**Empathic Accuracy in Close Relationships**

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**Abstract**

In the present chapter we examine the role that empathic accuracy plays in people's close relationships. We first define the term *empathic accuracy* and briefly review the historical precedents of this important construct. We then describe how empathic accuracy is operationally defined and measured within the context of the three major research paradigms that have been developed to date: the *dyadic interaction paradigm*, the *standard stimulus paradigm*, and the *standard interview paradigm*. Next, we summarize the results of the search for reliable predictors of empathic accuracy, starting with characteristics of perceivers and then moving to characteristics of targets.

The rest of the chapter focuses specifically on empathic accuracy in close relationship**s**. This section examines the “motivational dynamics” of empathic accuracy, using Ickes and Simpson’s (1997, 2001) *empathic accuracy model* to specify when perceivers will attempt to accurately versus *in*accurately infer their relationship partner’s thoughts and feelings. With the empathic accuracy model and its associated research findings as background, we go on to explore the role of empathic accuracy in successful social interactions. Finally, we suggest some useful directions for future research and summarize both the perils and pitfalls of “everyday mind reading.”

To married couples who are having trouble communicating with each other, child and family counselor Jean Tracy offers the following advice:

**Stop mind reading.** You can guess but you can't read anyone's mind. Sometimes your guesses are close. Much of the time, they're wrong. If you're not good at mind reading, neither is your partner. Nobody is. Use your reason and let go of mind reading. You'll both be happier. (Tracy, February 23, 2009)

Are these assertions correct? Is it true that nobody is good at mind reading (i.e., we’re just not good at it)? Is it also true that we―and our relationships―would be better off if we just let go of mind reading (i.e., it’s just not good for us)? As tempting as it might be to draw such simple and unqualified conclusions, we suggest that the reality of mind reading in close relationships is far more nuanced and complex. With regard to Tracy’s first assertion, we will argue that although no one is a mind-reading superstar, poor mind readers suffer from their deficiency, and it is a mistake to assume that we are all better off not even trying to "read" our relationship partners' minds. With regard to Tracy’s second assertion, we will argue that everyday mind reading―what we call *empathic accuracy*―is neither entirely good nor entirely bad. As we hope to demonstrate, our empathic accuracy often helps, but sometimes hurts, our close relationships. The trick lies in knowing the difference between when it helps and when it hurts.

Finally, although Tracy neglected to mention the issue, we will review a considerable amount of evidence attesting to the importance of the perceiver’s *motivation* in determining the level of empathic accuracy that he or she achieves. We will argue that although perceivers are usually motivated to achieve greater accuracy, they are sometimes motivated to be less accurate―particularly in situations in which the relationship would be threatened by a more accurate knowledge of what one’s interaction partner is currently thinking or feeling.

***Overview***

To state our goals more broadly, in the present chapter we examine the role that empathic accuracy plays in people's close relationships. We first define what empathic accuracy is and briefly review the historical precedents of this construct. We next describe how empathic accuracy is operationally defined and measured within the context of the three major research paradigms that have been developed to date. We then summarize the search for reliable predictors of empathic accuracy, starting with characteristics of perceivers and then moving to characteristics of targets.

The rest of the chapter focuses specifically on empathic accuracy in close relationship**s**. This section of the chapter examines the “motivational dynamics” of empathic accuracy, using Ickes and Simpson’s (1997, 2001) *empathic accuracy model* to specify when perceivers will attempt to accurately versus *in*accurately infer their relationship partner’s thoughts and feelings. With the empathic accuracy model and its associated research findings as background, we then explore the role of empathic accuracy in successful social interactions. Finally, we suggest some useful directions for future research and revisit Jean Tracy’s assertions about the perils and pitfalls of everyday mind reading.

**Empathic Accuracy: What Is It and How Is It Measured?**

In this section of the chapter, we address two fundamental questions: What is empathic accuracy and how is it measured? While answering these two questions, we also provide an historical perspective on the construct of empathic accuracy and how it has developed over time.

***Definitions***

Let's begin with the existing definitions of two closely-related terms: empathic inference and empathic accuracy. As defined by Ickes (2009, p. 57):

*Empathic inference* is the everyday mind reading that people do whenever they attempt to infer other people’s thoughts and feelings. It is a concept that other writers address under such headings as “mentalizing” or “theory of mind” (Stone, 2006; Stone & Gerans, 2006). *Empathic accuracy*is the extent to which such everyday mind reading attempts are successful (Ickes, 1997, 2003). To put it simply, empathically accurate perceivers are those who are good at “reading” other people’s thoughts and feelings.

***The Origin of the Empathic Accuracy Construct***

From an historical standpoint, the most obvious precedent for the empathic accuracy construct is Carl Rogers's concept of *accurate empathy*. Rogers (1957) used this term to describe the (ideal) clinician's ability to correctly infer, from one moment to the next, the content of a client's successive thoughts and feelings. When William Ickes later needed to name the inferential accuracy measure that he and his colleagues had just developed (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990), he decided to reverse the words in Rogers's term to put the primary emphasis on the accuracy portion of his term *empathic accuracy*.

This etymological link is not quite as straightforward as it appears, however. As Ickes (2003) notes in chapter 4 of his book *Everyday Mind Reading,* his choice of the term empathic accuracy also derived from his own "crash course" study of the empathy construct. One of the things he learned was that, following the introduction of this construct by Theodore Lipps around 1903, the word *empathy* quickly acquired multiple meanings as different writers treated it as a kind of "Rorschach word" into which they could project their own preferred conceptions (at least eight of them, according to a recent review by Batson, 2009).

It should be noted that when Ickes and his colleagues use the word "empathy," the meaning they have in mind is essentially the same as that proposed by the philosopher Max Scheler (1931): empathy is the apperception or intuition of another person's thoughts and feelings (see also Becker, 1931, 1956).

***The Measurement of Empathic Accuracy***

In the original procedure for measuring empathic accuracy that Ickes and his colleagues developed (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990),[[1]](#footnote-1) empathic accuracy is measured on a percentage (0 to 100) scale as the ratio of the "total number of accuracy points earned" to the "total number of accuracy points possible." If this type of performance measure sounds familiar, it should. It is the same "percent correct" measure on which our performance is typically evaluated in grade school through middle school through high school―and often beyond.

But how do we obtain the terms of this ratio: the total number of accuracy points earned and the total number of accuracy points possible? To see how this is done, we must first consider the procedure that Ickes, Stinson, et al. (1990) developed to measure empathic accuracy in what they call the *dyadic interaction paradigm*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

***The dyadic interaction paradigm***. In this procedure, a pair of individuals is escorted into a laboratory "waiting room," seated together, and asked to wait while the experimenter completes a necessary errand. During the time they are left together (a time interval which varies according to the design and purposes of the study), they are covertly videotaped without their prior knowledge―a practice which is essential to ensure that their interaction together is spontaneous and unaffected by the prior knowledge that any recording of their interaction will occur.

After returning from the "errand," the experimenter probes for any suspicion that the interaction was recorded, explains the deception and why it was necessary, and asks the participants to sign a release form that allows the researchers to use the tape as a source of data. If both participants give their signed consent, the experimenter then explains that the rest of the procedure requires the participants to independently view separate copies of the videotaped interaction and pause their respective copy at each of the points where they had a specific, clearly-remembered thought or feeling.

If the participants give their further signed consent to continue, they are seated in separate cubicles where they perform this task using a *thought/feeling reporting form* (see an example in Figure 1). Each person makes a list of all of the specific thoughts and feelings he or she remembered having during the videotaped interaction and records the times displayed on the video counter when they occurred. Then, in the final phase of the procedure, the participants independently view the tape a second time, when it is now paused at each of the points at which their interaction partner reported a specific thought or feeling. Using a *thought/feeling inference form* (see the example in Figure 2), they record their written inference about what their partner's thought or feeling was at each of the "tape stops," thereby enabling the experimenter to match each of the actual thoughts and feelings reported by a participant with the corresponding empathic inference made by his or her interaction partner.

When all of the data have been collected, trained raters compare the content of the inferred thought or feeling with that of the actual thought or feeling and assign "accuracy points" that range from 0 (essentially different content) through 1 (similar, but not the same, content) to 2 (essentially the same content).[[3]](#footnote-3) Note that the total number of accuracy points possible always equals 2 (the maximum accuracy points per inference) times the number of inferences made. In a final step, dividing the total number of accuracy points earned (averaged across the judgments of enough raters to get sufficient interrater reliability) by the total number of accuracy points possible yields a "percent correct" measure of empathic accuracy.

The dyadic interaction paradigm is useful for studying empathic accuracy in the naturally occurring interactions of pairs of individuals whose level of acquaintance can vary widely, depending on the purposes of the study: strangers, acquaintances, close friends, dating partners, or couples who are married or cohabiting. It is particularly well-suited for making empathic accuracy comparisons *between* certain types of dyads (e.g., strangers versus friends, distressed versus non-distressed married couples) and *within* certain other types of dyads (e.g., an autistic person paired with a non-autistic partner of the same age, gender, and IQ level).[[4]](#footnote-4)

***The standard stimulus paradigm.*** In studies using the *standard stimulus paradigm*, individual participants are asked to view one or more videotapes of dyadic interactions that occurred between other people. Again, who these "other people" are can vary widely, depending on the purpose of the study. For example, they can be strangers, close friends, married couples, two people who are negotiating a business deal, a therapist talking with a client, or a mother spending time with her child. Immediately following each of these videotaped interactions, the actual thoughts and feelings of the people on the tape are obtained. From these videotaped interactions, a "master" standard stimulus tape is later created and shown to individual research participants who view this tape with the instruction to infer the specific content of the target person(s)' reported thought or feeling at each of the previously determined "tape stops" (for the first study to use this paradigm, see Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995).

Because all of the individual "perceivers" in the study infer the same exact set of thoughts and feelings, the task is objectively the same for all of them. This means that the empathic accuracy scores they obtain can be meaningfully compared across all of the perceivers in the study―something that cannot be done in the dyadic interaction paradigm, in which different perceivers infer the unique thoughts and feelings of their own particular partner-target. This feature of the standard stimulus paradigm makes it particularly well-suited to studies of how individual differences in perceiver characteristics (their ability, motivation, personality, interest, attention, etc.) are related to the individual differences in their empathic accuracy scores. In addition, if the standard stimulus tape depicts multiple "target persons" who vary in the overall "readability" of their thoughts and feelings, the paradigm makes it easy to study the variables associated with these target readability differences as well.

***The standard interview paradigm***. Finally, in studies using the *standard interview paradigm,* the participant views a videotaped interview in which the target person (who may be a stranger, a friend, an intimate partner, etc. to the participant) is asked to respond to a standard set of questions that are posed by an interviewer. The videotape is paused immediately before each of the interviewee's responses, and the task of the perceiver is to write down his or her "best guess" about what the interviewee said in response to the question. Empathic accuracy is later assessed in terms of how well the content of the predicted answers matched the content of the actual answers. This standard interview paradigm is particularly useful in studying acquaintanceship effects, because it lends itself well to yoked-subjects designs in which "perceiver pairs" are composed of one perceiver who knows the target (interviewee) well and another perceiver who does not.

***Reliability and Validity of the Empathic Accuracy Measure***

In each of these research paradigms, different raters assess the degree of similarity between the perceiver’s empathic inferences and the corresponding thoughts or feelings that the target person actually reported. The researcher can therefore assess the interrater reliability of the aggregated measure of empathic accuracy, which has generally been quite high. For example, in a range of studies conducted by Ickes and his colleagues, the interrater reliabilities have ranged from a low of .85 in a study in which only four raters were used to a high of .98 in two studies in which either seven or eight raters were used (Ickes, 2001).

The validity of the empathic accuracy measure does not reside in the results of a single study or two, but rather in the large and developing body of research findings that have accumulated over nearly 25 years. As we will see, some of these studies tested predictions derived from common sense, whereas other studies tested predictions derived from theory. In both cases, the assumption was made that if these common-sense or theory-based predictions were confirmed, their confirmation would have the "spillover" benefit of increasing our confidence in the validity of the empathic accuracy outcome measure.

**Are There Reliable Predictors of Empathic Accuracy?**

Finding reliable predictors of empathic accuracy has proved to be more difficult than one might expect. Although there is plenty of evidence for the intuitive belief that some people have greater empathic ability than others, finding replicable correlates of this ability has—with only a few exceptions—turned out to be a frustrating challenge. In this section of the chapter, we examine the evidence that empathic accuracy is indeed a reliable ability trait, but one that is not consistently predicted by other individual difference factors, including demographic variables, personality traits, and what one might expect to be conceptually-related interpersonal sensitivity skills.

***Some People Have Greater Empathic Accuracy than Others***

Two observations support the intuitively obvious conclusion that some people have greater empathic ability than others. The first observation is that autistic individuals are deficient in their empathic accuracy when compared to normally developing individuals. The second observation is that there is substantial cross-target consistency in the empathic accuracy of normally developing individuals.

***Autistic individuals have impaired empathic accuracy***. According to Baron-Cohen (1995), severely autistic individuals are “mindblind” in their inability to accurately infer other people’s thoughts and feelings. Indeed, it would be pointless to try to test the performance of severely autistic individuals on the kinds of empathic accuracy measures that we have described above; it would be an exercise akin to asking visually blind individuals to read all the words on passing billboard signs. Instead, viewing autism as a continuum or “spectrum” that connects profoundly autistic individuals at one extreme with exceptionally good everyday mind readers at the other extreme, researchers have tested for more subtle differences in how the empathic accuracy of mildly to moderately autistic individuals (i.e., those with Asperger syndrome) compares with that of their normally-developing counterparts.

For example, Demurie, DeCorel, and Roeyers (2011) compared the empathic accuracy of mildly autistic individuals who had normal intelligence with that of normally-developing control subjects. They found that the mildly autistic individuals displayed a relative deficit in their ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of videotaped target persons. Similarly, Ponnet et al. (2008) found that a mildly autistic sample had lower empathic accuracy scores than a typically developing sample, and that this effect was particularly pronounced when the target video was an unstructured “get to know you” conversation between two individuals, as compared to a structured “get to know you” conversation that occurred after providing the two individuals with a set of questions they could use to learn about each other.

***Cross-target consistency in normally developing individuals.*** Additional evidence that some people have greater empathic ability than others is provided by studies showing significant cross-target consistency in the empathic accuracy of normally developing individuals. In the first of these studies, Marangoni et al. (1995) showed participants videotapes of three female targets and found that the participants’ cross-target correlations were significant and quite substantial (averaging .60), thereby demonstrating stable between-perceiver variation in the ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of different target persons.

Other studies by Gesn and Ickes (1999) and Pham and Rivers (as cited in Ickes et al., 2000) also showed reliable cross-target, within-perceiver effects, but the fact that all of these studies used the same targets, all of whom were women talking about personal problems in a pseudo-therapy session, raises the possibility that cross-target stability may be more pronounced when the target videos are similar. Kelleher (1998, as cited in Ickes et al., 2000) using a different set of targets (pairs of interactants, some of whom had been told to try to make their partner laugh) found that a somewhat smaller percentage of variance was attributable to the perceiver. Finally, the two studies by Ponnet and colleagues (Ponnet et al., 2004; Ponnet et al., 2008) found statistically significant within-perceiver correlations of moderate size for empathic accuracy scores across two targets.

In summary, the available evidence suggests that there *is* consistent cross-target variance associated with particular perceivers when it comes to predicting empathic accuracy scores. But why is the amount of “perceiver variance” only slight to moderate in these studies? According to Ickes (in press), one answer is likely: Because these studies included only college-student perceivers, the range of empathic accuracy scores was highly restricted in these studies, compared to a hypothetical study in which the full “spectrum” of empathic ability (from severely autistic to empathically gifted) is represented. Given the artifactual constraint of this range restriction, the evidence for consistent perceiver differences in empathic accuracy for different target persons is actually quite impressive.

***What Other Perceiver Characteristics Predict Individual Differences in Empathic Accuracy?***

Ifindividual differences in empathic accuracy are real and important, as we have just noted, what other perceiver characteristics—apart from autistic impairment—might account for them? At present, there is only one strong-but-blunt contender in this category: the perceiver’s age. So far, the evidence for other perceiver attributes (abilities, traits, and personal characteristics) is, by comparison, only weak and highly equivocal at best.

***Age.*** Every developmental psychologist—along with just about everyone else on the planet—already knows that infants are incredibly inept mind readers. (Why else would they so rudely scream their demands at us during the earliest hours of the morning?). The maturational change associated with age—at least during the period from infancy through middle to late childhood—is a good predictor of empathic accuracy. However, its predictive utility drops off precipitously as individuals start to leave childhood. The acquisition of a “theory of mind” (e.g., see Gopnik & Wellman, 1994)—that is, realizing that other people’s thoughts and feelings can differ from our own, and that these differences can derive from corresponding differences in what these other people are in a position to know or to perceive—first emerges around the age of three and is present in typically developing children by five.

As children continue to develop, they become increasingly able to contemplate more complicated “other minds” problems, such as second-order theory of mind tasks that involve imagining what another person believes about a third person’s beliefs (Perner & Wimmer, 1985). However, these abilities may be attributable to the development of more general skills, such as executive function, rather than to a specific honing of mind reading skills. And beyond the dramatic increase in everyday mind reading ability that occurs during the relatively brief period between infancy through middle childhood, age-related change during adolescence and adulthood is not clearly associated with improved empathic accuracy.

***Sex and gender.*** Are sex and gender (psychological masculinity and femininity) sources of these substantial individual differences? Sex and gender have at times looked promising—both theoretically and occasionally empirically—as possible contenders for predicting empathic accuracy, but they have proven somewhat fickle. A recent review by Hodges, Laurent, and Lewis (2011) of the available literature can be summarized as “Women are sometimes better than men and sometimes not; but men are never better than women.” These results set empathic accuracy apart from other measures of interpersonal sensitivity for which women show a consistent—and robust—advantage over men (Hall, 1978; Hall, 1984; Hall & Mast, 2008; McClure, 2000). And although there is considerably less literature on gender differences as contrasted with dichotomous sex differences, a tentative parallel statement may be made about variations along a gender continuum: Femininity sometimes predicts greater empathic accuracy and sometimes not, but femininity is, in general, a better bet than masculinity (see Hodges et al., 2010).

One of the reasons why women sometimes have the advantage over men in empathic accuracy is that certain motivators appear to affect women but not men. For example, women show greater empathic accuracy than men in situations in which they are explicitly asked to think about how well they are (or were) able to “read” other people (Graham & Ickes, 1997; Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000). They also do better when they are first asked how much empathic concern (sympathy) they feel for the person whose thoughts and feelings they are then asked to infer (Klein & Hodges, 2001). These motivators may selectively enhance women’s, but not men’s, empathic accuracy by reminding the women that empathy (whether in the form of empathic accuracy or empathic concern) is a fundamental part of the female gender role (Helgeson, 1994; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). We will turn to “equal opportunity” motivators that may affect both sexes later in this chapter.

***Personality traits conceptually related to empathy.*** Surprisingly, personality traits that are conceptually related to empathy have largely failed the test of reliably predicting perceivers’ empathic accuracy scores. For example, the subscales of the most widely-used self-report measure of empathy, Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; 1990), are often unrelated to empathic accuracy (e.g., Hodges & Klein, 2000), or are “paradoxically related,” such that higher scores on some empathy subscales predict *lower* empathic accuracy (e.g., Myers & Hodges, 2009; Stinson & Ickes, 1992). On the other hand, a study by Zaki and colleagues (2008) showed that higher empathy scores on the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) predicted greater accuracy using a measure that called upon perceivers to continually assess targets’ emotional valence, but only when the targets were relatively high in expressivity.

Self-report measures of one’s own empathic abilities are problematic for at least two reasons. First, they could simply reflect people’s delusions that they are more (or less) empathically gifted than they really are. Second, they could also reflect a lack of “meta-knowledge” about one’s actual level of ability in this domain, an explanation which has found some traction (Ickes, 1993, 2003). Turning—as we will next—to a construct like intelligence would both solve the self-report problem and also potentially increase the chances of finding a good predictor of empathic accuracy because intelligence is a more general cognitive ability (or set of abilities) than empathic skills *per se*.

***Intelligence and its proxy variables (i.e., GPA).*** Verbal intelligence in particular might be expected to predict empathic accuracy when using the methods developed by Ickes and his colleagues (Ickes, 2001), because these methods rely on putting inferences about the other person’s thoughts into words after having decoded the target person’s verbal—as well as nonverbal—messages (see Gesn & Ickes, 1999). For a while, at least, investigations of intelligence as a predictor of empathic accuracy appeared to be promising. In the very first of their empathic accuracy studies, Ickes et al. (1990) found that university students’ grade point average (GPA) predicted their empathic accuracy scores. Similarly, 18 years later, Ponnet, Buysse, Roeyers, and De Clercq (2008) reported a significant positive correlation between IQ and empathic accuracy among their sample of typically developing adults.

On the other hand, several other results have cast doubts on the relation between intelligence and empathic accuracy. Ponnet, Roeyers, Buysse, De Clercq, and Van der Heydan (2004) found no correlation between IQ and empathic accuracy. Ickes et al. (2000) reported the results of an unpublished study that failed to replicate the earlier positive correlation between GPA and empathic accuracy. More equivocally, Ickes et al. (2000) also reported the results of a published study in which verbal intelligence predicted empathic accuracy for men, but not for women (the association was non-significant and negative in the women’s data). An attempt to replicate this finding found no main effect for verbal intelligence and no verbal intelligence by sex of perceiver interaction (Neel & Hodges, 2008). Further complicating this picture, Thomas, Fletcher, and Lange (1997) found that, in heterosexual couples, both the man’s level of education and the woman’s level of education positively predicted the *man’s* empathic accuracy in the couple’s interactions, whereas neither of these variables significantly predicted the woman’s empathic accuracy.

***Interpersonal sensitivity skills.*** Of course, intelligence is a very general ability (or set of abilities), and one might expect better success predicting empathic accuracy from perceivers’ scores on skills that also tap some aspect of interpersonal sensitivity. However, here too researchers have come up mostly empty-handed. The ability to identify facial expressions using the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA; Nowicki & Duke, 1994) has been inconsistently linked to empathic accuracy, with a small but significant correlation in an unpublished study by Lewis (2008) and no correlation in an unpublished study by Locher (2009). The Lewis (2008) study also showed no correlation between empathic accuracy and scores on the Interpersonal Perceptions Task (IPT-15; Costanzo & Archer, 1989), another measure of nonverbal sensitivity that assesses perceivers’ ability to read cues about interpersonal interactions from nonverbal behavior. One possible reason why measures of nonverbal sensitivity do not predict empathic accuracy is that these measures are plagued by low internal reliability (Hall, 2001; Carter & Hall, 2008).

***What Target Characteristics Predict Individual Differences in Empathic Accuracy?***

As we have just seen, apart from autistic impairment and the maturational change that occurs during childhood and early adolescence, it is difficult to identify any other perceiver characteristics that reliably predict individual differences in empathic accuracy. Given that difficulty, researchers might want to change their angle of attack by asking the question: What *target* characteristics might predict individual differences in empathic accuracy?

There is no doubt that target differences are also real and important. This fact was clearly established when Ickes et al. (2000) used the logic of the social relations model (Kenny, 1994) to compare the relative amounts of *perceiver variance* and *target variance* in empathic accuracy scores across several studies that used multiple perceivers and multiple targets. They found that target variance was always substantially larger than the perceiver variance in these studies, a finding which suggests that the perceiver’s empathic accuracy depends heavily on how “readable” (i.e., transparent versus opaque) a particular target person’s thoughts and feelings are in relation to those of other target persons.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To capture these differences more directly and at their most detailed level of analysis, empathic accuracy researchers have computed an index of *inferential difficulty* (an index of how difficult a given target’s thoughts and feelings are to infer) and then tested for its effect as a covariate when analyzing empathic accuracy scores.[[6]](#footnote-6) Specifically, these researchers instruct a separate group of coders to watch the target’s video and—at each point that the target person stopped the video to record a thought or feeling—the coders are shown the thought or feeling and are asked to rate how easy or difficult it would be to infer, based on the events in the videotaped interaction that preceded it. This index is significantly correlated with perceivers’ empathy accuracy scores (around .30 to .40 in the studies conducted to date), enabling the researchers to identify some targets as being reliably “more transparent” than others.

Interestingly, the target’s readability not only affects the perceiver’s empathic accuracy directly, but can also moderate the effects of other predictors. As noted earlier, Thomas and Maio (2008) found that variables designed to motivate perceivers to achieve greater empathic accuracy had the predicted effect only when target persons were relatively easy to read. Similarly, Zaki et al. (2008), using a measure of empathic accuracy that asks perceivers to continuously estimate how positive or negative the target’s affect is, found that the perceivers’ affective empathy scores predicted empathic accuracy, but only for emotionally expressive targets. Sillars (2011), noting a pattern in several studies, hypothesized that target transparency (or diagnosticity, as he calls it) may have a greater impact on empathic accuracy for strangers than for friends and intimates. In strangers’ interactions, the cues given off by the targets are one of the only sources of information a perceiver has to go on, whereas in intimates’ interactions the perceiver has background knowledge and perhaps well-developed theories about the target that may also influence inferences about what the target is thinking or feeling.

Of course, in terms of a global measure of empathic accuracy, targets can also be thought of as a sum of their thoughts and feelings. Just as targets may vary in terms of personality traits such as expressiveness or transparency, the thoughts and feelings *within* a particular target may also vary. When the studies cited above accounted for target differences in transparency, they did so by aggregating across all of the thoughts and feelings the target person reported—i.e., by computing a summed or mean transparency score for each target. However, multilevel modeling techniques allow for nested models, so that characteristics of individual thoughts and feelings can also be tracked as predictors of empathic accuracy. Using this approach, Lewis, Hodges, Laurent, Srivastava and Biancarosa (under review) found that, indeed, the transparency of *individual* thoughts and feelings predicted accuracy: When a target’s thought or feeling corresponded to what the target was currently talking about, the perceiver’s accuracy was higher than when the target’s thought or feeling was less directly related to what the target was saying at the time.

Lewis and colleagues also examined whether another characteristic of individual thoughts and feelings could predict empathic accuracy. The targets in their study were all first-time mothers discussing their adjustment to new motherhood, and coders rated the content of each of their thoughts and feelings for stereotypicality. Thoughts and feelings such as “I was thinking how exhausting it is to have a newborn baby and how challenging it was to find time for myself” got higher stereotypic marks; in contrast, thoughts and feelings such as “I was feeling sad—as if the pre-baby me has been lost—I don’t know where ‘she’s’ gone” were rated lower in stereotypicality. Above and beyond transparency, greater thought/feeling stereotypicality also predicted empathic accuracy. Notably, the effects of stereotypicality in this study were moderated by how much personal information the target person was seen as disclosing: Stereotypicality was a better predictor of empathic accuracy for targets who were seen as disclosing *less* personal (i.e., individuating) information about their experiences.

**Empathic Accuracy in Close Relationships**

So far, we have considered some perceiver- and target-relevant variables that predict individual differences in empathic accuracy. We now consider variables that are relevant to the relationship between the perceiver and the target. We first consider *evidence for the acquaintanceship effect*, which should influence empathic accuracy through the increasingly amount of knowledge that relationship partners acquire about each other. We then consider *motivational influences on empathic accuracy* that the partners either bring with them to the relationship in the form of personality dispositions or that emerge as a product of the unfolding dynamics of the relationship.

***The Acquaintanceship Effect***

One of the first common-sense predictions that was tested in empathic accuracy research concerned the type of relationship that currently existed between the perceiver and the target. If we found that close friends displayed greater empathic accuracy than total strangers did, this finding would not only confirm a common-sense belief but, by implication, would also help to confirm the validity of the empathic accuracy measure itself.

***Evidence for the acquaintanceship effect***. One way to operationally define "type of relationship" is in terms of how long the relationship partners have known each other. In two dyadic interaction studies that compared the empathic accuracy achieved by total strangers (who had never met before) with that of close friends (who had known each other for at least a year), the results revealed mean accuracy scores of about 20% for the strangers and about 30% for the close friends (Stinson & Ickes, 1992; Graham, 1994). In a similar study, Thomas and Fletcher (2003) compared the empathic accuracy of strangers, friends, and dating partners. Planned comparisons revealed that dating partners were significantly more accuracy than both friends and strangers; however, the difference between friends and strangers was not significant in this study.

Interestingly, other research findings suggest that these differences are due less to the length of time involved than to how well the perceiver gets to know the target in whatever time period is being considered. For example, Marangoni et al. (1995) found that perceivers could rapidly "get to know" targets who they merely viewed in videotapes of simulated therapy sessions. First, the results supported the common-sense prediction that the perceivers would infer the thoughts and feelings of these client-targets significantly better at the end of the videotaped session than at its beginning. Second, the results showed that the rate of this improvement could be further accelerated by giving some of the perceivers veridical feedback about the target person's actual thought or feeling immediately following each reported inference. This second finding suggests that it is possible to "speed up" both the acquaintanceship process and the perceiver's empathic accuracy, at least in regard to highly disclosing targets who are willing to express what they are currently thinking and feeling.

The Marangoni et al. (1995) study was the first to suggest that acquaintanceship is not just a matter of the amount of time that the perceiver is exposed to the target, although that factor undoubtedly plays a role. But "time" is clearly not the effective variable in itself; rather, it is a proxy variable for the events that take place within its span. We can think about those events as providing the information from which empathically accurate inferences are derived. But what kinds of information are important in this regard?

***Informational bases of the acquaintanceship effect.*** One possibility is that it is important to know a lot of background information "about" the other person, including the person's age, ethnicity, religion, family members, pets, dating partners, work experience, career goals, travels, and leisure-time interests. Gesn (1995) assessed the degree of such background knowledge that pairs of same-sex acquaintances and pairs of same-sex friends had about each other. He also asked them to rate how "close" they perceived their relationship to be. Finally, he covertly videotaped them during a brief, unstructured laboratory interaction and then gave them the opportunity to try to infer each other's thoughts and feelings. The results revealed that the dyad members' empathic accuracy could not be predicted from the measure of how much background knowledge they had about each other. Instead, it was predicted by how "close" they rated their interaction as being.

But what, in this context, does it mean to be "close"? From an informational standpoint, closeness involves having a high level of cognitive interdependence with another person. Cognitive interdependence is evidenced by the partners' possession of a large amount of shared, "common ground" knowledge, much of which has been co-created and reinforced through the history of conversations the partners have had with each other (Wegner, Giuliano, & Hertel, 1985).

With regard to empathic accuracy, there is considerable evidence that shared, "common ground" knowledge is particularly important when one person tries to infer the specific content of another person's thoughts and feelings. For example, Stinson and Ickes (1992) predicted that the empathic accuracy of close friends would be positively correlated with the percentage of their thoughts and feelings that focused on events occurring at another place and time, whereas the empathic accuracy of strangers would be negatively correlated with this index. The rationale for this prediction was that the friends could base their empathic inferences on their history of shared, common-ground knowledge concerning such far-removed events, whereas the strangers could not. Confirming the prediction, Stinson and Ickes (1992) found that the relevant correlation was +.35 for the friends and -.54 for the strangers in their study, and the difference between these two correlations was statistically significant.

In a follow-up study, Graham (1994) predicted that strangers could also make accurate inferences regarding each other's thoughts and feelings about events occurring in another time or place, but only if they had already discussed the events in question. Her results provided strong support for this hypothesis. Similarly, Kelleher, Ickes, and Dugosh (2003) found that perceivers could more accurately infer the thoughts and feelings relevant to a target person's hidden agenda when they already knew that the hidden agenda existed. In addition, Thomas, Fletcher, and Lange (1997) reported that married couples could "read" each other's thoughts and feelings more accurately to the extent that they already had what the researchers called a “shared cognitive focus.”

***Motivational Influences on Empathic Accuracy in Close Relationships***

Perceivers not only *know more* about close others than about strangers and casual acquaintances their empathic accuracy; they also tend to *care* more about close others than about strangers and casual acquaintances. This distinction is important, because knowing more and caring more are often confounded in studies of the acquaintanceship effect. It isnoteworthy, therefore, that the motivation to accurately infer a particular partner’s thoughts and feelings has proved to make an important, independent contribution to perceivers’ empathic accuracy scores. And, as we will see, the strength and specificity of the perceiver’s motive to be accurate or inaccurate can derive from a number of sources: (1) situational motivators (e.g., explicit or implicit rewards for being accurate); (2) the actor’s personal characteristics (e.g., personality traits that motivate and/or bias the perceiver’s empathic inference-making); (3) the partner’s personal characteristics (e.g., the partner’s physical attractiveness), or—and most commonly—(4) motives that emerge naturally in the context of the actor-partner relationship (e.g., the motive to ignore or discount the other’s perspective when the partners want different and irreconcilable outcomes).

***Situational motivators of empathic accuracy***. Although the manipulations used in the lab to transiently affect motivation are necessarily a bit contrived, they resemble common “real world” motivators—for example, money and sex. With regard to the former, Klein and Hodges (2001) found that participants who were promised payment commensurate with their empathic accuracy performance were more accurate than participants who were not told they would be paid. With regard to the latter, Thomas and Maio (2008) boosted male perceivers’ empathic accuracy by telling them that women were more sexually attracted to men who were more sensitive to other people’s thoughts.

There appear to be limits to the effects of situationally manipulating empathic motivation, however. For example, the promise of adoring women did not affect men’s empathic accuracy performance in the Thomas and Maio study when the female targets were very difficult to read; not surprisingly, motivation appears to work best when the task is challenging, but not impossible.

Other situational motivators “work” by challenging individuals to be more empathic accurate in order to sustain a desired self-image rather than a self-presentation that is intended only to impress other people. For example, Thomas and Maio (2008) showed that women—but not men—were more empathically accurate after being given information that challenged their empathic skill as women. Once again, the effects held only for “readable” targets, whereas no difference was found for very difficult-to-read targets.

Thomas and Maio’s results suggest that cues that call attention to having an empathic concern for others may selectively motivate the empathic accuracy of women but not men. On the one hand, because caring for and understanding others is part of the female gender role (Helgeson, 1994), these “women only” motivators support the idea that empathic accuracy is part of the larger, multi-dimensional construct of empathy (Davis, 1983; Hodges & Biswas-Diener, 2007). On the other hand, knowing that the lure of attracting mates or money can motivate men to be more empathically accurate reminds us that, despite its empathic first name, empathic accuracy may be used to get what *we—*as perceivers*—*want from others, rather than being exclusively focused on their needs.

***Perceiver-based motivators of empathic accuracy***. Empathic accuracy is also motivated by perceiver-based motives that are associated with specific personality traits. For example, people with higher scores on a “Need to Belong” scale performed better on standard stimulus empathic accuracy task than those with lower scores did (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). In addition, anxiously-attached women (i.e., women with a high fear of abandonment) who listened to their male dating partners being interviewed by an attractive female interviewer were more likely than less-anxious women to closely monitor their partner's behavior and correctly predict his answers to the interview questions (Dugosh, 1998; 2001).

***Partner-based motivators of empathic accuracy***. In the very first empathic accuracy study, Ickes et al. (1990) found that that perceivers' empathic accuracy increased as the physical attractiveness of their opposite-sex interaction partner increased. It is reasonable to speculate that the partner’s physical attractiveness motivated the perceiver to want to get to know the partner better, and that this increased motivation resulted in greater empathic accuracy. Other desirable qualities associated with a particular target (e.g., a penetrating intellect, a charismatic personality) may also increase the perceiver’s motivation to be empathically accurate.

***Relationship-based motivators of empathic accuracy***. For decades, the research findings on the role of interpersonal accuracy in relationships presented a maddeningly inconsistent picture. Although most investigators reported a positive correlation between some measure of interpersonal accuracy (e.g., accuracy regarding the partner’s traits, attitudes, role expectations, or self-perceptions) and relationship satisfaction and stability, some investigators reported negative associations instead (for specific citations of these conflicting studies, see Ickes and Simpson, 1997, p. 223).

The key to reconciling these conflicting findings was provided by Sillars’ (1985) insight that greater accuracy was associated with *reduced* marital satisfaction when the perceiver’s insights exposed information that was threatening to the relationship (e.g., irreconcilable differences, blunt and unpleasant truths, or benevolent misconceptions about the relationship that could no longer be sustained). In short, when it reveals information that has the potential to threaten the relationship, greater inferential accuracy hurts, rather than helps, close relationships.

This insight led Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) to propose that although partners in close relationships are often motivated to accurately infer each other’s thoughts and feelings (e.g., in order to coordinate their goals and plans, work cooperatively, meet each other’s needs, and be sensitive to each other’s feelings), they are sometimes motivated to inaccurately infer each other’s thoughts and feelings instead. To clarify when relationship partners are motivated to be more accurate, and when they are motivated to be less accurate, Ickes and Simpson (1997, 2001) proposed the *empathic accuracy model*, which we consider next. Because the model is complex, and because the research inspired by it warrants a detailed examination, we devote all of the next section to it.

**The Original and Revised Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001)**

The impetus for developing the original version of the empathic accuracy model was the empirical demonstration by Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995) of the phenomenon which they labeled *motivated inaccuracy*. For this reason, it is appropriate to describe how the early research on motivated inaccuracy led to the more comprehensive model of empathic accuracy in close relationships that Ickes and Simpson later proposed.

***Motivated Inaccuracy***

It is important to keep in mind that motivation is a slippery construct. There is a temptation to assume that any manipulation that results in improved performance was mediated by an increase in motivation even though directly measuring motivation can often be impossible. There is also as a tendency to assume that increased motivation will always result in a performance increase, rather than a decrement or no change (Hall, 2011). An even more fundamental insight regarding the relation between motivation and empathic accuracy has emerged from empathic accuracy studies that have revealed evidence for *motivated inaccuracy*, a phenomenon that occurs when people are motivated *not* to know what their interaction partners are thinking and feeling, particularly when accurate inferences have the potential to reveal relationship-threatening information.

The first of these studies, by Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995), was inspired by a real-life incident that William Ickes shared with Jeffry Simpson about a woman who refused to see any of the all-too-obvious signs that her husband was having an affair: The man's schedule became more erratic; he was away from home many evenings and occasionally during the weekends. And there were unexplained phone hang-ups and other signs that, if investigated, would have suggested that he was involved with another woman.

But these signs weren't investigated―not at all. The man's wife rarely asked him about his absences, and she immediately accepted his explanation of them without any further questions. Nothing in her behavior indicated that she was motivated to know what was going on. In fact, her entire pattern of behavior indicated just the opposite: that she was motivated to *not* know what was going on, either in her husband's mind or in his activities away from home (Ickes, 2003, p. 228).

This phenomenon of *motivated inaccuracy* was too interesting not to pursue as a topic for research, so Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995) came up with a procedure to study it in a laboratory setting. In this procedure, heterosexual dating partners came to the lab and independently completed various personality measures, in addition to measures of how much they relied on each other (i.e., were interdependent) and how secure-vs.-insecure they felt about the future of their relationship. After completing these measures, the partners were re-united for a study of what makes individuals attractive as potential dating partners.

The dating partners' task was to view and rate a series of slides of "other students on campus" who were said to be currently unattached and available as potential dating partners. By a flip of the coin, either the male or the female dating partner began the task by viewing slides of available partners of the opposite sex and rating them aloud on the dimensions of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal―while sitting right next to his or her dating partner! Then the partners switched roles: the other dating partner now viewed and rated slides of available partners of the opposite-sex while the first partner sat, watched along, and listened to the resulting ratings. During this time, each couple's interaction was covertly recorded by a concealed video camera mounted in the corner of the room. After the rating session was over, the partners were placed in separate rooms, where they each viewed a copy of the videotaped rating session two times: first, to report each of their own thoughts and feelings; and next, to make inferences about their partner's thoughts and feelings.

Of particular interest was the subset of participants who should have found the rating task to be especially threatening: participants who (1) depended a lot on their partners, but (2) were insecure about the future of their relationship, and (3) were in a session in which only highly attractive alternative partners were viewed and rated aloud. The results showed that these participants were indeed highly threatened and that this threat resulted, as predicted, in motivated inaccuracy―chance-level accuracy that was presumably the outcome of their *not* wanting to know what their dating partner was thinking and feeling.

***The Empathic Accuracy Model***

This and several other findings that resulted from the dating couples study (see also Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999) led Ickes and Simpson to develop a theoretical model―the *empathic accuracy model*―that might be sufficient not only to account for their existing results, but to predict some novel findings as well (Ickes & Simpson, 1997; 2001). Because it is difficult to describe the model concisely using words alone, Figure 3 provides a schematic picture of the original version of the empathic accuracy model that captures its essential features.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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The model is premised on the assumption that the desire to have a good relationship is an important motivator of both empathic accuracy and empathic *in*accuracy. The model presumes that, in general, people try to understand others better in order to develop and maintain close relationships with them. These processes are depicted on the right-hand side of Figure 3. On the other hand, when the partner's thoughts and feelings have the potential to threaten and destabilize the relationship, the model presumes that people (at least some of them) will use motivated inaccuracy as a way to deflect the potential threat, i.e., to stay out of the partner's head and *not know or even want to know* the relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings that the partner might be harboring. These processes are depicted on the left-hand side of Figure 3.

The empathic accuracy model made an important new prediction. According to the model's logic, the perceiver's empathic accuracy should be positively correlated with relationship stability and satisfaction when the partner's thoughts and feelings are not relationship-threatening, but should be negatively correlated with these outcomes when the partner's thoughts and feelings have the potential to threaten the relationship.

This prediction was tested in a study by Simpson, Oriña, and Ickes (2003). In this study, 95 married couples were videotaped as they tried to resolve a problem in their marriage. Following the couple's conflict interaction, the spouses independently viewed a videotape of the interaction, recorded the thoughts and feelings they had at specific time points, and tried to infer their partner’s thoughts and feelings.

Consistent with the model's prediction, when the partner’s thoughts and feelings were relationship-threatening (as rated by both the partners and by trained observers), greater empathic accuracy on the part of the perceiver was associated with pre-to-posttest declines in the perceiver’s feeling of closeness to the partner. The reverse was true when the partner’s

thoughts and feelings were nonthreatening: in this case, greater accuracy was associated with a pre-to-posttest increase in the perceiver's feeling of closeness to the partner. Thus, as we noted in the introduction to this chapter, everyday mind reading is neither entirely bad nor entirely good. Our empathic accuracy sometimes hurts, but at other times helps, our close relationships.

***The Revised Empathic Accuracy Model***

Ickes and Simpson (2001) revised their empathic accuracy model a few years after the original version appeared (Ickes & Simpson, 1997). Schematically, the revised model still looked essentially the same as the one in Figure 3. So what was different this time around? More than anything else, it was the authors' recognition that people have a variety of relationship-relevant motives, and that these motives can lead them to "manage" their empathic accuracy (and inaccuracy) in characteristically different ways.

***Anxiously-attached individuals***. Consider, for example, how anxiously-attached individuals (particularly women) react in relationship-threatening situations:

* In sharp contrast to low-anxious women in the Simpson et al. (1995) study, high-anxious women displayed greater accuracy, rather than motivated inaccuracy, when it appeared that their male partners were harboring thoughts and feelings that were threatening to the relationship (Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). In the terms of attachment theory, the high-anxious women became "hypervigilant" when their relationship was threatened and their attachment system was activated. They acted as if they just *had* to know what their male partner was thinking and feeling, even if that knowledge was going to hurt the relationship.
* Similarly, high-anxious women in the studies by Dugosh (1998, 2001) were more accurate than low-anxious women in predicting their male partner's answers to a series of questions from an attractive and flirtatious female interviewer―another type of relationship-threatening situation.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Finally, in two studies reported by Simpson, Kim, et al. (2011),high-anxious individuals were relatively more accurate when they discussed intimacy issues that posed a potential threat to their relationship (in Study 1), and when they were rated as more distressed while discussing a relationship conflict (in Study 2).

These findings make sense if we assume, as attachment theorists do, that anxiously-attached individuals have a strong motive to attend to and evaluate potential threats to their relationship because of their fear of being abandoned by their partners (Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson, 1990).

***Avoidantly-attached individuals.*** A very different style of "managing" empathic accuracy is displayed by avoidantly-attached individuals. In further analyses of the data collected by Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995), Simpson, Ickes, and Grich (1999) discovered that avoidantly-attached individuals were generally reluctant to infer what their dating partners were thinking and feeling (as evidenced by the fact that they were particularly likely to defy the task instructions and refuse to make an empathic inference!). It is important to note that this reluctance was not found only in the more relationship-threatening conditions of the Simpson et al. (1995) study; it was found across all conditions. Similarly, Simpson, Kim et al. (2011) found that relationship partners who scored high in avoidant attachment displayed lower empathic accuracy than those who scored low in avoidant attachment―an effect that was consistent across both relationship type (marriage versus dating) and the level of threat they experienced.

Other evidence also suggests that avoidantly-attached individuals have a general preference to stay out of their romantic partners' heads, rather than one that is limited to relationship-threatening situations. For example, Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, and Friedman (2007) gave highly avoidant people an opportunity to obtain new information about their romantic partners’ private thoughts and feelings, their thoughts about the future of the relationship, or their preferences for mundane things (e.g., movies, music). Even in this non-threatening situation, highly avoidant people did not want to learn more private information about their partners. They also admitted that they knew less about their partners relative to other people, and they placed less value on knowing more about their partners in the future. This finding is reminiscent of Ickes, Hutchison, and Mashek's (2004) earlier finding that "closeness averse" individuals are distinctive in reporting that they do not want to know all about their partner or to have their partner know all about them.

These findings make sense if we assume, as attachment theorists do, that avoidantly-attached individuals have a strong motive to avoid becoming close to and dependent upon others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Because the intersubjective "sharing" of highly personal information is an important form of closeness (Ickes et al., 2004; Wegner et al., 1985), it makes sense that avoidantly-attached individuals would generally shun such information.

***Maritally aggressive and abusive men.*** Yet another style of "managing" empathic accuracy is displayed by maritally aggressive and abusive men. Schweinle, Ickes, and Bernstein (2002) found that such men were biased toward inferring that women harbor critical and rejecting feelings toward them. Moreover, the more pronounced this bias was, the less accurately these men inferred the thoughts and feelings of women who described their marital problems, and the more they reported abusing their own wives.

Schweinle and Ickes (2007) suggested that abusive men use a form of motivated inaccuracy to maintain their power and control over women. They found that such men are significantly more likely than non-abusive men to disattend (i.e., "tune out") a woman's complaints and to react to them with feelings of contempt rather than sympathy. These reactions appear to sustain and reinforce the abusive men's bias that they "already know" what is on women's minds (i.e., critical and rejecting thoughts and feelings about their male partners), making it easy for them to justify their continued abuse of their own female partners ("She had it coming").

Providing further support for this interpretation, Clements, Holtzworth-Munroe, Schweinle, and Ickes (2007) found that abusive men were selectively inaccurate: their empathic accuracy was low in regard to their own wives' thoughts and feelings, but not in regard to the thoughts and feelings of other women. And, more recently, Robillard and Noller (2011) found evidence that abusive men are particularly poor at inferring their wives’ more positive and loving thoughts and feelings, perhaps because they believe that most of their partner's thoughts and feelings are critical and rejecting.

Collectively, these findings suggest that empathic accuracy can also be "managed" in the service of justifying one's continued abusive treatment of a relationship partner. By tuning out the partner, treating her complaints with contempt, and "already knowing" the critical and rejecting things that she is thinking and feeling, an abusive man can continue to control, manipulate, and abuse her―even if the long-term cost of this management style is the death of the relationship itself.

***Role-specific and relationship-specific factors*.** Although the revised empathic accuracy model did not consider role-specific and relationship-specific factors, the importance of such factors to empathic accuracy has been noted in other sources.

With regard to role-specific factors, Vervoort, Crombez et al. (2007) examined the empathic accuracy of the parents of adolescents with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). They found that the mothers were more empathically accurate regarding the adolescent’s CFS-related thoughts and feelings when the adolescent was more distressed. In contrast, fathers were less empathically accurate regarding such thoughts feelings when they themselves were more distressed. The researchers attributed this difference to the different roles that the mothers and fathers play. Because the mothers were the child's primary caregivers, they had presumably learned to be more sensitive to the child's CFS-related thoughts and feelings when the child was more distressed. On the other hand, because the fathers were the primary breadwinners whose attention was required elsewhere, they were presumably less able to focus on their child's condition when they themselves were distressed.

With regard to relationship-specific factors, Sillars (2011) has argued that misunderstandings are often driven by the perceivers' current needs, including the need to feel personally vindicated ("I'm right and you're wrong"). Misunderstandings are particularly problematic when the partners adopt different "conflict frames" that they cling to rigidly during their conflict discussions, and when they selectively introduce information that is intended to advance their own interests and viewpoint at the expense of the partner's. For example, Ruth thinks that the major problem in their relationship is that Calvin has a serious drinking problem, whereas Calvin thinks the major problem is that Ruth nags him about his drinking when it isn't a problem at all. Because Ruth and Calvin "frame" the situation differently and are unwilling to give serious credence to the other person's frame, they remain willfully stuck in their own perspectives―refusing to reach a common understanding or to compromise in any meaningful way.

**Empathic Accuracy and Interaction Outcomes**

Does empathic accuracy predict success in social interactions? The answer might seem obvious: How could knowing what people are thinking *not* lead to better outcomes in social interactions? Indeed, the relevant research evidence suggests that, in general, greater empathic accuracy really *is* associated with more positive relationship outcomes, and we will review that evidence shortly. Before we do, however, we would like to advise the reader to keep in mind two important reasons why greater accuracy may not always lead to positive outcomes.

The first reason, as discussed previously, is that people may sometimes want to avoid knowing what other people are thinking or feeling, particularly in relationship contexts where those thoughts and feelings may threaten the relationship. We know from various lines of research that there are times when an inaccurate but more charitable view of one’s partner predicts positive relationship outcomes (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Thus, under some circumstances, less inaccurate inferences about another person’s thoughts—whether that other person is an intimate partner or not – may lead to more harmonious interactions. As suggested by Simpson and colleagues’ work with anxiously attached individuals (2011), one can easily envision how the greater empathic accuracy of anxiously attached individuals discussing relationship-threatening topics may not lead to soothing, supportive interactions, and indeed, there is evidence that anxiously attached individuals’ greater accuracy can lead to lower evaluations of their relationships and greater likelihood of relationship dissolution (Simpson, Ickes & Grich, 1999).

The second reason why greater empathic accuracy may not lead to more positive outcomes is that knowing what another person is thinking moment-by-moment may not be essential for social success. Severe deficits in understanding others’ intentions and perspectives, such as those seen in people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) clearly seem to negatively impact social interactions. However, beyond some “normal” minimum threshold, additional empathic accuracy may not bring corresponding additional social success. A “good enough” level of empathic accuracy may be perfectly functional (Myers & Hodges, 2009).

Consistent with this idea, across many studies of empathic accuracy using the paradigm developed by Ickes and his colleagues, mean empathic accuracy is always far from perfect, and rarely even reaches the halfway point of the scale. People may *wonder* what is going through other people’s minds and they may *wish* they knew, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that their lives and relationships would be dramatically improved if they did know. In a healthy relationship, information that it is important for relationship partners to share is likely to be communicated in direct, face-to-face conversation.

In fact, relying excessively or exclusively on “mind reading,” as the vignette opening this chapter suggests, may signify a relationship in trouble. Other variables such as simply being respectful and kind to each other (Gottman & Levenson, 1992) have been shown to explain the lion’s share of variance in the success of close relationships. Empathic accuracy within relationships may be analogous to how much money a couple in a relationship has. When the quantity goes below a certain level, the relationship really suffers. However, at some point above that bare minimum, more is not necessarily better, and in fact, in some cases (when greater accuracy leads to more accurate perception of threats to the relationship), more may actually be worse.

***When Empathic Accuracy Helps***

These two caveats aside, empathic accuracy has been linked with social success, and in some cases, specifically with relationship success. Examining the connection between empathic accuracy and general positive social outcomes, Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, and Ickes (2009) found young adolescents who scored better at empathic accuracy were less likely to experience “relational victimization” (e.g., were less likely to be ignored, ostracized, or badmouthed by their peers) and were also less susceptible to internalizing problems (e.g., depressive symptoms, withdrawal). Furthermore, empathic accuracy appeared to serve as a buffer against the effects that poor peer relations (e.g., poor friendship quality or high levels of victimization) tend to have on adjustment problems (internalizing problems as well as externalizing problems such as aggression, and social problems such as being disliked by peers or being viewed as immature).

In another study demonstrating the relation between empathic accuracy and social success, perceivers inferred the thoughts of videotaped female targets who were all discussing the experience of recently having become new mothers (Ahnert, Veach, Klein, & Hodges, 2001). When the targets later had a chance to rate how much they liked the perceivers and how well the perceiver understood them, based on the inferences that perceivers made of their thoughts and letters that the perceivers wrote to the new mothers, perceivers who had done a better job of inferring the targets’ thoughts got higher marks.

However, the association between empathic accuracy and rapport appears to be less consistent or more complicated than suggested by the Ahnert et al. results. Myers (2009) conducted a study in which participants interacted as dyads before inferring each other’s thoughts and found that partners who had greater empathic accuracy did not also have greater rapport. When people have a chance to interact face-to-face, as they did in the Myers study, empathic accuracy’s effects on liking and rapport may be swamped by other qualities, such personality traits, physical attractiveness, or the context of the interaction. Thus, just as Sillars (2011) suggests that there may be different weights on the determinants of empathic accuracy for strangers and intimates, it may also be the case that empathic accuracy is weighted differently in determining the outcomes of different kinds of interactions.

Turning away now from general social success and more specifically to how empathic accuracy may lead to better outcomes in close relationships, there are some intuitively supportive results. Greater empathic accuracy appears to help close relationships when:

* perceivers use it to identify their partner's current need for support and how to provide the particular type and amount of instrumental support that the partner currently desires (Verhofstadt, Ickes, & Buysse, 2010; Verhofstadt, Davis, & Ickes, 2011)
* perceivers use it pre-emptively, to anticipate and avoid conflicts with the partner, and to solve small problems before they turn into larger ones (Simpson, Ickes, & Oriña, 2001)
* perceivers use it to "stay on the same page" with the partner, applying the same interpretive frame to the current situation and tracking the changes in the frames that the partner applies (Goffman, 1974; Ickes, 2003, chapter 8; Noller, 1980, 1981; Sillars, 1998; Stinson & Ickes, 1992; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997)
* perceivers use it to put the partner's "bad behavior" into perspective; to recognize the partner's mixed motives; to identify mutually acceptable ways to resolve conflicts with the partner; to depart from immediate self-interest for the good of the partner and the relationship (Bissonnette, Rusbult, & Kilpatrick, 1997)
* perceivers use it to effectively align and coordinate their own goals with the partner's goals (Berscheid, 1985).

However, more of a good thing may not always be a better thing: One study showed links between greater empathic accuracy and better marital functioning in the first year of marriage (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002). However, notably, not only did empathic accuracy decline after the first year of marriage, but the correlations between empathic accuracy and marital functioning also shrank after the first year. In their work, Kilpatrick et al. computed a “baseline accuracy” score by rating the correspondence between a thought reported by one member of the couple at a specific point with the other member of the couple’s inference about a randomly selected *other* thought from the first member. Thus, if the first member of the couple was frequently thinking, “I’m putting more into this relationship than my partner,” and if the other member of the couple often inferred that “My partner thinks he’s [she’s] putting more into this relationship than me,” then baseline accuracy would be high.

After the first year of marriage, it seems that Kilpatrick et al.’s couples may have relied more on baseline assumptions rather than making the effort to infer the unique content of a specific thought that their partner had. These results are consistent with another study by Thomas, Fletcher, and Lange (1997), who found that length of marriage was *negatively* correlated with empathic accuracy (although the results were only significant for the men). In line with our earlier discussion of how the stereotypic content of thoughts may affect empathic accuracy, over the first year of marriage, partners may have been honing their schema of what their partner tended to be thinking about, and increasingly used that schema as part of a “good-enough” strategy to guess what their partner was thinking about at any particular point in time.

***When Empathic Accuracy Hurts Close Relationships***

Just as people can “dial up” their everyday mind reading skills in order to understand the partner better and to apply that knowledge to improve the relationship, they can also “dial down” their everyday mind reading skills in order to avoid learning things about their partner’s thoughts and feelings that might harm, rather than help, the relationship. This means that empathic accuracy is a two-edged sword that can cut both ways―often making the partners’ relationship better, but sometimes making the relationship worse. Greater empathic accuracy appears to hurt close relationships when:

* perceivers uncover blunt, unpleasant truths about each other's private thoughts and feelings that could undermine their views of each other and of their relationship (Aldous, 1977; Rausch, Berry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974; Sillars, 1985; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974)
* perceivers discover that their differences are greater than they previously believed, or are apparently irreconcilable, so that extended discussion and clarification of their respective viewpoints will not improve the relationship, but only make things worse (Aldous, 1977; Kursh, 1971; Sillars, 1985)
* perceivers discover that certain "benign misconceptions" they have previously held about each other are false and can no longer be sustained (Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; Sillars, 1985)
* perceivers use their empathic insights to torture each other and "push each other's buttons," like the characters George and Martha in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Ickes, 2003, chapter 11)
* perceivers insist on knowing virtually everything that their partners are thinking or feeling, to the point that their partners feel violated, intruded upon, and lacking any sense of privacy within their own minds (Ickes, 2003, chapter 1).

Accordingly, in response to Jean Tracy's claim that we are all better off not even trying to "read" our relationship partners' minds, our answer would be that it's just not that simple. There are several ways in which accurate everyday mind reading makes our relationships better, and several other ways in which it makes our relationships worse. The trick is to cultivate all the ways in which it helps and to eliminate all the ways in which it hurts. As Ickes (2003, chapter 12) has suggested, this involves developing a finely-tuned sense of *discretion*: the ability to know when to get inside your partner's head and when to stay out of it.

**Future Directions**

We now consider the future of studying empathic accuracy in close relationships. In our discussion above about what we already *do* know about empathic accuracy, we have foreshadowed a number of directions for empathic accuracy research that we think will be important, informative, and challenging to study. We will suggest three broad categories of future work: (1) continuing work to explore and estimate different sources of variance in empathic accuracy; (2) examining empathic accuracy in situations where people are hiding their actual thoughts and feelings; and (3) modifying the empathic accuracy methodology for use in new applications.

***Looking for Accuracy in More of the Right Places***

As intuitive and tempting as it may be to pursue them, questions about which stable individual differences in perceivers predict empathic accuracy have provided a fairly compelling answer in the aggregate: This is *not* the most fertile ground for studying empathic accuracy. There is little support for a model that assumes an incremental ratcheting up between specific perceiver traits and empathic accuracy scores. Examining more bluntly-evident empathic accuracy deficits in people with various psychological and cognitive disabilities, such as autism, may prove useful in understanding more about these conditions, and may conceivably help differentiate between variants forms of these disabilities or even distinct syndromes. However, when studying empathic accuracy among typically functioning individuals, it appears we need to think beyond the main effects of individual differences.

In contrast, the contributions of target characteristics have likely not yet been plumbed. So far, it seems that they have mainly been studied as an afterthought—a source of noise that, once controlled for, will help highlight the effects of perceiver traits. We know little about stable target traits such as emotional expressiveness, openness to experience, or extraversion, and yet we have evidence that stable amounts of variance in empathic accuracy are more consistently associated with targets than perceivers (Ickes, Buysse, et al., 2000).

Furthermore, the assumption that *all* of a target’s thoughts and feelings bear some signature quality (e.g., more positive in valence, less transparent) has not been explored. Although we might expect the target’s personality to shape her thoughts and feelings, it is also important to keep in mind that the empathic accuracy methodology developed by Ickes and colleagues (Ickes, 2001) encourages targets to report discrete, individual thoughts and feelings. The boundary line between one thought or feeling and another may well be some threshold of change, and thus we can expect some degree of independence among thoughts and feelings—perhaps a great deal of independence.

We have already seen that some thoughts or feelings are easier to guess than others. However, the reasons for this variation have not been explored. Lewis et al.’s (under review) work suggests that thoughts or feelings that represent a perspective that is inconsistent with stereotypes (e.g., a new mother who thinks about how she *likes* the fact that her baby doesn’t allow her any time for herself) are harder to guess. Their findings also suggest that thought/feeling stereotypicality—or the lack thereof—is at least partially independent from a more global assessment that the content of a particular thought or feeling was hard to guess.

What else makes thoughts or feelings hard to infer? Just as non-stereotypic thoughts are seen as inconsistent with what members of a particular group are usually thinking, there may also be thoughts that are hard for close others to guess because they are inconsistent with what a particular target is usually thinking (e.g., a self-proclaimed city slicker who finds himself thinking about how nice a vacation at a Wyoming ranch might be). Some thoughts are difficult to guess because they are about tangential topics that flit through a target’s head (e.g., a momentary cognitive hiccup to wonder whether one remembered to feed the dog amidst an otherwise focused exploration of life goals).

Other thoughts may be intentionally guarded from perceivers, obscured by the fact that targets outwardly say one thing while inwardly thinking another. This last category of difficult thoughts seems especially relevant to the study of empathic accuracy in close relationships, as thoughts may be obscured to protect the target, the perceiver, or the relationship they share. For example, imagine that a heterosexual couple encounters another man in their social circle—one who is quite attractive. The woman in the couple may do everything to obscure her thoughts of how attractive he is in order to avoid provoking her jealous and physically abusive partner (e.g., see Schweinle et al., 2002). Or, if she is paired with a more loving but highly sensitive male partner, she may try to hide such thoughts because she knows that if her partner knows what she is currently thinking, the implicit comparisons between him and the other man may be hurtful to her partner.

Thus, future work may address how qualities of specific thoughts and feelings (such as how difficult they are to guess or how stereotypical they are) affect empathic accuracy, but also how such qualities may interact with other characteristics of the target, characteristics of the perceiver, or characteristics of their relationship. Multilevel modeling techniques will aid such investigations by allowing us to decompose empathic accuracy into thought-level sources of variance (e.g., thought transparency), nested within targets that contribute target-level sources of variance (e.g., target attractiveness), studied across perceivers who contribute often hypothesized yet elusive sources of perceiver-level variance. We may well discover that higher-level factors interact with lower-level factors to determine empathic accuracy. For example, Lewis et al. (under review) found college student perceivers’ reliance on stereotypic content in guessing the thoughts of new mother targets was most effective when the targets disclosed relatively little about themselves and their experiences.

What other variables might change the effectiveness or likelihood of using different “mind reading” strategies? Ames (2004a,2004b) has suggested that, for other forms of interpersonal “knowing” (e.g., rating another person’s traits or making attributions), people will be relatively more likely to project their qualities on to the target if they perceive the target as similar to themselves, and relatively more likely to make stereotype-consistent judgments if they perceive the target as dissimilar. Would the same pattern hold if the criterion was guessing another person’s thoughts (rather than making trait or motive attributions)? For example, would new mother perceivers use some form of projection more effectively than stereotyping in guessing the thoughts of other new mothers? Finally, researchers should definitely not limit themselves to stereotypicality as the only dimension on which thoughts and feelings can differ. Other qualities of thoughts and feelings, such as how positive or negative they are, may also interact with target or perceiver qualities to predict empathic accuracy.

***Reading Closed Minds***

Pointing out that some thoughts may be harder to guess because the target does not want them to be known brings us to another future direction: Empathic accuracy researchers have not fully exploited the fact that thoughts can serve as a private refuge, especially in cases of conflict. Many of the empathic accuracy studies reviewed in this chapter were conducted within contexts that would create relatively low baseline levels of conflict between targets and perceives (e.g., get-to-know-you conversations between pairs of college students who share a college affiliation; perceivers watching videos of targets with whom they will never interact face-to-face).

On the other hand, at least some empathic accuracy studies have deliberately created contexts in which conflict (and the accompanying desire to keep one’s thoughts private) could emerge (see DePaulo 2002) by having couples discuss the attractiveness of other people (e.g., Simpson et al., 1995), or by instructing couples to talk about things they would like to change in the relationship (e.g., Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Empathic accuracy probably makes a more straightforward and less complicated contribution to interactions in which the participants are *not* trying to hide or obscure their actual thoughts and feelings, but are instead motivated to achieve a clear and frank exchange of perspectives (e.g., the participants *asking* for and *telling* each other their actual, non-deceptive thoughts and feelings).

The fact that inferences about deliberately hidden or obscured thoughts and feelings are more difficult to make and can lead to greater problems suggests another possible future research direction—and a possible source of interventions. The advice from Jean Tracy that opens this chapter advises couples to “let go of mind reading.” Perhaps a more helpful piece of advice would be to “take note of mind reading,” particularly when one finds oneself inferring a thought that is different from or inconsistent with what one’s partner has outwardly said, or in those probably rarer cases when finds out one’s partner has incorrectly inferred one’s own thought or feeling. What led to mind reading, rather than direct communication in these situations? Is there a particular topic, setting, or circumstance that reliably triggers the use of mind reading rather than straightforward, unedited communication? The answer to this question may be as, or perhaps even more, important to the relationship than the degree of empathic accuracy or inaccuracy.

***Methodological Innovations***

Another broad direction for future research is continued tinkering, tweaking, and downright messing with current empathic accuracy methods. A number of variations seem promising. Several researchers have experimented with techniques for *specifying* the “stop points” at which targets report their thoughts. For example, Verhofstadt, Davis, and Ickes (2011) videotaped couples talking about personal problems and then, when playing the tapes back for targets to report their thoughts, the researchers stopped the tape at arbitrary equidistant intervals (every 30 to 60 seconds, depending on how long the video was). Though this technique may result in targets either reporting that they can’t remember thinking anything at that point, or possibly making something up, it probably produces more thoughts with a greater range of variation – and a selection less impacted by any target bias about what constitutes a “good” thought.

Tipsord (2009), in contrast, instructed *perceivers* to designate the stop points, asking them to stop the video at any point they noticed thinking or wondering about what the target was thinking, while also asking the targets to designate stop points and report thoughts in the traditional fashion. Tipsord then used the *number* of perceiver-designated stop points as a measure of attention to the target, along with coding the accuracy of perceiver inferences at any stop points that happened to coincide in time with targets’ stop points. More recently (Howington, 2011) has experimented with having targets report when they are having thoughts *during* the initial making of the videotape, by pressing a button that lights up an LED light that is visible to anyone watching the videotape, but not visible to interactants during the making of the videotape. As in the Verhofstadt et al. method, this technique results in targets sometimes reporting that they cannot remember what they were thinking or feeling initially, but it probably also triggers memories of a few thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be lost.

Other researchers have chosen to look at accuracy for something other than temporally discrete thoughts and feelings. For example, Zaki et al. (2008), using a technique first developed by Levenson and Ruef (1992), had targets continuously rate how positive or negative they remembered feeling as they watched videotapes of themselves discussing personal events. Perceivers then watched the same videotapes and continuously rated how positive or negative they thought the targets were feeling. Accuracy in this case was reflected in how closely the two sets of ratings were correlated. This methodology seems like it could also be adapted for use with other continuous ratings, such as how honest the target was being, or how comfortable the target felt.

Other researchers continue to examine discrete thoughts but have explored new variations in coding accuracy. Hodges et al. (2010), for example, asked targets to rate the accuracy of the perceivers’ thought/feeling inferences, in addition to the more standard procedure of having objective coders rate empathic accuracy. It could be argued that targets’ ratings are not only closer to the truth (after all, they are the best source of what they were actually thinking), but can also take researchers a step closer to finding out whether certain forms of perceiver inaccuracy are more detrimental to an interaction than others.

**Conclusions**

We hope that this chapter has convincingly demonstrated that there are very few simple and unqualified statements that can be made about the role of empathic accuracy in close relationships. We began the chapter with a blanket admonition from a couples’ counselor *not* to engage in mind reading, but we have presented within the chapter a much more complex picture, framed by a number of findings that twist intuitive assumptions:

* Humans are not very good at reading each other’s minds, but we are substantially better than chance would predict.
* Although there appear to be stable individual differences in empathic accuracy ability, demographic and personality variables do a poor job predicting who will be good, at least beyond coarse distinctions such as “not having autism” and “being older than 5.”
* Untapped variance in empathic accuracy may be explained instead by differences among the people whose minds we are trying to read (and even more specifically, by which thoughts and feelings they are having).
* Although we may *think* that we want to know what those around us are thinking (a recent poll showed that over a quarter of Americans listed mind reading as their top choice for a “super power”; Marist Poll, 2011), research findings clearly show that people are occasionally motivated to avoid such accuracy.
* *Motivated inaccuracy*, when it occurs, is often adaptive; it can protect the perceiver’s self-esteem and esteem for the interaction partner, and it can help to preserve the partners’ relationship in the face of a temporary threat. On the other hand, chronic motivated inaccuracy can be a maladaptive way to avoid dealing with relationship problems which, if left unaddressed, might only get worse over time. From these considerations, it follows that accurate knowledge of another person’s thoughts and feelings—including those of a close other—may be linked with more positive relationship outcomes in some circumstances but may not matter that much in others, and may even lead to detrimental outcomes in yet others.

In summary, simple questions about empathic accuracy have led to answers conditioned on variables that were not initially anticipated to play a role in explaining results, and on new methodological techniques have been created to address emerging and unanticipated research questions. These developments fuel a vibrant area of research that we predict will continue to be paradoxical-seeming: repeatedly frustrating and unpredictable on the one hand, but endlessly fascinating and fruitful on the other.

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Figure 1. Thought/feeling reporting form.

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Figure 2. Thought/feeling inference form.

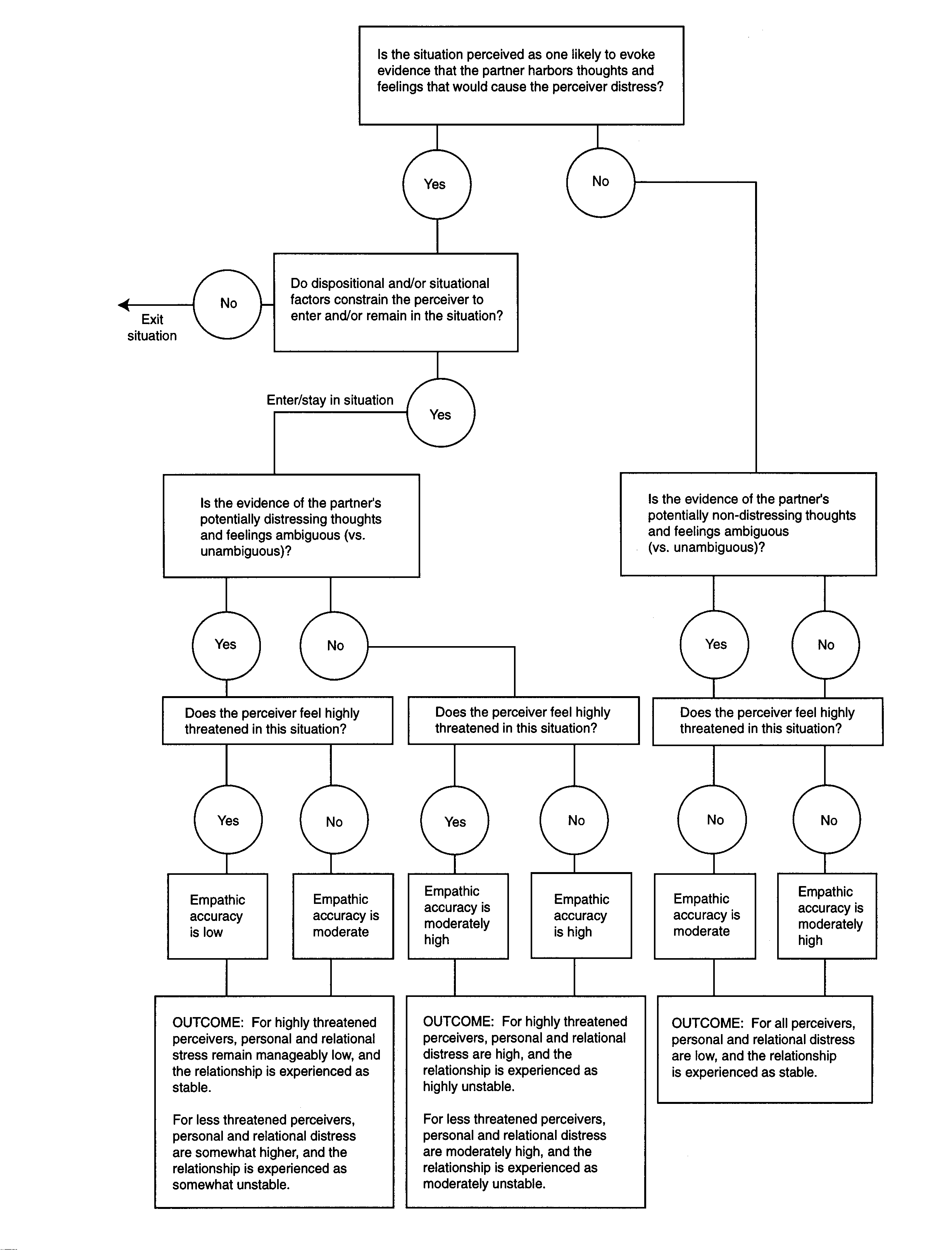


Figure 3. The empathic accuracy model (Ickes and Simpson, 1997, 2001).

1. Since the introduction of the empathic accuracy construct and its associated measurement procedure by Ickes and his colleagues in 1990, the term “empathic accuracy” has been widely accepted and also broadened to include the constructs measured by a number of variant procedures that have been developed by other researchers, some of which we will highlight later in this chapter. Although the original measurement technique is still the best-known and most widely applied, we will occasionally refer to one or another of the alternative techniques that are also used to measure the more general construct of empathic accuracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note again that although the dyadic interaction paradigm, the standard stimulus paradigm, and the standard interview technique were initially developed for the study of empathic accuracy as originally defined and operationalized by Ickes and his colleagues, the same three paradigms can also be used in studies of empathic accuracy using the alternative operationalizations that other researchers have more recently developed. Furthermore, other researchers have implemented variants of these paradigms, for example, letting participants in the dyadic interaction paradigm know at the start that their “get to know you” conversation will be filmed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the traditional scoring, developed by Ickes et al. (1990), which most―but not all―researchers use. It has the obvious advantage of yielding a percent-correct measure of empathic accuracy which is easily compared across all of the studies that use this same measurement convention. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In some designs, both between-dyad and within-dyad comparisons can be made. For example, a design might contrast three dyad types: (1) neither partner is egocentric; (2) one partner is egocentric but the other is not; and (3) both partners are egocentric. In this (hypothetical study) design, we could test both the between-dyad differences in empathic accuracy across conditions (1), (2), and (3), and the within-dyad difference in empathic accuracy between the egocentric and non-egocentric partners in condition (2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As we have noted above, perceiver variance tends to be quite range-restricted in college-student samples. It may plausible to assume that target variance is simply less range-restricted in these samples. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marangoni et al. (1995) were the first to compute and control for the effect of an inferential difficulty index, thereby setting the precedent for its use in many subsequent studies (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003; Flury, Ickes, & Schweinle, 2008; Hodges, Kiel, Kramer, Veach, & Ahnert, 2010; Simpson, Kim, Fillo, Ickes, Rholes, Oriña, & Winterheld, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This study was the first to use the *standard interview paradigm*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)