
Suspicious minds: The motive to acquire relationship-threatening information

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Abstract

In four studies, we obtained evidence for the reliability and validity of a 21-item scale designed to measure a new theoretical construct: individual differences in the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information (hereafter, MARTI). Study 1 provided evidence for the MARTI scale's reliability and discriminant validity, revealing that it was reliable and not significantly correlated with measures of the Big Five personality traits, adult attachment styles, or more general social orientations. Studies 2 and 3 provided evidence for the scale's convergent and discriminant validity, showing that dating partners with higher MARTI scores (i.e., those who were more motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information) scored lower in relational trust and reported engaging in more "suspicion behaviors." Study 4 provided behavioral evidence for the scale's predictive validity, revealing that (a) dating partners with higher MARTI scores were more likely to break up within 5 months, and (b) the breakup rate was most pronounced for dating partners who scored higher on the scale and who also reported being less close. We discuss how this new construct and measure can be used to study important relationship dynamics.

*We can't go on together
With suspicious minds.*

—Lines from the 1969 Elvis Presley hit

Was Elvis right? Are the relationships of partners who have suspicious minds more susceptible to break-ups than the relationships of partners who don't? If they are, how do suspicious minds contribute to the demise of intimate relationships? Using a recently developed measure of individual differences in the *motive to acquire relationship-threatening information* (MARTI), we

address these and other questions in the research presented below.

Our decision to study this motive was guided by recent theory and research on the empathic accuracy of couples in relationship-threatening situations (see Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). Accordingly, we begin with a brief review of this theory and research, which highlights the importance of assessing the accuracy motives of the partners in close relationships.

Ickes and Simpson's Empathic Accuracy Model

In a recent revision (Ickes & Simpson, 2001) of our original empathic accuracy model

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(see Ickes & Simpson, 1997), we attempted to account for the complex relations between empathic accuracy and relationship satisfaction and stability by positing a general rule and two major exceptions to the rule. As a general rule, we proposed that empathic accuracy tends to be good for close relationships. In the majority of routine, everyday interactions in which knowledge of a partner's thoughts and feelings carries little or no potential to threaten or destabilize a relationship, greater empathic accuracy should promote the kind of mutual understanding that enables partners to coordinate their individual and shared goals and actions and thereby maintain a more satisfying and stable relationship.

There are, however, two important exceptions to this general rule. The first exception involves situations in which one or both partners, recognizing that greater empathic accuracy might damage their relationship, display *motivated inaccuracy* in order to buffer the relationship from the dissatisfaction and instability that might otherwise occur. The second exception involves situations in which, despite realizing that greater empathic accuracy might damage the relationship, one or both partners become hypervigilant and display *motivated accuracy* with respect to their partner's unexpressed thoughts and feelings. This second exception to the general rule—which is pertinent to individuals with suspicious minds—is the primary focus of the present research.

The general rule: Empathic accuracy helps relationships

Many studies in the *marital adjustment literature* have found a positive association between marital adjustment and accurately understanding the attitudes, role expectations, and self-perceptions of one's spouse. Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001), for example, identified more than 20 studies in which such an association was reported, and many of these studies were cited in an earlier review by Sillars and Scott (1983).

Though fewer relevant studies exist in the more recent *empathic accuracy literature*, some of these studies also suggest that partners' accuracy in inferring each other's thoughts and feelings tends to predict better relationship outcomes. The connection between empathic accuracy and positive relationship outcomes appears to be particularly strong during the early stages of relationship development. During this period, greater empathic accuracy may enable partners to anticipate and avoid conflicts as they learn new patterns of behavior that will eventually facilitate mutual accommodation within the relationship (cf. Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990; Kilpatrick, Rusbult, & Bissonnette, 2002; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). During the later stages of relationships, heightened empathic accuracy may be beneficial in a more subtle way by cueing mutually accommodative behaviors after they have become habitual (Kilpatrick et al., 2002).

The first exception: Sometimes motivated inaccuracy helps relationships

Ickes and Simpson (2001) proposed two exceptions to the general rule that empathic accuracy is beneficial to relationships in mundane, nonthreatening situations. Both exceptions are presumed to occur in those relatively infrequent interaction contexts in which relationship partners suspect—or know for certain—that their partner is harboring thoughts and feelings that they might be better off *not* knowing (i.e., thoughts or feelings that, if accurately inferred, could damage the relationship).

The first exception occurs when one or both partners are motivated to *misinfer* their partner's potentially threatening thoughts and feelings, thereby sparing themselves and their relationship the pain and injury that might otherwise be experienced. In these cases, *motivated inaccuracy* provides an important exception to the general rule that partners will benefit from a full and accurate understanding of each other.

Simpson et al. (1995) reported preliminary evidence that partners may use motivated

inaccuracy to defend against impending relationship threats. Heterosexual dating partners tried to infer each other's thoughts and feelings during a task designed to threaten their relationships. Specifically, the partners took turns rating and discussing with each other the physical and sexual attractiveness of several opposite-sex target persons as potential dating partners. In the high-threat condition, the potential dating partners were all highly attractive individuals; in the low-threat condition, they were all below average in attractiveness. Following the rating-and-discussion task, each dating partner tried to infer his or her partner's private thoughts and feelings from a videotape of their interaction during the task.

As predicted, the *lowest* empathic accuracy was exhibited by partners who were closer (i.e., more interdependent) and less secure about the long-term stability of their relationship, and who rated attractive (vs. less attractive) potential dating partners in each other's presence. Moreover, the relation between these three variables and empathic accuracy was mediated by the perceiver's degree of self-reported threat during the rating-and-discussion task. In fact, the couples who were the most threatened—those who were closer, less secure about their relationships, and who also rated highly attractive opposite sex persons—displayed near-chance levels of empathic accuracy. Nevertheless, *all* of these couples were still dating four months later, whereas the remaining couples in the study had a significantly higher breakup rate (28%). These results suggest that when partners find themselves in relationship-threatening situations that cannot be avoided, they may use motivated inaccuracy to protect their relationships from the damage that might result from more accurately “reading” each other's thoughts and feelings.

The second exception: Sometimes motivated accuracy hurts relationships

Individuals enter relationships with prior beliefs and expectations about themselves

and their partners, and about how relationships tend to function (Collins & Read, 1994). According to Bowlby (1973), individuals with a history of receiving intermittent, unpredictable care and support from significant others develop low self-esteem and are preoccupied with the possibility of losing or being abandoned by their romantic partners. To guard against this possibility, these highly anxious/preoccupied individuals become hypervigilant with regard to what their partners are thinking and feeling, particularly when they sense that their relationships might be in jeopardy (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

One interesting implication of this line of reasoning is that the highly anxious/preoccupied individuals in the Simpson et al. (1995) study should have responded very differently from the rest of the sample. Instead of displaying motivated inaccuracy in the relationship-threatening situation, these individuals (identified by high scores on the anxiety attachment dimension) should have displayed hypervigilance and *increased* accuracy when inferring their partners' potentially threatening thoughts and feelings.

To test this intriguing possibility, Simpson, Ickes, and Grich (1999) recoded and reanalyzed the data from the Simpson et al. (1995) study, using anxious attachment scores as a predictor variable. Consistent with the hypervigilance prediction, the more anxiously attached participants in the study (particularly women) displayed greater empathic accuracy. That is, highly anxious individuals displayed enhanced accuracy rather than motivated inaccuracy when asked to infer their partners' potentially threatening thoughts and feelings. They also reported feeling more distressed, threatened, and jealous, and displayed other signs of relationship dissatisfaction and instability.

In effect, these highly anxious individuals behaved as if they had suspicious minds that compelled them to know, at the first sign of threat, what their partner was thinking and feeling. Although their suspiciousness may have allowed them to gauge the severity of a threat more accurately by giving them

clearer insights into their partner's destabilizing thoughts and feelings, it also carried a high price in terms of the corresponding emotional and relational distress it engendered. Overall, then, these findings offered preliminary support for the second exception to the rule in our theoretical model: Sometimes motivated accuracy can hurt relationships.

Presumably, the enhanced accuracy of anxiously attached individuals is motivated by their desire to gauge the degree of relationship threat, and this motive should be routinely activated in relationship-threatening situations. But what if a more general motive of this type exists—one that reflects a more chronic and enduring need to acquire and confront relationship-threatening information? Would the relationships of individuals who score high in this motive also exhibit the instability and vulnerability observed in the relationships of dating partners who scored high in anxious attachment? Conversely, would the relationships of dating partners who score low in this motive reveal the protective, buffering effect of avoiding information that could potentially threaten the relationship?

We addressed these questions in the four studies reported below. Our first step was to develop a self-report measure designed to identify individuals who had suspicious minds. This measure, which we have labeled the MARTI scale, assesses the strength of the motive to acquire (vs. avoid) relationship-threatening information. The items on this scale (see the Appendix) were written by the first author and were designed to apply to dating relationships. They were structured so that the most relationship-threatening items are located at or near the end of the measure. Items having to do with a partner's (hypothetical) sexual infidelity concern protected ("safe") sex rather than unprotected ("unsafe") sex so that the issue of threats to one's relationship will not be confounded with the issue of threats to one's physical health. Finally, only positively keyed (relationship-threatening) items are included in the scale. Attempts to write negatively keyed (reverse-scored)

items were not successful because pilot data revealed that such items contributed little or no variance (i.e., virtually all respondents reported wanting to know every positive and reassuring thing they could about their dating relationship).

In Study 1, we report evidence for the reliability and discriminant validity of the MARTI scale. In Studies 2 and 3, we report additional evidence for the scale's convergent and discriminant validity—evidence that links individuals' MARTI scores with their scores on measures of relational trust (Study 2) and suspicion behaviors (Study 3), but not with their scores on measures of socially desirable responding or hostile/paranoid forms of suspiciousness (Study 3). In Study 4, we report behavioral evidence regarding the predictive validity of the MARTI scale, showing that the relationships of couples who are motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information are, in fact, more likely to break up in response to a major destabilizing influence (less subjective closeness).

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the internal consistency of the MARTI scale and confirmed that it is a unidimensional measure of the strength of the motive to acquire versus avoid relationship-threatening information. We established the uniqueness of the measure by testing its discriminant validity against the Big Five personality traits, adult attachment styles, and more general dimensions of social relating.

Method

Participants

The participants were 159 undergraduates at the University of Texas at Arlington who completed a questionnaire study on the "characteristics of partners in dating relationships." Each student received partial course credit in an introductory psychology class for participating in the study. Data were excluded for two participants because they did not follow the instructions.

Sociodemographic characteristics

Of the 157 participants whose data were used, 84 were women (53.5%) and 73 were men (46.5%). The racial and ethnic composition of the sample reflected the general composition of the student body at the University of Texas at Arlington. Based on self-reports, the sample was composed of 21 African Americans (13.4%), 23 Asians (14.6%), 25 Hispanics (15.9%), 1 Native American (0.6%), 84 Whites (53.5%), and 3 Others (2%). Participants ranged in age from 18–36 years, with a mean age of 20.6 years, and a standard deviation of 3.54 years. In terms of dating status, 30 participants (19.1%) were not dating anyone at the time of the study, 26 (16.6%) were dating both their current partners and others, and 85 (54.1%) were dating their current partner exclusively. Eight of the remaining participants were engaged (5.1%) and 8 were married (5.1%).

Procedure and materials

When participants arrived for the study, they were given a brief introduction and then signed a consent form. Each participant was then given a survey packet containing the following self-report scales:

1. A short demographic questionnaire that assessed the participant's gender, age, race/ethnicity, and current dating status.
2. The 17-item Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), which contains two subscales that assess the two orthogonal attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety. The avoidance subscale measures the tendency to retract from intimacy in relationships and strive for psychological and emotional independence; the anxiety subscale taps preoccupied concerns about losing one's current partner or not being fully appreciated by him or her. Each item was answered on a 7-point scale, anchored by 1 = *I*

strongly disagree and 7 = *I strongly agree*. For evidence of the AAQ's reliability and validity, see Simpson et al. (1996).

3. The 18-item Social Orientation Scale (SOS; Ickes & Hutchison, 2000), which has two subscales that assess the orthogonal dimensions of social absorption and social individuation. Social absorption is the tendency to become highly involved and interdependent with others (e.g., *It's easy for me to get "in sync" with other people and to "merge" with them during the time we're together*). Social individuation is the tendency to distinguish self from others with respect to attitudes, values, intentions, and motives (e.g., *In my interactions with others, I have a clear and definite sense of the difference between my perspective and theirs*). The two-factor structure of the SOS has been supported by confirmatory factor analyses in four samples (see Ickes & Hutchison, 2000). Each item was answered on a 4-point scale, anchored by 1 = *very uncharacteristic of me* and 4 = *very characteristic of me*. For evidence of the reliability and validity of the SOS subscales, see Ickes, Hutchison, and Mashek (in press).
4. A 15-item measure of the Big Five personality traits (Ickes, 1997), based on prototypical markers of each of the Big Five dimensions reported by John (1990). Sample item dimensions are: quiet versus talkative and shy versus sociable (extraversion), friendly versus unfriendly and cold versus warm (agreeableness), responsible versus irresponsible and careful versus careless (conscientiousness), tense versus relaxed and calm versus anxious (neuroticism), and imaginative versus unimaginative and closed-minded versus open-minded (openness). Each item dimension

was answered on a 1 to 7 scale, with 4 as the neutral midpoint between each adjective pair.

5. The 21-item Motive to Acquire Relationship-Threatening Information (MARTI) scale (see the Appendix).

After they had completed the survey packet, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Reliability of the measures

Cronbach alpha coefficients were computed to assess the internal consistency of each scale. The alpha values for the subscales of the Adult Attachment Questionnaire were .71 for avoidance and .74 for anxiety. Similarly, the alpha values for the two subscales of the Social Orientation Scale were .76 for social individuation and .74 for social absorption. The internal consistencies of the Big Five scales were more variable: extraversion (.84), neuroticism (.71), conscientiousness (.68), openness (.61), and agreeableness (.52). Because the MARTI scale was intended to measure a single, unidimensional construct, we calculated its internal consistency as a single 21-item scale. The alpha value was high (.85).

Factor analyses of the MARTI scale

One major goal of Study 1 was to test whether the MARTI scale measured a single latent variable that was distinguishable from the Big Five personality traits, attachment styles, and other major social/relational orientations. To achieve this goal, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor

analyses (CFAs) using all 21 items of the MARTI scale. We tested four CFA models: (i) the hypothesized single-factor (centroid) model, (ii) a model based on item means, (iii) a model based on item variances, and (iv) a model based on item skewness.¹ The results indicated that the single-factor (centroid) model accounted for substantially more variance (49.4%, GFI fit index = .95) than did the models based on item means (13.6%, GFI = .63), item variances (16.4%, GFI = .70), or item skewness (10.3%, GFI = .57).

We next conducted an exploratory principal components analysis (PCA) that produced five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. To determine whether this exploratory five-factor model provided a better fit to the data than did the single-factor model, we performed a second CFA in which the single-factor (centroid) model was tested against the five-factor model. The five-factor model accounted for only 16.5% of the total variance, much less than the 49.4% accounted for by the one-factor model.

These results clearly demonstrate that the MARTI scale is a single-factor measure. This conclusion is also supported by the scale's face validity, the fact that the scale items were developed to tap a single psychological construct, and the scale's high internal consistency.

Descriptive statistics

The average MARTI score for the 157 participants in the Study 1 sample was 25.0, with a standard deviation of 3.93, a skewness index of 1.12, and a kurtosis index of .78. The average MARTI score for the men in the sample ($M = 25.4$) did not differ significantly from the average score for the women ($M = 24.6$), $t = 1.28$, *ns*.²

1. Artfactual factors (historically known as "difficulty factors") can occasionally emerge when sets of items on a scale intercorrelate because they have similar (and typically extreme) means, variances, or skews (Bernstein & Teng, 1989; Carroll, 1945; Ferguson, 1941). To ensure that the factors underlying the MARTI scale were content-based rather than artifactual, we compared the one-factor (centroid) model solution against the other three.

2. There was also no significant difference between the men's and the women's MARTI scores in Studies 2, 3, and 4. And because the participants' gender did not significantly moderate any of the findings reported in these four studies, we will not discuss the gender variable further.

Discriminant validity: Correlations between the MARTI scale and other measures

Given the CFA results, we next correlated participants' MARTI scores with their scores on the other self-report measures. These analyses were performed to test whether the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information is empirically distinct from general personality traits and basic social/relational orientations.

The results consistently supported the discriminant validity of the MARTI scale. The participants' MARTI scores were not significantly correlated with their scores on the social orientation dimensions of social absorption ($r = .05$) or social individuation ($r = .02$). They were also not significantly correlated with Big Five scores on extraversion ($r = -.04$), agreeableness ($r = .01$), conscientiousness ($r = -.13$), neuroticism ($r = -.11$), or openness to experience ($r = .00$). As a measure of the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, therefore, the MARTI scale appears to assess a construct that is both theoretically and empirically distinct from personality traits and general social orientations.

Ickes and Simpson (2001) speculated that the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information should be relatively independent of adult attachment styles. The rationale for this prediction is that information motives are presumed to be conscious and relatively consistent across situations, whereas attachment motives may be largely unconscious and activated only in certain situations (i.e., those in which the threat of relationship loss seems imminent; see Bowlby, 1973). Ickes and Simpson's speculation was confirmed in the present sample: MARTI scores were essentially unrelated to participants' scores on both the avoidance ($r = .05$) and the anxious ($r = -.03$) attachment subscales. These data provide further support for the conceptual distinctiveness of the MARTI scale as a measure of the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information.

In summary, the results of Study 1 revealed that the 21-item MARTI scale is a

highly reliable measure of a single construct. They further revealed that this construct is empirically distinct from the Big Five personality traits, the social orientation dimensions of social absorption and social individuation, and the relationship-relevant dimensions of avoidant and anxious attachment styles. What was still lacking, however, was evidence for the convergent and predictive validity of the MARTI scale. We sought to obtain such evidence in the next three studies we conducted.

Study 2

In Study 2, we explored the convergent validity of the MARTI scale in terms of its association with relationship trust. People who are strongly motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information may seek to do so because they distrust their partners. Any acquired evidence that supports their initial distrust might only strengthen this motive. On the assumption that a reciprocal relationship exists between distrust and the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, we predicted that couples whose members were motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information (high MARTI scorers) would report lower relationship trust than couples whose members were motivated to avoid relationship-threatening information (low MARTI scorers).

Method

Participants

Participants were 96 heterosexual dating couples who completed a relationship questionnaire before participating in a laboratory study unrelated to the present investigation. At least one member of each couple was enrolled in an introductory psychology class at the University of Texas at Arlington and received partial course credit for his or her participation. If the other partner was not also an introductory

psychology student, she or he was paid \$10 for participating.

Sociodemographic characteristics

Once again, the racial and ethnic composition of the sample was similar to the general composition of the student body at the University of Texas at Arlington. Based on self-reports, the sample was composed of 28 African Americans (14.5%), 14 Asians (7%), 31 Hispanics (16%), 1 Native American (0.5%), 111 Whites (58%), and 7 Others (4%). Participants ranged in age from 18–50 years; their mean age was 21.6 years, with a standard deviation of 3.50 years. In terms of dating status, 14 were dating both their current partners and others (7.3%) and 150 were dating their current partner exclusively (78.1%). Of the remaining participants, 24 were engaged (12.5%) and 4 were married (2.1%).

Procedure and materials

As in Study 1, when the participants arrived for the study, they were given a brief introduction and then signed a consent form. Each participant was then given a survey packet similar to the one used in Study 1. The packet contained the MARTI scale, the Adult Attachment Questionnaire, and some additional measures. These additional measures included (i) a short demographic questionnaire that assessed each participant's gender, age, race/ethnicity, and current dating status, and (ii) the Trust Scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Participants completed their packets in separate cubicles to ensure that their dating partner could not influence them to censor or distort their responses.

Results

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess the internal consistency of each scale. The alpha values for the subscales of the AAQ were .74 for avoidance and .72 for anxiety. The coefficient alphas for the MARTI scale and the Trust Scale were .90 and .79, respectively.

To examine the discriminant and convergent validity of the MARTI scale, correlations were computed between the participants' MARTI scores and their scores on the other measures. As in Study 1, the zero-order correlations between the MARTI scale and the subscales of the AAQ were not significant ($r = .03$ for the avoidance subscale, $r = .05$ for the anxiety subscale). On the other hand, the predicted negative correlation between the MARTI scale and the Trust Scale was statistically significant, $r = -.19$, $p < .01$. Specifically, partners who had stronger motives to acquire relationship-threatening information reported lower levels of trust in their current relationships.

The dating partners' scores on the Trust Scale were interdependent, as evidenced by an intraclass (interpartner) correlation of .58, $F(95,96) = 1.83$, $p < .05$. For this reason, we recomputed the correlation between the MARTI and the Trust Scale at both the individual and dyad levels of analysis, using procedures recommended by Gonzalez and Griffin (2000). The interdependence-adjusted individual-level correlation between MARTI and trust was about the same as before ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$); the latent-variables estimate of the dyadic correlation was slightly larger ($r = -.24$). The adjusted individual-level correlation indicates that as the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information increases, individuals are less trusting (or vice versa). Similarly, the dyad-level correlation indicates that in dating couples where both members have higher MARTI scores, both members also tend to trust each other less.

Because mistrust should be conceptually related to the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, the Study 2 data offer important support for the convergent validity of the MARTI scale. On the other hand, although the negative correlation between MARTI and trust was significant, as we predicted, it was also low enough ($-.20$ to $-.25$) to justify making a conceptual distinction between MARTI and relational trust.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed to provide further construct validity evidence for the MARTI scale. With respect to convergent validity, we predicted that if individuals are strongly motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information, they should be more inclined to engage in “suspicion behaviors” driven by concerns about the possible lack of commitment or the infidelity of past or current romantic partners. Accordingly, individuals who score higher on the MARTI scale should be more likely to report having eavesdropped on their past or current partners’ phone conversations, checked up on their partners’ whereabouts, secretly followed or spied on their partners, monitored their partners’ behavior for signs of infidelity, or set up test situations to determine whether their partners were lying (see Ickes & Simpson, 1997, p. 238).

With respect to discriminant validity, we predicted that scores on the MARTI scale should not correlate significantly with scores on a measure of socially desirable responding (i.e., impression-management; Paulhus, 1984) or on a measure of hostile/paranoid (i.e., more clinical) forms of suspicion (Buss & Durkee, 1957). Because the MARTI was developed to assess individual differences in the desire to acquire relationship-threatening information in romantic relationships (rather than the desire to make good social impressions or the tendency to harbor paranoid concerns about people in general), it should not share substantial variance with measures of people’s tendencies to present themselves in an overly positive light or to harbor hostile and paranoid worries about the malevolence of all people.

As a final goal of Study 3, we wanted to confirm that the MARTI scale (which has a dichotomous response format) correlates strongly with a version of the scale in which all 21 items are answered using a continuous, Likert-type response format. Accordingly, both versions of the scale were administered to the Study 3 participants.

Method

Participants

Seventy-four men and 114 women, all enrolled in an introductory psychology class at Texas A & M University, participated for course credit. To be eligible for the study, participants had to have dated someone at some point in the past. At the time of the study, 44.1% percent of the participants were not currently dating anyone, 49.5% were dating one partner exclusively, 4.3% were currently dating more than one partner, and 2.1% were engaged. The participants’ average age was 18.90 years, with a standard deviation of .87 years. Based on self-reports, 79.8% of the participants classified themselves as White, 14.4% as Latino/Hispanic, and the remaining 5.8% as African American, Asian, or Other.

Procedures

Participants completed a short set of self-report questionnaires in small groups. In addition to completing a general demographic questionnaire and the MARTI scale, they also responded to each of the four following measures.

1. Suspicion Behavior Checklist (SBC). This 11-item scale, developed for the present study, asks individuals how often they have engaged in various acts/behaviors designed to check, monitor, or test for a romantic partner’s potential disloyalty or infidelity (either their current partner or previous ones). On a 4-point scale (where 1 = *never*, 2 = *1 or 2 times*, 3 = *3 or 4 times*, and 4 = *5 or more times*), the participants indicate how often they have eavesdropped on a partner’s private phone conversations, called to see if a partner was where he or she was supposed to be, secretly followed or spied on a partner, set up test situations to see if a partner would lie about the relationship, had someone check to see who

a partner was with, confronted a partner about suspicions of being romantically involved with other people, closely monitored a partner's daily behavior for signs of infidelity, unexpectedly visited a partner to see whether he or she was doing something wrong, or asked a partner details about his or her past lovers.

This checklist proved to be reliable ($\alpha = .85$), but because the behaviors it assessed were relatively rare and socially undesirable, the distribution of scores was markedly (and positively) skewed. To help normalize the distribution, total scores on the SBC were transformed using a \log_{10} transformation to reduce the skew. Higher scores indicated engaging in suspicion behaviors more frequently.

2. **Impression Management Scale.** Paulhus's (1984) 10-item Impression Management Scale is answered on a 7-point scale (anchored by 1 = *No, not at all* and 7 = *Yes, a great deal*). Sample items include: *Once in a while, I laugh at a dirty joke* (reverse-keyed); *I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable*; and *Sometimes at elections I vote for candidates I know little about* (reverse-keyed). The scale had a lower-than-expected reliability ($\alpha = .53$), which did not improve when potentially problematic items were considered for exclusion. High scores on this measure reflect a tendency to present oneself in an overly positive light.
3. **Alternative MARTI Scale** (continuous response format). The participants then responded to the 21 items of the MARTI scale again, but this time using a Likert-type rating scale (anchored by 1 = *I would prefer to NOT know this information* and 7 = *I would prefer TO KNOW this information*). This continuous-scale version of the MARTI was highly reliable ($\alpha = .92$), with higher scores reflecting a stronger

desire to acquire relationship-threatening information.

4. **Hostile/Paranoid Suspicion Scale.** This 10-item measure (Buss & Durkee, 1957) assesses hostile/paranoid forms of distrust and suspicion about people in general (including strangers). It is answered in a true/false format. Sample items are: *I sometimes have the feeling that others are laughing at me*; *There are a number of people who seem to be jealous of me*; and *I know that people tend to talk about me behind my back*. The scale was reasonably reliable ($\alpha = .63$) given its brevity and dichotomous response format. Higher scores indicated greater paranoid suspicion and distrust.

Results

As expected, the dichotomous and continuous versions of the MARTI scale proved to be highly correlated, both in the full sample, $r = .77$, $p < .001$, and within each sex, $r = .79$ for men and $r = .74$ for women. When the unreliability of each scale was corrected for attenuation (Cohen & Cohen, 1983), the disattenuated correlation was .91. This result indicates that the two versions of the MARTI scale (dichotomous and continuous response formats) yield total scale scores for which respondents are rank-ordered almost identically, suggesting that the two versions can be used interchangeably in research.

To further examine the factor structure of the MARTI scale, we conducted two principal components analyses: one on the 21 MARTI items answered in the original (dichotomous) response format, and one on the 21 MARTI items answered in a Likert-type response format. The scree test for the analysis involving the 21 items answered in the dichotomous format indicated one component (factor) that explained 23.15% of the variance. With the exception of one item (item 13), all items loaded .30 or greater on this factor. The scree test for the analysis involving

MARTI items answered on the Likert-type scales also revealed one component (factor) that accounted for 39.50% of the variance. All 21 items loaded .35 or greater on this factor. Thus, replicating results reported in Study 1, both forms of the MARTI scale appear to measure a single underlying factor.

Despite the low frequency (and the highly skewed distribution) of the suspicion behaviors reported in this sample, the participants' scores on the MARTI scale correlated significantly with their scores on the Suspicion Behaviors Checklist, $r = .17$, $p < .02$ in the full sample ($r = .14$ for women and $r = .19$ for men). When the unreliability of each scale was corrected for attenuation, the disattenuated correlation was .20 in the full sample (.17 for women and .23 for men). That is, individuals who want to acquire more relationship-threatening information report having engaged more frequently in "suspicion behaviors" involving past or current romantic partners.

As predicted, two nonsignificant discriminant correlations were found. Specifically, the MARTI did not correlate with either Paulhus's (1984) Impression Management Scale, $r = -.06$, *ns*, in the full sample ($r = -.02$ for men and $r = -.14$ for women, both *ns*) or Buss and Durkee's (1957) Hostile/Paranoid Suspicion Scale, $r = -.05$, *ns* ($r = -.05$ for men and $r = -.08$, both *ns*).

In sum, this pattern of convergent and discriminant correlations provides further support for the construct validity of the MARTI scale. The significant convergent correlation involving the MARTI scale and the Suspicion Behaviors Checklist was only modest, however, analogous to the weak-but-significant correlations typically observed in other domains (i.e., research on criminal behavior or on coronary heart disease) in which the criterion outcome occurs infrequently and has a positively skewed response distribution.

Study 4

The goal of Study 4 was to marshal additional evidence for the construct validity of the MARTI scale by replicating the scale's

discriminant validity properties and testing the scale's predictive validity. Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) proposed that individuals who find it difficult to avoid relationship-threatening information should be vulnerable to experiencing relationship dissolution over relatively short periods of time, especially if they feel less close to (i.e., less personally connected with) their partners. People who feel less subjectively close to their partners should find relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings more damaging because their levels of relationship commitment and trust are not high enough to allow them to ignore, downplay, or discount threatening information.

This line of reasoning suggests that dating partners' MARTI scores should predict the probability of relationship dissolution over time. Specifically, couples who score higher on the MARTI scale (i.e., couples with more suspicions) should be significantly more likely to break up than couples who score lower (i.e., couples with fewer or less intense suspicions), and this instability should be *most* apparent in couples who also report lower levels of perceived (subjective) closeness.

Method

Participants

The participants were 85 heterosexual dating couples who volunteered for a study on the "characteristics of partners in dating relationships." With the aid of posters and fliers, couples were recruited from the University of Texas at Arlington campus and the surrounding community. Each partner was paid \$10 for his or her participation. Data from four couples were excluded from the analyses (in two cases because of technical difficulties, and in two others because of a failure to follow instructions). Data from the remaining 81 couples were used in the analyses reported below.

Sociodemographic characteristics

Similar to Study 1, the racial and ethnic composition of the Study 4 sample reflected the

general composition of the student body at the University of Texas at Arlington. There were 15 Hispanic participants (9.3%), 24 African Americans (14.8%), 23 Asians (14.2%), 94 Whites (58.0%), and 6 Others (3.7%). Participants ranged in age from 18–43 years, with a mean age of 22.1 years. The average length of their relationships was 22.5 months, with a standard deviation of 1.3 months. With regard to dating status, only 4 participants were dating their current partner and others (2.5%), 126 people were dating only their current partner (77.7%), and 32 were engaged (19.8%).

Procedure

When each couple arrived for the study, the experimenter escorted the partners to separate cubicles where they completed a packet of self-report measures in private. The packet contained each of the scales used in Study 1 (except the Big Five scales) plus an additional one (the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale). When both partners had finished, they were reunited. They then participated in a laboratory task not relevant to the present study. When this task was over, each couple was given \$20 (\$10 per person) for their participation, after which they were thanked and debriefed.

Measures

The Study 4 self-report scales included the brief demographic questionnaire, the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1996), the Social Orientation Scale (Ickes & Hutchison, 2000), and the MARTI scale. Participants also completed the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), which is a well-validated measure of perceived relationship closeness. The IOS consists of 7 Venn diagrams that depict self and partner as circles with different degrees of overlap (perceived closeness). The participants choose the diagram (1 through 7) for which the degree of overlap best represents their perception of the degree of closeness in their current relationship. Higher scores reflect greater subjective closeness.

Five-month follow-up of dating status

Five months after the study, each of the dating partners was contacted by telephone. Each partner was asked the following question: “When you participated in the study on [date of participation], you were dating a person named [name of dating partner]. Are you still dating this person?” (answered either “Yes” or “No”). Both partners had to agree about their current dating status for their relationship status data to be used in the analyses. Of the 81 couples who participated in Study 4, concordant relationship status information was obtained from 75 couples (92%).

Results

Discriminant validity: Correlations between the MARTI scale and other measures

As in Study 1, scores on the MARTI scale were not significantly correlated with scores on any of the other self-report scales assessed in Study 4. In particular, MARTI scores were not correlated with scores on either the avoidance ($r = .10$) or the anxious ($r = -.08$) subscales of the AAQ, and they also were unrelated to both the social absorption ($r = -.06$) and social individuation ($r = .03$) subscales of the Social Orientation Scale. Similar to the findings of Study 1, these null results support the discriminant validity of the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information.

Evidence for the predictive validity of the MARTI scale

As a behavioral test of predictive validity, we calculated the dyad-level scores for the MARTI scale and the IOS measure (for each scale, we averaged the scores of the male partner and the female partner within each dyad) and used these two scores to predict couples' relationship status (broken up vs. still together) at the 5-month follow-up. Because information would have been lost by reducing the predictor variables to class variables (needed to run in an ANOVA model), we used a moderated

multiple regression approach to test the unique effects of each predictor variable—dyad-level MARTI and perceived closeness scores—and the interaction of these two variables (for information about this technique, see Arnold & Evans, 1979; Cohen, 1978; McClelland & Judd, 1993; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Saunders, 1956).

As predicted, couples who scored higher on the MARTI scale were more likely to have broken up 5 months later than were couples who scored lower. When, for illustrative purposes, median splits were used to divide the couples into subgroups, the percentages of couples who were still dating at 5-month follow-up were 54% of those with high MARTI scores and 78% of those with low MARTI scores, $t(74) = -1.93$, $p = .06$. A similar trend was found for couples who were classified by median split as higher versus lower in perceived closeness: A higher percentage of more-close couples (77%) than less-close couples (65%) were still dating 5 months later, $t(74) = -1.74$, $p < .08$.

These main effects, however, were qualified in the moderated multiple regression analysis by a significant MARTI \times Perceived Closeness interaction, $F(1,74) = 4.47$, $p < .05$. This predicted interaction (shown in Figure 1) revealed that, among couples who had a stronger motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, those who were less close were less likely to stay together (47%) than those

who were closer (67%). In contrast, among couples with a weaker motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, there was no such difference. In fact, less-close couples were just as likely to stay together as more-close couples in this case (78% and 76%, respectively).

This interaction provides evidence that the avoidance of relationship-threatening information can actually buffer dating partners from risk factors that might otherwise destabilize their relationships. Lower levels of perceived closeness appear to be a risk factor for relationship dissolution, but only in combination with a strong motive to acquire relationship-threatening information. When this motive is weak (i.e., when couples avoid such information), the relationships of less-close couples are no more unstable than those of more-close couples, at least within the time frame examined in Study 4.

General Discussion

The findings of the present studies support the reliability, distinctiveness, and construct validity of the MARTI scale—a measure of the tendency to approach or avoid relationship-threatening information. Results of Study 1 reveal that the MARTI scale has good internal consistency and that it measures a single underlying factor. The results of Study 1 also provide discriminant validity evidence for the MARTI scale, demonstrating that it is empirically unrelated to measures of conceptually distinct constructs such as the Big Five personality traits, adult attachment styles, and general social orientations.

Data from Studies 2 and 3 provide convergent and discriminant validity evidence for the MARTI scale. Specifically, results of these studies reveal that dating partners with higher MARTI scores tend to trust their partners less (Study 2) and report engaging in more “suspicion behaviors” designed to ascertain their partners’ degree of fidelity or commitment (Study 3). In addition, scores on the MARTI scale do not correlate with the tendency to convey

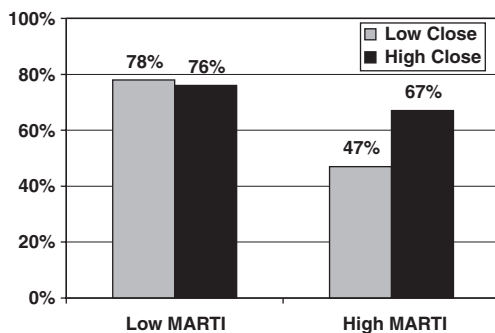


Figure 1. Percentage of couples still together at the time of the 5-month follow-up in Study 4.

socially desirable impressions or with hostile/paranoid forms of suspiciousness.

The data from Study 4 replicate the discriminant validity findings from Study 1 and provide important predictive validity evidence for the MARTI scale. As expected, dating couples who are more motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information are more likely to break up across a 5-month period, particularly if their relationship is low in subjective closeness. Conversely, couples who are motivated to avoid relationship-threatening information are less likely to break up, even if their relationship is less close. These results suggest that a strong motive to avoid relationship-threatening information might buffer relationships from destabilizing influences (such as low closeness) that could undermine them if left unchecked.

Considered together, the results of these studies indicate that the MARTI scale assesses a novel and empirically distinct psychological dimension that may play an important role in the long-term functioning and well-being of romantic relationships. In what follows, we suggest ways in which the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information might have both deleterious and (in certain cases) beneficial effects on relationships. We then propose some viable directions for future research.

When is seeking relationship-threatening information bad versus good for relationships?

As a general rule, relationships should suffer if one or both partners possess a strong motive to acquire relationship-threatening information, particularly if one or both partners ruminate about or embellish worst-case scenarios when confronted with such information. Strong motives to acquire threatening information should be particularly damaging to relationships when the knowledge of potential threats prolongs, revives, or intensifies existing relationship problems. This should be true even in situations where problems seem minor (i.e., are not central to the relation-

ship) or are transient (see Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al., 1995). The damage should be greatest, however, in situations where problems are major, enduring, difficult, or impossible to resolve.

On the other hand, there may be instances in which it might be adaptive for partners to possess at least *moderate* levels of the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information. Moderate levels of this motive could potentially benefit relationships when the resulting awareness of legitimate relationship threats enables partners to make necessary corrections or changes in their relationship. This process should be most evident in situations where the problems associated with the threat are critical to the long-term well-being of the relationship, are likely to persist over time, could recur frequently, or could be resolved if dealt with directly. Conversely, moderate levels of the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information may be harmful if couples continually encounter situations where their differences seem irreconcilable or their relationship problems are viewed as irremediable.

These hypothesized effects are likely to be moderated by any or all of several factors, including (a) the type of relational threat a person finds most troubling, (b) the person's *own* dispositional characteristics (e.g., level of anxious attachment or neuroticism), and (c) the person's *partner's* dispositional characteristics. For example, in certain watershed situations (e.g., when relational stability is highly threatened), high scores on both the MARTI and anxious attachment may bode poorly for the long-term well-being of a relationship. Highly anxious persons tend to be preoccupied with issues of loss and abandonment, and they typically infer the worst in these relationship-threatening contexts (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). In contrast, high scores on the MARTI scale in combination with greater attachment security should be less damaging because more secure people do not worry about abandonment and, for that reason, should be less likely to prematurely catastrophize

problems when relationship threats become salient.

The characteristics of one's partner also might affect long-term relationship outcomes. Individuals who are involved with partners scoring high on both the MARTI and anxious attachment, for instance, might have to persistently calm their partners and remind them of their steadfast love and devotion in order to sustain and stabilize their relationships. Needless to say, this role could become increasingly difficult and burdensome over time.

In sum, the meaning of high scores on the MARTI scale must be interpreted in the context of additional qualifying information about the relationship partners. A strong desire to acquire relationship-threatening information should have different long-term effects on relationships, depending on how each partner interprets and processes potentially threatening information. If partners use information-processing strategies in which negative affect distorts their thinking (Forgas, 1995) or if they rely on emotion-focused coping strategies when distressed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the motive to acquire relationship-threatening information may have deleterious effects. However, if partners do not let negative affect infuse their information processing or if they use problem-focused coping strategies when upset, this motive should be less damaging to their relationships.

Directions for future research

The new MARTI construct and its associated scale suggest several new avenues for research on relationship dynamics. First, future research should determine whether other relevant individual difference measures (e.g., attachment styles or neuroticism) or dyad-based measures (e.g., relationship trust) interact with the MARTI scale to predict long-term relationship outcomes such as changes in satisfaction or relationship instability. It would be interesting to determine, for example, whether specific configurations of personal attributes

(e.g., high scores on the MARTI, high scores on anxious attachment, and low scores on trust) forecast the most negative relationship outcomes across time. Predictions of this type could be tested in married couples as well as in dating couples. By simply changing the scale instructions and certain of the items, the MARTI can easily be adapted for use with married samples.

Second, future research should examine whether different levels of the motive assessed by the MARTI scale predict long-term marital well-being in the specific situations in which high versus low levels of this motive theoretically should have beneficial versus damaging effects. It is possible, for example, that a strong motive to avoid relationship-threatening information on the part of one or both spouses may protect marriages from short-term, minor, or temporary downturns, but make them more susceptible to long-term declines in stability and satisfaction when more serious or intractable problems arise. In other words, future studies should identify the specific circumstances in which the motive to avoid relationship-threatening information stops being adaptive and becomes maladaptive.

Third, we need to understand how relationship dynamics might differ when partners have similar versus different motives to approach or avoid relationship-threatening information. For example, if both partners are predisposed to avoid relationship-threatening information, avoidance may become normative in their relationship and such couples may become "conflict-avoidant" (Gottman, 1994). If both partners are predisposed to approach relationship-threatening information, they may develop confrontative relationships similar to those that Gottman has characterized as "volatile." Finally, if one partner is predisposed to avoid relationship-threatening information while the other is predisposed to acquire it, such couples may develop and display a "demand/withdrawal" pattern (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Our informational-motives perspective suggests that which partner "demands" and which one "withdraws" might have more to do with

each partner's MARTI score than with his or her gender. If this proves to be true, it would qualify the conventional wisdom that women usually demand and men usually withdraw in romantic relationships.

Fourth, future research should investigate the different possible "origins" of the motivation to acquire versus avoid relationship-threatening information. Some individuals may be motivated to gather threatening information because they chronically worry about their partners' activities and whereabouts, even if their partners have always been honest and faithful. Other individuals may seek such information because painful personal experiences have taught them that they cannot trust their partners and must remain vigilant to signs of trouble. Scores on the MARTI, therefore, may contain some variance associated with the general disposition to acquire relationship-threatening information and some that reflects the dynamics of the current relationship. Understanding why certain individuals are strongly motivated to acquire versus avoid relationship-threatening information is likely to provide important clues about the dynamics of suspicion and denial in close relationships.

Fifth, additional research should clarify where the MARTI scale fits within the larger nomological network of potentially related constructs and measures. The current studies demonstrate that the MARTI

scale displays its convergent validity in relation to conceptually similar constructs such as dispositional trust and the tendency to engage in suspicion behaviors, but shows its discriminant validity in relation to conceptually distinct or irrelevant constructs such as personality traits, response biases, and general social orientations. Because scale validation is a continuing process and because no initial set of studies can be expected to rule out the influence of all possible covariates (uncertainty orientation, need for closure, jealousy, etc.), future research should continue to explore the construct validity of the MARTI scale.

Finally, future research should explore in greater detail the behavioral tactics that individuals use to acquire or avoid potentially threatening information. Do people typically seek such information directly by confronting their partners? Or do they seek information indirectly by monitoring their partner's personal correspondence, checking their partner's claims against verifiable records, or calling to confirm their partner's whereabouts and current activities? Are there certain types of information or situations in which direct versus indirect tactics are more likely to be employed? A better understanding of what tactics people routinely use, when they use them, and why they use them may provide deeper insights into how, when, and why these informational motives operate.

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Appendix: The Motivation to Acquire Relationship-Threatening Information (MARTI) Scale

In dating relationships, there are things that partners might or might not want to know about each other. For each of the following hypothetical items of information, indicate whether you would prefer to **know** or **not know** the information by circling the appropriate alternative in each case. There are no right or wrong answers, but it is important that you be as honest and accurate as possible in responding to each item.

All of the items of information listed below are hypothetical. We have not obtained any of this information from your dating partner and will not do so. We will keep all of the responses to this survey strictly confidential and use the resulting data for statistical purposes only. Your dating partner will never see any of your responses at any time.

If you could, which of the following hypothetical items of information about your dating partner would you prefer to know or not know? (Circle one of the two responses in each case.)

(continued on next page)

Appendix: (continued)

	I would prefer to:	
1. The most critical thing my partner has said about me to one of his/her same-sex friends.	know	not know
2. The most unkind or unfair thing my partner has said about me to one of his/her same-sex friends.	know	not know
3. The most critical thing my partner has said about me to one of <i>my</i> same-sex friends.	know	not know
4. The most unkind or unfair thing my partner has said about me to one of <i>my</i> same-sex friends.	know	not know
5. The most critical thing my partner has said about me to one of his/her current or former dating partners.	know	not know
6. The most unkind or unfair thing my partner has said about me to one of his/her current or former dating partners.	know	not know
7. The most intimate detail of my past history that my partner has revealed to one of his/her same-sex friends.	know	not know
8. The most intimate detail of my past history that my partner has revealed to one of <i>my</i> same-sex friends.	know	not know
9. The most intimate detail of my past history that my partner has revealed to one of his/her current or former dating partners.	know	not know
10. The most intimate detail of our relationship that my partner has revealed to one of his/her same-sex friends.	know	not know
11. The most intimate detail of our relationship that my partner has revealed to one of <i>my</i> same-sex friends.	know	not know
12. The most intimate detail of our relationship that my partner has revealed to one of his/her current or former dating partners.	know	not know
13. Which of <i>my</i> same-sex friends my partner is secretly the most strongly attracted to.	know	not know
14. Whether my partner has ever flirted with one of my same-sex friends without telling me.	know	not know
15. Whether my partner has, without telling me, ever flirted with any other members of the opposite sex while we have been dating.	know	not know
16. Whether my partner has ever dated one of my same-sex friends without telling me.	know	not know
17. Whether my partner has, without telling me, ever dated any other members of the opposite sex while we have been dating.	know	not know
18. Whether my partner has ever made out with one of my same-sex friends without telling me.	know	not know
19. Whether my partner has, without telling me, ever made out with any other members of the opposite sex while we have been dating.	know	not know
20. Whether my partner has ever had protected sex with one of my same-sex friends without telling me	know	not know
21. Whether my partner has, without telling me, ever had protected sex with any other members of the opposite sex while we have been dating.	know	not know

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