each of participation. Of those deceptive acts, 147 (44.95%) were lies, 61 (18.65%) were exaggerations, 56 (17.13%) were half-truths, 35 (10.70%) were diversionary responses, 26 (7.95%) were secrets, and two (0.61%) uses of deception were of a form unknown due to a lack of detail provided in the diary entry. The average rate of deception use per participant was 4.88 uses during the seven days (median = 5, range = 0–11), or about 0.7 acts of deception a day.

### *RQ2: Common Motives for Using Deception in Romantic Relationships*

Participants provided 332 motives for their 327 reported acts of deception. Six overarching motive categories emerged across the diaries: engaging in relational maintenance, managing face needs, negotiating dialectical tensions, establishing relational control, continuing previous deception, and unknown. Twenty-six additional responses were considered to be “Other” because participants did not indicate a motive or reason for a particular act of deception (see Table 1 for a list of themes).

#### *Engaging in relational maintenance*

Within this major theme, four subcategories of motives emerged: avoiding relational turbulence, eliciting positivity, evoking negative feelings, and restoring equity. When using deception to avoid relational turbulence, participants’ motives were to avoid confrontation, suspicion, and other generally negative partner reactions. One participant succinctly noted, “I did not want to start an unnecessary fight.” In order to avoid the partner’s suspicion, one participant wrote, “Denied being attracted to a

**Table 1** Themes and Subthemes of Deception Motives

---

<i>Engaging in Relational Maintenance</i>
<i>Avoiding Relational Turbulence</i>
Avoiding confrontation, avoiding suspicion, avoiding negative partner reaction
<i>Eliciting Positivity</i>
Lightening the mood, focusing on partner's wishes, making partner happy
<i>Evoking Negative Feelings</i>
Eliciting jealousy
<i>Restoring Equity</i>
Using deception to restore harmony after perceived relational transgression
<i>Managing Face Needs</i>
<i>Supporting Positive Face</i>
Supporting own and/or partner's positive face (protecting partner's feelings and self-presentation)
<i>Supporting Negative Face</i>
Supporting own and/or partner's negative face (avoiding unwanted activities and/or imposition)
<i>Negotiating Dialectical Tensions</i>
<i>Balancing Autonomy/Connection</i>
Balancing the need for independence versus the need for togetherness
<i>Balancing Openness/Closedness</i>
Balancing the need for open communication versus the need for privacy
<i>Balancing Novelty/Predictability</i>
Balancing the need for spontaneity versus the need for routine or expected behaviors
<i>Establishing Relational Control</i>
<i>Acting Coercive</i>
Ensuring partner behaves or feels how partner wants them to
<i>Continuing Previous Deception</i>
Participants indicated that they had lied about something in the past and the particular act of deception was a way of continuing or maintaining the lie
<i>Unknown</i>
Participants reported that they could not identify their motives for using deception

---

friend. Girlfriend worries too much that I will cheat on her and I don't want her to worry as much." Another participant used deception to avoid an awkward situation and wrote, "Today I started having a pregnancy scare, but I didn't want to tell him, because if it was nothing, he would have been scared and worried for nothing... I guess by not telling him I avoided an awkward position for us, a situation that I am not sure how he would react to."

Partners also deceived in order to maintain positivity by lightening the mood, focusing on the partner's wishes, or making the partner happy. For example, when a participant's partner asked her if she was "feeling ok," she said, "yes even though



I didn't . . . I did not want to bring both us down." Others noted exaggerating stories or offering assurances that were not completely honest in order to elicit positivity; one such participant wrote, "I wanted an interesting story and something to talk about. It made her laugh, which made me happy." Another participant wrote, "I told her I was having a good time when I really wasn't. I know it is important to her that I get along with her work friends."

Other participants used deception to elicit feelings of jealousy from their partners in order to feel more desirous in the relationship. One such participant wrote, "I also lied to him to induce jealousy . . . I used this lie to make myself appear wanted and to not be taken for granted I guess." In addition to evoking jealousy to maintain relationships, others used deception to restore equity after a perceived relational transgression. One participant wrote, "I wanted to make him know that I was really upset about a rude comment. By telling him I cried, he felt more sorry."

#### *Managing face needs*

Participants reported using deception for self-presentation reasons and for protecting their partner's feelings. They also reported motivation to deceive in order to avoid unwanted activities or imposition. One participant described lying to his partner in order to protect her positive face: "She asked me if I thought her cheeks were getting fatter. I kind of did but I told her no. I didn't want to hurt her feelings." Other participants used deception in order to support their own positive face. After exaggerating the amount of work one participant accomplished, she wrote, "He wants me to do good and I didn't want to look like a slacker," while another wrote, "I don't want him to ever view me as dumb!"

Numerous entries describing one act of deception each were motivated by multiple face needs. For example, many participants deceived their partners in order to avoid an unwanted activity or imposition and to protect their own negative face but did so in ways that protected their own positive face and their partner's as well. One such participant deceived her partner about why she "could not" go over to his house one night; she wrote, "I didn't feel like going over to his house but didn't want to hurt his feelings."

#### *Negotiating dialectical tensions*

Within this category, participants reported using deception in order to negotiate the dialectical tensions of autonomy/connection, openness/closedness, and novelty/predictability. Two participants who were feeling a "pull" towards autonomy deceived in order to "have some personal time and space" and because he "just needed to be alone." Others used deception in order to foster connection. One such participant wrote, "I told the little lie so I could spend a few more minutes with him driving back to my place. It usually drives me nuts to waste time like that, but it never hurts to spend a few more minutes together."

Others used deception as a way to negotiate the tension of openness/closedness. In order to garner privacy, one such participant wrote, "Don't feel it's any of his

business,” while another wrote, “It’s private and I wouldn’t tell him.” On the other hand, deceiving in order to obtain more openness did not appear in any of the participant responses. The idea of a *deceptive* act of disclosure to achieve openness may seem contradictory, but perhaps one might falsify an experience in order to reciprocate a disclosure. Although researchers may not consider this a *true* act of openness since it is deceptive, a receiver might perceive the act as openness.

Participants also reported using deception to negotiate the tension between novelty/predictability. In order to achieve more relational novelty, participants deceived in order to “surprise” their partners with spontaneous dinner plans, gifts, or trips. Others deceived their partners in order to gain more novelty in their own lives. One such participant deceived her partner because, “I wanted my boyfriend to understand why I needed to go shopping. It worked and now I have a new dress. :).” She wanted something new — a dress — and used deception in order to achieve that sense of novelty. Alternatively, others deceived in order to maintain a sense of predictability. For example, one participant’s partner made some novel plans with friends for the Superbowl, but she deceived him in order to “just be casual and watch it with him” alone as they had done the previous year.

#### *Establishing relational control*

Numerous participants reported deceiving their partners in order to establish relational control. This indirect form of coercion was a means to ensure their partner behaved or felt how they wanted them to. Some participants deceived in order to “guilt” their partners into changing their behavior. One participant noted he deceived, “to make her feel bad about sleeping all day and getting nothing done” in hope that she would be more productive. Others deceived to have the upper hand in situations or control relational outcomes. One participant wrote, “I did this to make her feel bad and then comfort her out of this to build myself up.” Another participant wanted to control a situation; he wrote, “A friend of mine who gets along really well w/ my girlfriend kept texting me about getting lunch & watching the game together, us 3. I ignored his texts & didn’t tell my girlfriend . . . because she probably would have wanted to hang out.”

#### *Continuing previous deception*

Some participants reported using deception in order to maintain a previous deceptive act. One participant wrote that she deceived “Just to keep the lie up, I guess.”

#### *Unknown*

Numerous participants reported that they “did not know why” they deceived their partner and they could not identify their motives. For example, one participant wrote, “I went to a movie and didn’t tell him. I don’t know why.” One participant even noted, “I don’t know why I lied, it made no sense to.”

## Discussion

### *RQ1: The Extent to Which Deception is Used in Romantic Relationships*

Results indicated that on average participants deceived their romantic partners 0.7 times a day (median = 5, range = 0–11). This finding falls within George and Robb's (2008) rates of about 0.6 lies a day and about once per day. Serota, Levine, and Boster operationalized deception as any time “a communicator seeks knowingly and intentionally to mislead others” (2010, p. 3). They found that while most individuals may not deceive in any given day, a small minority is responsible for the majority of deceptive acts. In other words, many people committed few deceptive acts, while a few people committed many. The findings from the current study differ, however, as the median use of deception during the week was five, and the distribution revealed a clustering around the range of three to seven total instances of deception in the examined week (2.99% reported no acts of deception, 2.99% reported one, 7.46% reported two, 13.43% reported three, 19.40% reported four, 13.43% reported five, 16.42% reported six, 11.94% reported seven, 7.46% reported eight, 1.49% reported nine, and 2.99% reported 11).

Moreover, only two participants reported that they did not deceive their romantic partners during the course of the week. One participant said, “I honestly do not lie or even ‘hide’ things from my [partner] whatsoever,” while the other wrote, “You just caught us in a very honestly boring week!” As only two participants reported not using deception during the week, it may be reasonable to conclude that moderate amounts of deception are becoming more of a societal norm as opposed to pure honesty and/or rampant amounts of dishonesty.

Overall, 44.95% of these deceptive messages were lies, 18.65% were exaggerations, 17.13% were half-truths, 10.70% were diversionary responses, and 7.95% were secrets. Of the five forms of deception examined in this study, lies comprised almost half of the deceptive messages reported. One possible explanation is that, although some participants indicated in their diaries that they were “bad liars,” lying may be a more attractive form because it reduces the potential for further questioning from partners. Though lying may be more difficult to successfully execute for some, it does at least forestall continued conversation on the topic when the receiver simply believes the false information. Another possible explanation for the high frequency of lies is that lies may be more easily identifiable for participants. In addition, numerous participants' deception was *reactionary*; their partners asked them a direct question about something the participant may have kept as a secret, but this direct questioning may have prompted the participant to lie in response.

### *RQ2: Common Motives for Using Deception in Romantic Relationships*

Results indicated that the motives for using deception in romantic relationships were focused around six common categories. The following discussion highlights the four relational motive categories (engaging in relational maintenance, managing face needs, negotiating dialectical tensions, and establishing relational control). The fifth

category, “continuing previous deception,” illuminates how there were times when participants deceived in order to continue or hide their deception. The sixth category, “unknown,” illustrates how difficult it can be to identify motives for behavior at times, as these participants did “not know why” they deceived their partner. Twenty-six responses were considered to be “Other,” as the participants provided no information regarding their motive.

#### *Engaging in relational maintenance*

This theme aligns with Spitzberg and Cupach’s assertion that “lying in intimate relationships functions to avoid relational trauma and conflict, processes that might be substantively more dysfunctional than deceptions” (2007, p. 15). Within this theme, participants may have viewed the cost of telling the truth as more damaging to the relationship than using deceptive strategies with their partners. Furthermore, the subcategories of this theme (avoiding relational turbulence, eliciting positivity, evoking negative feelings, and restoring equity) illustrate the complexities of maintaining relationships (see also Horan & Booth-Butterfield, in press). As Erbert and Duck explain, scholars should “rethink” how they view satisfaction and maintenance in personal relationships, at least with regard to deception, because “although it may be safe to conclude that people who consistently engage in negative, destructive, conflictual interaction will report higher levels of relational dissatisfaction . . . this generalization does not begin to reflect the complexity and variability in interaction that characterize most relationships” (1997, p. 190). For example, if a romantic partner were *completely* honest all the time regarding how they felt about what their partner does or says, this behavior could easily be considered as excessive *criticism*; one of Gottman’s (1994) signs that a relationship is headed toward dissolution.

These findings also have implications regarding using deception as a means for conflict avoidance, and numerous participants reported a tension between wanting to be honest with a partner about certain issues (e.g., a criticism of how they really felt) and simultaneously wanting to remain “positive” or to avoid a possible “fight” that a disclosure might prompt. Several participants noted how using deception to avoid a contentious topic was “easier” than telling the truth. One such participant wrote, “At the time it just seemed . . . easier to say what I thought she would quietly dismiss.” Another participant wrote that she hid her true feelings about a relational issue because “I knew this would make him unhappy, so I avoided conflict & an awkward walk to class by withholding info that would have been beneficial to our overall communication.” This entry reflects the tension found in directly voicing issues of conflict. On one hand, conflict can be beneficial to the relationship if our responses are “effective, honest, and respectful of ourselves and others” (Wood, 2011, p. 238); on the other hand, conflict can leave us feeling “frustrated, hurt, or misunderstood. And often the disagreement continues into the future, wreaking havoc whenever it raises its head” (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2011, p. 224). For some relational partners, these strategies may be a part of their response repertoire, and even passive responses such as these can be considered appropriate at times because they benefit either the self, partner, or relationship.

### *Managing face needs*

Participants often deceived to allow partners and themselves to maintain positive self-image evaluations. In the data, it is clear that protecting the partner's face and being polite with romantic partners continue to motivate behavior in romantic relationships, and deception may be the means to serve these purposes. These findings contrast with Cupach and Metts' assertion that "familiarity entails some degree of exemption from the obligation to create and support face during private interactions" (1994, p. 2), as politeness and self-presentation were still apparent in the participants' responses regarding motives for deceiving their partners. Moreover, the data reflect the complexity of managing face needs as numerous entries about one specific act of deception simultaneously met face needs for both self and partner (e.g., making up an excuse to avoid imposition to protect both parties' positive face and the deceiver's negative face).

### *Negotiating dialectical tensions*

This theme of reported motives carries strong implications regarding relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 1988, 1990). The need for autonomy/connection, openness/closedness, and novelty/predictability as underlying acts of deception assuredly illustrate the push/pull relational partners might feel between these tensions. While there are many strategies for navigating the dialectical tensions inherent in relationships (Baxter, 1988), deception at least occasionally serves as one of them. As Cole argues, "deception is often the best way to deal with the constraints that intimacy creates" (2006, para. 13), so romantic partners may use deception as a way to negotiate these tensions.

In addition to the tensions underlying relational dialectics theory, many participants also noted a tension between wanting to be honest with their partners but not always wanting to experience the consequences of that honesty (e.g., dealing with a partner whose feelings were hurt). Numerous participants' entries reflected the push/pull they feel between honesty and deception. One such participant wrote, "When these forms [of deception] do take place they weaken our relationship because it always causes problems. But these forms have also made us a strong couple." Another wrote, "There are times when I wished I didn't have to use these forms of communication in order for my relationship to remain strong." Numerous other participant entries reflected how they feel both positively and negatively about the way deception functions in their relationships.

### *Establishing relational control*

Alternatively, other participants exemplified O'Hair and Cody's (1994) sentiment that deception can be used as a method to obtain control in a relationship. For example, one participant reported how *he* would feel if the roles were reversed in the deceptive interaction. He noted, "If I would've said I just didn't want to hang out with her she would've been Really mad. If she told me I'd just annoy her I guess I'd get mad too." His response begs the question: Does this mean he would rather be deceived

in that circumstance than confronted with the truth? Thus, deception may be used to be kind rather than hurtful. After all, sometimes the truth can be a bitter pill to swallow.

While a few participants reported that deception is always bad or harmful because trust and honesty are such integral parts of romantic relationships, others reported (and often in the same language) that deception is permissible when it pertains to “small” issues but not “big” issues. When describing these types of “white lies,” one participant even asked, “What’s the harm done, really?” Clearly, these findings suggest that perceptions of deception reflect the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of deception, and romantic relationships in general.

### *Summary and Practical Implications*

There are numerous possible benefits to examining one’s own use of deception with a romantic partner. Fourteen participants’ responses mentioned (without prompt) the implications of examining one’s own use of deception within a romantic relationship. For the most part, these participants responded positively to examining their own use of deception, and many reported that they will try to be more open and honest with their romantic partners as a result. These findings suggest that simply examining one’s own use of deception within romantic relationships may have positive outcomes for communication within relationships. Numerous participants noted how their use of deception either occurred more or less than they thought it would. These findings imply that people may have inaccurate perceptions of their use of deception with their romantic partners; perhaps by truly examining the use of deception, one can evaluate whether deception functions in positive or negative ways within the relationship and adjust behavior accordingly. Finally, several participants reported that they do not talk about deception with their romantic partners. Without discussing deception, couples cannot increase their understanding of how deception functions in their relationships. Based on participants’ responses, it seems as though having an honest discussion about deception, ironic as it might be, could be extremely beneficial. If approached with caution and care, romantic partners may possibly determine which issues they choose to be informed about and which issues are acceptable for withholding.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Although diary methods can be useful in collecting detailed, in-depth, and event-centered data, there are several limitations to this method. First, it is not clear that participants indicated all instances of deception. Since romantic partners may deceive each other with little effort or planning (Cole, 2006; McCornack, 1992), it may have been difficult for participants to be aware of every act of deception. Second, it is conceivable that some participants might not have complied with the study’s directions. For instance, some participants may have refrained from making diary entries as deception was practiced and/or forgot to record these acts later. Of course, this possibility would only serve to underrepresent the frequency by which deception was

employed in our results. Finally, although the categories of deception utilized for the study were listed in the participant consent form, the categories were not listed in the diaries, so participants may not have labeled or recalled the categories correctly (which, of course, would have impacted our results).

### *Directions for Future Research*

The complex nature of motives strongly suggests that continued research is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of deception in romantic relationships. Future studies on this topic should include quantitative measures along with qualitative measures of both partners' behaviors and cognitions to assess how the use of deception affects perceptions of relational satisfaction and how self-monitoring and one's propensity for deception in general function within romantic relationships.

Moreover, researchers should examine the implications of interpersonal deception theory (Buller & Burgoon, 1996) within romantic relationships, especially regarding context. As one participant perceptively noted, deception use may vary for each person depending on the particular romantic relationship. In essence, researchers should examine what specific factors of relationships or personality make deception more or less prevalent and how the context of the relationship may change deceptive behavior.

In addition, future studies might address the notion of how deception can function to foster openness and affection in relationships. This is consistent with Horan and Booth-Butterfield's (2011, in press) line of inquiry regarding deceptive affectionate messages and how deception is used as a means to engage in behaviors normatively considered positive, like preserving the relationship or benefiting the partner.

Finally, future studies might address potential harm caused by the use of deception in romantic relationships. Sampling from among the deceived may supplement the studies that have already examined the consequences of discovered deception. Researchers might also examine the potential harm of undetected deception for each party and for the relationship as a whole.

### **References**

- Baxter, L. A. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. W. Duck, D. F. Hay, S. E. Hobfoll, W. Ickes, & B. Montgomery (Eds.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 257–273). London, United Kingdom: Wiley.
- Baxter, L. A. (1990). Dialectical contradictions in relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 7, 69–88.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Bok, S. (1999). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Buller, D. B., & Burgoon, J. K. (1994). Deception: Strategic and nonstrategic communication. In J. A. Daly & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *Strategic interpersonal communication* (pp. 191–224). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Buller, D. B., & Burgoon, J. K. (1996). Interpersonal deception theory. *Communication Theory*, 6, 203–242.
- Buller, D. B., Strzyzewski, K. D., & Hunsaker, F. G. (1991). Interpersonal deception: II. The inferiority of conversational participants as deception detectors. *Communication Monographs*, 58, 25–40.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Buller, D. B. (1994). Interpersonal deception: III. Effects of deceit on perceived communication and nonverbal behavior dynamics. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 18, 155–184.
- Burgoon, J. K., Buller, D. B., Dillman, L., & Walther, J. B. (1995). Interpersonal deception: IV. Effects of suspicion on perceived communication and nonverbal behavior dynamics. *Human Communication Research*, 22, 163–196.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cole, T. (2001). Lying to the one you love: The use of deception in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18, 107–129.
- Cole, T. (2006). Intimacy, deception, truth and lies: The paradox of being close. *Entelechy*. Retrieved from <http://www.entelechyjournal.com/timcole.htm>
- Cupach, W. R., & Metts, S. (1994). *Facework*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DePaulo, B. M., & Kashy, D. A. (1998). Everyday lies in close and casual relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 63–79.
- DePaulo, B. M., Kashy, D. A., Kirkendol, S. E., Wyer, M. M., & Epstein, J. A. (1996). Lying in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 979–995.
- Dunbar, N. E., & Jensen, M. L. (2011). Digital deception in personal relationships. In K. B. Wright & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *Computer-mediated communication in personal relationships* (pp. 324–343). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Erbert, L. A., & Duck, S. W. (1997). Rethinking satisfaction in personal relationships from a dialectical perspective. In R. J. Sternberg & M. Hojjat (Eds.), *Satisfaction in close relationships* (pp. 190–216). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Fleiss, J. L. (1981). *Statistical methods for rates and proportions*. New York, NY: John Wiley.
- George, J. F., & Robb, A. (2008). Deception and computer-mediated communication in daily life. *Communication Reports*, 21, 92–103.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What predicts divorce?*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hancock, J. T., Thom-Santelli, J., & Ritchie, T. (2004). Deception and design: The impact of communication technology on lying behavior. *CHI Letters*, 6, 129–134.
- Hopper, R., & Bell, R. A. (1984). Broadening the deception construct. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 288–302.
- Horan, S. M., & Booth-Butterfield, M. B. (2011). Is it worth lying for?: Physiological and emotional implications of recalling deceptive affection. *Human Communication Research*, 37, 78–106.
- Horan, S. M., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (in press). Understanding deceptive affection: A diary investigation of how and why we lovingly deceive romantic partners. *Communication Quarterly*.
- Kaplar, M. E., & Gordon, A. K. (2004). The enigma of altruistic lying: Perspective differences in what motivates and justifies lie telling within romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 11, 489–507.
- Knapp, M. L. (2006). Lying and deception in close relationships. In A. L. Vangelisti & D. Perlman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 517–532). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Knox, D., Schacht, C., Holt, J., & Turner, J. (1993). Sexual lies among university students. *College Student Journal*, 27, 269–272.
- Levine, T. R., Shaw, A., & Shulman, H. C. (2010). Increasing deception detection accuracy with strategic questioning. *Human Communication Research*, 36, 216–231.



- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McCornack, S. A. (1992). Information manipulation theory. *Communication Monographs*, 59, 1–16.
- McCornack, S. A., & Levine, T. R. (1990). When lovers become leery: The relationship between suspicion and accuracy in detecting deception. *Communication Monographs*, 57, 219–230.
- Metts, S. (1989). An exploratory investigation of deception in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 6, 159–179.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O’Hair, H. D., & Cody, M. J. (1994). Deception. In W. R. Cupach & B. H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (pp. 181–214). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Saxe, L. (1991). Lying: Thoughts of an applied social psychologist. *American Psychologist*, 46, 409–415.
- Seiter, J. S., & Bruschke, J. (2007). Deception and emotion: The effects of motivation, relationship type, and sex on expected feelings of guilt and shame following acts of deception in United States and Chinese samples. *Communication Studies*, 58, 1–16.
- Seiter, J. S., Bruschke, J., & Bai, C. (2002). The acceptability of deception as a function of perceivers’ culture, deceiver’s intention, and deceiver-deceived relationship. *Western Journal of Communication*, 66, 158–180.
- Serota, K. B., Levine, T. R., & Boster, F. J. (2010). The prevalence of lying in America: Three studies of self-reported lies. *Human Communication Research*, 36, 2–25.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (2007). *The dark side of interpersonal communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (2011). Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most. In K. M. Galvin (Ed.), *Making connections: Readings in relational communication* (5th ed.; pp. 223–231). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Turner, R. E., Edgley, C., & Olmstead, G. (1975). Information control in conversations: Honesty is not always the best policy. *Kansas Journal of Sociology*, 11, 69–89.
- Wood, J. T. (2011). I can’t talk about it now. In K. M. Galvin (Ed.), *Making connections: Readings in relational communication* (5th ed.; pp. 232–239). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.