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Relational Uncertainty And Avoidance Following The Discovery Of A Relational Partner's Deception: The Mediating Role Of Efficacy Assessments

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ABSTRACT : *The current study was conducted to examine the association between uncertainty and people's tendency to engage in avoidance following the discovery of a relational partner's deceptive communication. Based on the theory of motivated information management, outcome assessments and efficacy assessments were posited as a possible explanation for this association. The results of the present study revealed that efficacy assessments mediated the links between both partner and relationship uncertainty and avoidance. These findings suggest that a sense of efficacy can predict individuals' tendency to engage in avoidance when they discover a partner's deception.*

KEYWORDS : *Avoidance, communication efficacy, deception, mediation, relational uncertainty*

I. INTRODUCTION

When people discover that someone they are close to has lied to them, they often experience a great deal of uncertainty. In some cases, knowledge that they thought they had about their relationship, their partner, and even themselves may be called into question. Indeed, of the various events that can increase uncertainty in close relationships [1], deception can be particularly influential. Why? Because partners often lie to avoid revealing relationally threatening information or to preserve their autonomy or independence [2]. Once the relationally threatening information or the effort to preserve autonomy is uncovered, questions about the nature of the relationship as well as the partner's or one's own involvement in the relationship are likely to emerge.

Although the most direct response to experiencing uncertainty after a partner has lied may be to talk to the partner about the lie and the issues surrounding it, studies suggest that this response is relatively uncommon. As noted by Knobloch and Solomon [3], individuals' perceptions of relational uncertainty generally hinder direct, fluent communication between partners. In fact, when individuals experience an event that increases their uncertainty in close relationships, they often avoid talking about the event altogether. In their Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM), W. Afifi and Weiner [4] suggest that the decision about whether to seek information or avoid talking about such an event likely depends on two assessments: (a) the outcomes associated with seeking information (i.e., outcome assessments), and (b) beliefs about the ability to obtain information (i.e., efficacy assessments).The purpose of the current study was to examine the association between people's uncertainty and their tendency to avoid communicating with a relational partner after discovering the partner lied to them and to test whether individuals' outcome assessments and their efficacy assessments explain this association.

II. RELATIONAL UNCERTAINTY, DECEPTION, AND AVOIDANCE

According to Knobloch and Solomon [5], uncertainty that occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships, or *relational uncertainty,* can be defined in terms of the confidence that people have in their perceptions of involvement within their interpersonal associations. Knobloch and Solomon suggest that relational uncertainty involves three interconnected, but distinct types: Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty. These three types of uncertainty are associated with how people behave in the context of their close relationships [6, 7].Knobloch and Solomon [3] argue that the experience of relational uncertainty often discourages direct communication. More specifically, these researchers note that "direct communication is risky for people to employ under conditions of relationship doubt" (p. 461). They suggest that, because of the perceived risk associated with direct communication, individuals who experience uncertainty often engage in avoidance.

The link between relational uncertainty and avoidance may be especially evident following the discovery of a partner's deception. Compared to other events that increase uncertainty in close relationships, deception is relatively common [8]. What is more, research shows that the most serious lies are told in romantic relationships[9], and partners often lie to avoid threatening their relationship or hurting the other's feelings [2, 10]. The revelation of deception and relationally threatening or hurtful information both are likely to engender uncertainty and increase the risk of direct communication. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis was put forth:*H1*: There is a positive association between relational uncertainty (i.e., self, partner, and relationship uncertainty) and avoidance following the discovery of a partner's deception.Although the literature suggests that there is an association between the uncertainty experienced in close relationships and avoidance, the explanation for this association is not yet clear. The TMIM, developed by W. Afifi and Weiner [5, 11], offers a framework that can be used to explain this association. In brief, the theory suggests that individuals' information management decisions can be characterized by three phases. The first is the interpretation phase, when people become aware that the level of uncertainty they desire about an important issue is either higher or lower than the level they are experiencing. The second phase is the evaluation phase, when individuals assess both the costs and benefits of seeking information (outcome assessments) and their own ability to effectively engage in a particular strategy (efficacy assessments). Finally, the decision phase involves individuals' choice to either seek or avoid additional information.In line with the TMIM, the present study positions outcome and efficacy assessments as an explanation for the link between individuals' uncertainty and their avoidance following the discovery of a romantic partner's lie. In other words, we argue that one reason people who feel relationaluncertainty engage in avoidance after discovering their partner lied is that they anticipate the outcomes of more direct communication to be relatively negative and they lack a sense of efficacy in talking with their partner about the deception. Given this, the following research question was put forth:

*RQ*1a: Do outcome assessments mediate the link between relational uncertainty (i.e., self, partner, and relationship) and avoidance following the discovery of a partner's deception?

*RQ*1b: Do efficacy assessments mediate the link between relational uncertainty (i.e., self, partner, and relationship) and avoidance following the discovery of a partner's deception?

III. METHODS

1.1Participants and procedures:

Two hundred forty-five undergraduate students at a large southwestern university participated in the current study. Eighty-four (34.3%) were men and 161 (65.7%) were women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 46 years (M = 19.87, SD = 2.35). The duration of the relationships that participants described for the study ranged from one month to 12 years (M = 17 months, SD = 22.97). More than a third of participants (n = 92, 37.6%) reported they were currently in the relationship, whereas the rest of the sample had dissolved their relationship.

Participants completed a packet of questionnaires that consisted of several scales and an open-ended item. The first item in each packet instructed respondents to recall and describe the most recent incident in which they discovered that their current or former intimate partner had lied to them. McCornack and Levine's 12] definition of a lie was given in writing to the participants as part of the instructions: A lie was defined as "the deliberate falsification or omission of important information by a communicator, with the intent to deceive or mislead the conversational partner" (p. 120). Participants then completed a series of randomly ordered measures and demographic information.

1.2Measurements:

Participants' self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty were assessed by measures developed by Knobloch and Solomon [6]. Each of the items that comprised the three measures was followed by a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = "completely uncertain" and 6 = "completely certain"). Similar to previous uses of these scales [13, 4], confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to determine the unidimensionality of the scales. Certain items needed to be excluded to achieve sufficient fit. The resulting self uncertainty scale included 10 items, χ^2 (32) = 70.41, p < .001; CMIN/df = 2.20, CFI = .98; RMSEA = .07, α = .95.The resulting partner uncertainty scale included 10 items, χ^2 (33) = 88.36, p < .001; CMIN/df= 2.68, CFI = .98; RMSEA = .08, α = .97. The resulting relationship uncertainty scale also included 10 items, χ^2 (32) = 97.74, p < .001; CMIN/df = 3.05, CFI = .97; RMSEA = .09, α = .95. Items were reflected and combined so that higher scores indicate greater uncertainty. Outcome assessment was operationalized as participants' expectations about the possible outcomes associated with talking about a particular issue with their partner [5]. The measure of outcome assessment was comprised of three items followed by 7-point Likert-type scales (-3 = "a lot more negatives than positives," 0 = "about as many negatives as positives," and 3 = "a lot more positives than

negatives"). In the current study, the phrase "this person" was changed to "your partner" and "this issue" was changed to "the lie." Outcome assessment data were recoded to eliminate negative scores (α = .94).Similar to W. Afifi, Dillow, and Morse[14], participants' efficacy assessments were measured using the communication efficacy and target honesty scales from W. Afifi and Weiner [5]. The communication efficacy scale includes three items which asked participants about their ability to successfully seek information about the lie they described.Each item was followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale(1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 ="strongly agree"; α = .84). The target honesty scale used in this study is comprised of one of two subscales of a measure originally designed by W. Afifiet al. to evaluate target efficacy. The four items included in the current investigation asked participants about their perceptions of their partner's willingness to be honest about the issue at hand.Each item was followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale(1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 ="strongly agree"; α = .90).Participants were also asked to recall the degree to which their reaction to their partner's lie was characterized by avoidance. Four items from Jang, Smith, and Levine's [15] communication pattern scale were selected to measure avoidance. Each item was followed by a 9-point Likert-type scale(1 = "not at all" and 9 = "very much"). The exclusion of one item ("I pretended nothing happened after the incident while interacting with my partner") increased the reliability (the 3-item α = .88).Table 1 includes correlations between each of the aforementioned variables as well as the means and standard deviations of each.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	*M*	*SD*
1. Self U	--							2.78	1.30
2. Partner U	.62***	--						3.09	1.52
3. Rela. U	.78***	.80***	--					3.11	1.36
4. Comm. Efficacy	-.21**	-.34***	-.34***	--				5.36	1.77
5. Target Honesty	-.33***	-.47***	-.43***	-.41***	--			3.83	1.70
6. Outcome Asses.	-.29***	-.31***	-.32***	.36***	.37***	--		3.68	1.82
7. Avoidance	.10	.14*	.19**	-.50***	-.16*	-.20**	--	2.75	2.00
8. Status‡	-.37***	-.50***	-.46***	.31***	.47**	.33***	-.17**	--	--

Note. *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001 ‡For current status, 1 = no, 2 = yes.

Table 1 Correlation matrix,means, and standard deviations of the variables

IV. RESULTS

The first hypothesis tested the associations between self, partner, and relationship uncertainty and avoidance in situations when people believed a relational partner lied to them. The bivariate correlations showed that partner and relationship uncertainty were associated with avoidance, but self uncertainty was not (see Table 1). Hence, *H1* was supported for partner and relationship uncertainty.The potential mediation effects proposed in *RQ1a* and *RQ1b* were tested with structural equation modeling (SEM). We conducted models for only partner and relationship uncertainty given the non-significant association between self uncertainty and avoidance (i.e., there was no relationship between self uncertainty and avoidance to mediate). Similar to much of the previous research on relational uncertainty [6, 7], we assessed the sources of uncertainty separately because we were interested in how the different types of uncertainty were related to avoidance. Further, due to the number of parameters to be estimated relative to the sample size, partner and relationship uncertainty were assessed in separate models. In order to test the mediating roles of outcome assessments and efficacy assessments, the following paths were included in both models: uncertainty to avoidance, efficacy assessments to avoidance, outcome assessments to avoidance, uncertainty to efficacy assessments, uncertainty to efficacy assessments, and uncertainty to outcome assessments.

Although previous research has examined the effect of outcome assessments on efficacy assessments [14], this was not the focus of the current research and was instead modeled as a covariance term. In addition, despite preliminary analyses showing that the relationships within the model were similar for those who were currently dating their partners and those who had dissolved their relationships, current relationship status (i.e., not currently together vs. currently together) was included as a control based on its correlation with the dependent variable. Relationship length was also considered as a control variable, but it was not associated with avoidance (r = -.06, p = .34) and was thus not included in the models. The overall model for partner uncertainty showed good fit, χ^2 (143) = 255.48, p< .001, CMIN/df = 1.79, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .06, as did the model for relationship uncertainty, χ^2 (142) = 291.30, p< .001, CMIN/df = 2.05, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07. The results of the partner and relationship uncertainty models are presented in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively.

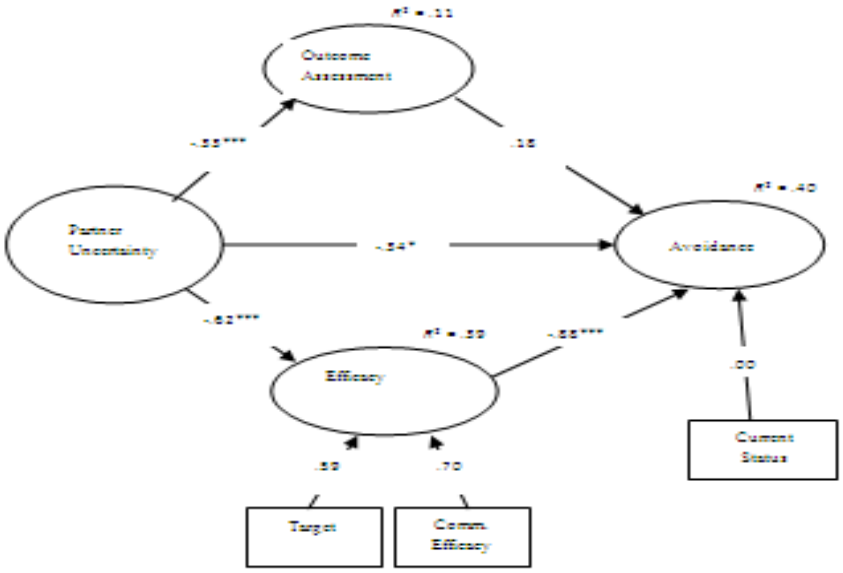

Fig. 1 Model for partner uncertainty

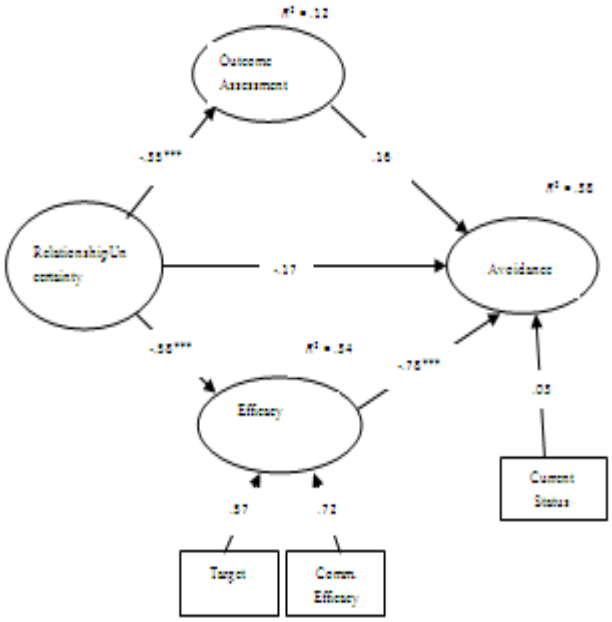

Fig. 2Model for relationship uncertainty

For both the partner and relationship uncertainty models, uncertainty was negatively related to both outcome assessments and efficacy assessments. Individuals who reported relatively high partner or relationship uncertainty were likely to anticipate more negative outcomes and feel less efficacious in confronting their partners when they perceived that their partner lied to them. Efficacy assessments also were negatively correlated with avoidance following the discovery of a partner's deception; individuals who had relatively low efficacy were likely to respond to their partner's lie with avoidance. Yet, outcome assessment was not significantly related to avoidance for either model. *RQ1a* pertains to the mediating effect of outcome assessment on the relationship between uncertainty and avoidance. For the partner uncertainty model, because outcome assessment was not related to avoidance, it is not surprising that the Sobel test also showed outcome assessment was not a significant mediator, $z = -1.41$, $p = .16$. Similarly, outcome assessment did not mediate the association between relationship uncertainty and avoidance, $z = -1.38$, $p = .17$. Overall, individuals with higher uncertainty anticipated more negative outcomes, yet these anticipated outcomes did not appear to influence their avoidance.
RQ1b was put forth to examine whether efficacy assessments mediate the links between uncertainty and avoidance following the discovery of a partner's deception. As shown in Fig1, in addition to significant associations between uncertainty and efficacy assessments as well as efficacy assessments and avoidance, the significant bivariate correlation between partner uncertainty and avoidance interestingly changed to a negative relationship in the mediation model. The Sobel mediation test showed that the indirect effect of partner uncertainty on avoidance was significant, $z = 3.25$, $p = .001$. In the model for relationship uncertainty (see Fig. 2), the significant bivariate correlation between relationship uncertainty and avoidance was not significant in the mediation model, and the Sobel mediation test also showed that the indirect effect of relationship uncertainty on avoidance was significant, $z = 3.05$, $p = .001$. Thus, efficacy assessments mediated the association between partner uncertainty and avoidance as well as relationship uncertainty and avoidance.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study was conducted to investigate whether outcome assessments and efficacy assessments explain the association between people's uncertainty and their tendency to avoid communicating with a relational partner after discovering the partner lied to them. To explore this issue, the association between individuals' uncertainty and their tendency to engage in avoidance first was examined. Then, the possibility that outcome assessments and efficacy assessments mediate the association between uncertainty and avoidance was tested.Following the arguments of Knobloch and Solomon [3], we predicted that individuals' perceptions of self, partner, and relationship uncertainty would be positively associated with their tendency to avoid communicating with a partner after discovering their partner lied to them. Our findings revealed a positive association between partner uncertainty and avoidance, as well as between relationship uncertainty and avoidance. However, no association was found between self uncertainty and avoidance. As suggested by Theiss and Solomon [17], the greater ambiguity involved in making predictions about a partner or a relationship might serve to strengthen the positive associations between partner and relationship uncertainty and avoidance. Perhaps when individuals have more uncertainty about their own involvement, they are less concerned about the relational implications of directly communating about the deception as compared to when they have greater partner or relationship uncertainty.In addition to examining the links between various types of uncertainty and avoidance, the present study investigated the mediating role of outcome assessments and efficacy assessments. The findings revealed that efficacy assessments, but not outcome assessments, mediated the associations between both partner and relationship uncertainty and avoidance. In short, greater partner and relationship uncertainty increased the likelihood that people would anticipate negative outcomes and feel less efficacious after discovering their partner lied to them. But the anticipation of negative outcomes was not linked to avoidance; rather, people's feelings of efficacy predicted their tendency to avoid communicating with their partner about the lie.

The findings of the current study are consistent with Bandura's [18, 19] claim that self-efficacy is key in determining social behavior in that they suggest that avoidance following events that increase uncertainty may depend on people's perceptions of their ability to effectively communicate about the issue at hand. When individuals perceive they are able to communicate with their partner about something such as the discovery of a lie, they are more likely to do so. Further, when people experience partner or relationship uncertainty after discovering their partner has lied to them, positive assessments of their own efficacy appear to embolden them to talk with their partner. Given that relational uncertainty complicates communication [20], a lack of efficacy may be an important explanation for why partners find communication more difficult when experiencing uncertainty, particularly uncertainty about the partner's involvement in the relationship. Put another way, individuals with high efficacy in confronting their partners may seek more information to deal

with uncertainty [21, 22].The absence of a significant association between outcome assessments and avoidance suggests that outcome assessments may function differently than efficacy assessments. It is possible that people who anticipate negative outcomes are as likely to talk with their partner about the event as those who anticipate positive outcomes. If this is the case, individuals may decide whether to engage their partner in conversation based on factors other than the likelihood that the conversation will result in positive outcomes. For instance, people may opt to talk to their partner after discovering he or she has lied because they feel justified in doing so, because they have a desire to express themselves, or because they have a strong sense of efficacy. It also is possible that the lack of an association between outcome assessments and avoidance is a result of including efficacy assessments in the model. Given that bivariate associations show that both efficacy and outcome assessments are related to avoidance, and that efficacy and outcome assessments are associated with each other, including both types of assessments in the same model may mask any association between outcome assessments and avoidance.

Of course, the current study's findings are limited. One limitation involves the use of retrospective reports. Participants in the present study may not have accurately recollected the lies they described or may have found it difficult to recall the degree to which they felt uncertain about the lie [23]. It also is important to acknowledge that people's decisions to avoid talking about the lie incident may have been due to reasons other than their efficacy assessments. For example, some individuals may have used avoidance because they wanted to protect their partner from psychological or emotional pain or because they felt pressured by their partner to conceal certain information [24].In spite of these limitations, the mediating role of efficacy assessments raises several issues for researchers to consider. Perhaps most obvious, when studying relational uncertainty and avoidance in close relationships, researchers need to consider the possible influence of efficacy assessments. Although uncertainty often has been conceived as a predictor of people's tendency to seek or avoid information, in many cases it may be that efficacy assessments, rather than uncertainty, are the primary influence on individuals' avoidance behavior. In a similar vein, scholars may find it useful to further explore the cognitive and affective predictors of efficacy assessments. The results of the present study indicate that uncertainty is one of these predictors, but there likely are others. For instance, Bandura [25] argued that psychological or physiological arousal is one of the principal sources of self-efficacy. Studying the link between efficacy assessments and either psychological or physiological arousal could yield theoretically important information about how people judge their efficacy and why they respond in particular ways to those judgments.

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