TOPIC-RELEVANT COGNITION AND
EMPATHIC ACCURACY IN LABORATORY
dISCUSSIONS OF SAFER SEX

ANN BUYSSE1,* and WILLIAM ICKES2

1University of Ghent, Research Group Health and Behaviour,
H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
2University of Texas at Arlington, USA

(Received 5 June, 1997; in final form 26 January, 1998)

The present study sought to identify some of the mechanisms that make safer sex such a difficult topic to talk about. Fifty-six dating couples participated in a laboratory study in which the opposite-sex members of two pairs of couples engaged in two discussions of safer sex (or a control topic), each time with a different opposite-sex partner (their own dating partner or an opposite-sex stranger). The results indicated that discussions of safer sex evoke in dating partners a high level of perceived goal-incompatibility, difficulty maintaining one’s focus on the topic, and difficulty in reading the other partner’s thoughts and feelings. These reactions did not occur in response to the control topic. This initial demonstration study is important with respect to the processes it implicates, but further clarification is needed regarding the specific real-life conditions in which these processes do, and do not, occur.

KEY WORDS: Sexually transmitted diseases, prevention, empathic accuracy, close relationships, experimental research.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the determinants of safe versus risky sexual behavior has, to a large extent, been guided by a social cognitive framework in which individuals are viewed as autonomous decision makers who behave rationally, use all the information available to them in a systematic way, and evaluate the consequences of their behavior before they act (Ajzen and Madden, 1986; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Janz and Becker, 1984; Kowalewski, Longshore and Anglin, 1994; Rosenstock, 1974). Substantial empirical support for the relevance of such models to sexual behavior has been found (Abraham, Sheeran, Abrams and Spears, 1994; Chan and Fishbein, 1993; Terry, Galligan and Conway, 1993).

Not all of the relevant research evidence has been supportive of a rational decision making model, however (cf. Abraham, Sheeran, Abrams and Spears, 1995; Kashima, Gallois and McCarnish, 1992). Moreover, criticisms of social cognitive models have pointed to a neglected aspect of safer sexual behavior: communication with the sexual partner about safer sex. This is a crucial issue, because intentions can be frustrated by social barriers in communication and negotiation about safer sex, and it is reasonable to assume that such barriers can play a role for both partners in discussing safer-sex related topics (Abraham and Sheeran, 1993; Metts and Fitzpatrick, 1992). All too often, individuals

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 9 264 64 49. Fax: +32 9 264 64 89. E-mail: Ann.Buysse@rug.ac.be.
who have well-defined cognitions and intentions regarding safer sexual practices fail to communicate them to their sexual partners (Buyse and Van Oost, 1997; Metts and Fitzpatrick, 1992). Effective safer sex negotiation is therefore more the exception than the rule in dating couples. Research findings suggest that about three quarters of young people ever talk about safer sex (Sprecher and McKinney, 1993). However, only 21% (Cline, Freeman and Johnson, 1990) to 27% (Gray and Saracino, 1991) report having discussed monogamy, condom use, or their sexual history with their actual sexual partner(s) before having sex.

For a number of reasons, people find it difficult to talk not only about safer sex, but about sex in general. Self-report data suggest that safer-sex discussions in intimate relationships are difficult to manage because of the high levels of goal-incompatibility they evoke (Buyse, 1998; Lust, Celuch and Showers, 1993). What sets up this incompatibility are two opposing viewpoints that are both likely to become salient when the issue of safer sex is confronted. On the one hand is the romantic view which holds (1) that stable, intimate relationships are relatively close and exclusive (Snyder and Simpson, 1987); (2) that they are based on "trust, caring, ease in communication, general comfort and security in each other's presence, and openness" (Wilmot and Baxter, 1983, p. 210); and (3) that sex in stable dating relationships is person-centered and seen as an expression of love and affection and a way to increase the emotional intimacy of the relationship (Reiss, 1967). On the other hand is the more cynical view which holds (1) that romance does not guarantee either fidelity or sexual health; and (2) that discussions of safer sex in intimate relationships are often associated with mistrust, psychological distance, and formality (Metts and Fitzpatrick, 1992). A plausible reason to decide not to discuss condom use or inquire about a partner's sexual risk history might be the perceived incompatibility between the goals most pertinent to safer-sex communication (e.g., mutual honesty about one's sexual history and behavior in other relationships) and highly valued relational goals such as exclusivity and emotional closeness.

Partners are expected to have difficulty with the pursuit of these multiple and incompatible goals during safer-sex talk. The pursuit of multiple goals, and the difficulties of combining features relevant to incompatible goals, place great demands on individuals' cognitive processes (Hodges and Wegner, 1997; Ickes and Simpson, 1997). From the results of time and information-processing studies, it can be expected that as partners try to "juggle" the competing cognitive demands of discussing safer sex and preserving their view of the relationship as relatively stable, close, and exclusive, their ability to sustain a focus on topic-relevant thoughts and feelings may decrease (Greene, 1995; Greene and Lindsey, 1989). It can therefore be expected that partners will have difficulty maintaining their focus on the topic and that they will report few topic-relevant thoughts and feelings during safer-sex discussions. This distraction from topic-specific thoughts and feelings can be interpreted in terms of the information processing difficulties that derive from the incompatible goals evoked in discussions of safer sex.

Motivated distraction is a complementary mechanism that may account for the report of fewer topic-relevant thoughts and feelings during safer-sex discussions than during discussions of a more neutral topic. That is, partners may be motivated to avoid experiencing thoughts and feelings that are potentially threatening or destabilizing, and to focus instead on more topic-irrelevant thoughts and feelings. Because they evoke the experience of high goal-incompatibility, thoughts and feelings related to the topic of safer sex may threaten the partners' relationship goals and cause them to experience a high level of temporary distress. Assuming that they can anticipate this distress, partners should be
motivated to avoid it by allowing themselves to be more easily distracted by aspects of their general environment and therefore reporting fewer topic-relevant thoughts and feelings. The concept of motivated distraction can also be interpreted within the context of defensive avoidance as described by Janis and Mann (1977).

In addition to experiencing greater distraction from topic-relevant thoughts and feelings during safer-sex discussions, it is expected that partners will have more trouble reading each other’s thoughts and feelings during these discussions. The extent to which partners in a relationship can accurately infer each other’s thoughts and feelings during an interaction episode is referred to as empathic accuracy (for details, see Ickes, 1993). The same two lines of reasoning underlying our prediction of distraction from topic-relevant thoughts and feelings also suggest this impairment in empathic accuracy. Specifically during discussions of safer sex, reduced empathic accuracy can also be expected in terms of both (1) the information processing difficulties that derive from the incompatible goals evoked in safer sex discussions, and (2) a motivated avoidance process.

First, because of the simultaneous presence of multiple and incompatible goals, partners in safer-sex discussions have to deal with competing tasks that require an unusually high level of controlled and effortful cognitive processing (Hodges and Wegner, 1997; Ickes and Simpson, 1997). This increased cognitive load should lead to more inferential errors and, therefore, to impaired levels of empathic accuracy (see also Gilbert and Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham and Krull, 1988).

Second, a complementary mechanism, labeled motivated inaccuracy (Ickes and Simpson, 1997; Simpson, Ickes and Blackstone, 1995), may also account for the predicted impairment in empathic accuracy during safer-sex talk. As a general rule, empathic accuracy has been shown to be positively correlated with variables such as relationship satisfaction, marital adjustment, and perceptions of mutual openness and quality of communication (Guthrie and Noller, 1988; Knudson, Sommers and Golding, 1980; Noller and Ruzene, 1991; Sillars and Scott, 1983). However, empathic accuracy has been shown to be negatively correlated with perceptions of relationship quality when highly conflictive issues are discussed (Ickes and Simpson, 1997; Noller and Ruzene, 1991; Sillars, Pike, Jones and Murphy, 1984). In a recent study, Simpson et al. (1995) demonstrated that motivated inaccuracy can occur when highly conflictive relational issues are confronted that the partners perceive as having the potential to undermine their relationship (cf. Ickes and Simpson, 1997; Sillars and Scott, 1983). Using several lines of converging evidence to support their interpretation, Simpson et al. (1995) argued that motivated inaccuracy in such contexts (which would include discussions of safer sex) can be interpreted as a line of defense against potential relational threat. In other words, motivated inaccuracy can occur as a means of protecting and sustaining the relationship in circumstances that threaten to undermine or destabilize it (see also Janis and Mann, 1977).

The present study seeks to test the hypothesis that safer sex would prove to be a difficult topic for dating partners to talk about because it would engender a set of reactions that are not likely to occur in response to discussions of a control topic. Focusing on the predictions that are common to both a cognitive processing account and a motivational account, we propose the following three hypotheses: Relative to partners who discuss a topic that presumably evokes low goal-incompatibility, partners who discuss the topic of safer sex will (1) report more goal-incompatibility during their discussions, (2) report fewer topic-relevant thoughts and feelings, and (3) display lower levels of empathic accuracy.
METHOD

Sample

A total of 224 dating couples were approached by two members of the research team in cinemas and shopping areas and were asked to voluntarily participate in an extended investigation of intimate and non-intimate communication in dating couples. The volunteer rate in this sample was 55%. Couples were recruited to participate only if they reported that their was a sexual relationship, either casual or stable. In total, 123 dating couples participated in the investigation, which took place in Ghent, Belgium from July to August 1995. The mean age of the participants was 22.70 years (SD = 3.82 years, range 18–30 years). Their mean age at relationship onset was 19.74 years (SD = 2.33). The mean length of their relationships was 18.02 months (SD = 6.24 months, range 4–30 months). Almost all of the couples (98%) reported having a stable sexual relationship, were generally very satisfied with their relationship ($M = 6.52$ on a 7-point scale; $SD = 0.37$, with $1 = not\ satisfied\ at\ all$, and $7 = very\ satisfied$), and 95% reported having ever discussed the issue of safer sex in their relationship.

Because of instances in which only one of the two invited couples showed up to participate, 11 sessions were cancelled, leaving a sample of 56 quartets consisting of 112 couples. In this study, which was the first part of a larger data collection involving these couples, the data for only the 28 quartets (56 couples) who completed the posttest questionnaires are reported. Only the members of the 28 participating quartets were required to complete our posttest questionnaires. All the quartets who completed posttest questionnaires are included in the present study. The quartets whose data were not included here did not differ significantly from the participating quartets on any of the demographic measures, the measures of empathic accuracy, or the incidence of topic-relevant thoughts and feelings.

Research Design and Manipulations

To test our hypotheses, it was necessary that we contrast discussions of safer sex, a topic presumably evoking high goal-incompatibility in stable dating partners, with discussions of a control topic for which the level of evoked goal-incompatibility would be substantially lower. On the basis of previous research by Buyse and Antrop (submitted), and Buyse and Ickes (in press), the topic of leisure activities was chosen as one that was likely to satisfy this requirement.

For each of the testing sessions, two couples, previously unacquainted with each other, were scheduled to come to the research center at the same time. Despite the practical difficulties involved, we chose to work with quartets because they enabled us to examine not only the between-quartet effects of discussion topic but also the within-quartet effects of the gender and actual relationship status of the participants. When two couples, previously unacquainted with each other, talk together about safer sex or joint leisure time, it is not only possible to compare safer-sex discussions with joint leisure time discussions, but also to compare the discussions between intimate partners with those between opposite-sex strangers.

The quartets were randomly assigned to discuss one of two communication topics: either safer sex, or leisure activities. The topics were randomly assigned to quartets by determining a random but fixed order of the topics for each session in advance, before the onset of the experiment. The assigned topic was discussed twice: once with the partner, and once with the opposite-sex stranger, with order and opposite-sex discussion partner counterbalanced.
The research design was a 2 (assigned discussion topic: safer sex vs. leisure activities) × 2 (relationship status: own partner vs. stranger) factorial design, with assigned discussion topic as the between-quartet variable and relationship status as a within-quartet variable.

We also counterbalanced the level of stability of the scripted relationship (stable vs. casual relationship) across the quartets, which resulted in two scripts. The scripts read as follows:

**Safer sex/leisure activities script with a casual partner.** You’re at a party. You feel comfortable. You just met someone. It’s love at first sight. You’ve been talking to each other about 101 things and now the topic is turning to safer sex/your favorite leisure time activities.

**Safer sex/leisure activities script with a stable partner.** You have been in love for some time now. Your relationship is really romantic, you feel comfortable. You’ve been talking to each other about 101 things and now the topic is turning to safer sex/doing some favorite activities during the next holiday.

The scripts did not include conceptual or operational definitions of safer sex because researchers and research participants can define it very differently. For example, many people believe they are engaging in safer sex because they naively assume that they can intuitively tell which persons are likely to be infected or not infected with HIV. Moreover, there is considerable research showing that as people develop more committed relationships, they tend to move away from condom use (see also Buyssse, 1998). Such findings suggest that any attempt we made to impose the definitions of safer sex that are held by most researchers might have had the unintended effect of increasing the irrelevance of the scripts for our research participants.

**Procedure**

**Phase I: Collection of the videotape data.** The quartets were led to an experimental room where they met two assistant experimenters. At this point, the video equipment used to record their discussions was activated. The participants were informed that they would be asked to role-play discussions between opposite-sex partners. As a “warm up” designed to help the participants to prepare for these role-played discussions, they were asked to participate in three brief getting-acquainted exercises. The role-played discussions were introduced and described as a more active getting-acquainted experience. The experimenters randomly selected two opposite-sex participants to start a conversation on the assigned topic, and then introduced one of the two randomly-selected experimental scripts (either the script in the context of a stable relationship or the script in the context of a more casual relationship). The participants who were not participating in the exercise at that time were asked to stand behind the same-sex quartet member. Exactly 90 seconds after the actors started discussing their topic, the experimenter (prompted by a tone) called “freeze” to indicate its termination. One of the actors was then replaced by the other same-sex participant, and the conversation continued within the same assigned script. Once again, exactly 90 seconds later, an actor was replaced by the remaining same-sex participant. Speaking initiations in each of these discussions were counterbalanced within quartets. After three such changes, each participant had been paired with both of the opposite-sex participants in the group. The phase 1 conversations were terminated after exactly 6 minutes.\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) The experimenter then introduced a final exercise that involved the role-playing of a conflict-management situation by each of the actual dating couples. These conflict management role-plays were also videotaped, for intended analysis in a different aspect of this investigation (Buyssse and Ickes, in press).
After the conflict management role-play had been completed, all four participants were partially debriefed about the phase 1 getting-acquainted exercises and role-play experience. They were also informed that their written consent was required for the videotapes of their role-play discussions to be used as data. None of the participants requested to have any of these videotapes erased, and all of them provided the requested written consent.

**Phase 2: Collection of the actual and inferred thought/feeling data for the phase 1 tapes.** Once the participants’ written consent had been obtained, the next part of the study was described. In this part, the four participants were asked to collectively view the videotape of the role-played discussions and make on-line written records of all of the thoughts and feelings they each experienced during the assigned discussions during the periods when they were involved as the discussants (for methodological precedents, see Ickes, Bissonnette, Garcia and Stinson, 1990; Simpson, Ickes and Blackstone, 1995). The participants were each seated at a separate small table in one of four respective areas of the room, where each of them had a clear view of a single, large TV monitor. Detailed instructions regarding the thought/feeling data collection were given. The video was activated and the participants were instructed to say “stop” at each point during the discussions that they recalled having had a specific thought or feeling as one of the discussants.

The participants recorded each of their thoughts or feelings on a standardized thought/feeling coding form (see Ickes et al., 1990) by entering (1) the time the thought or feeling occurred, (2) whether the entry was a thought or a feeling (coded “I was thinking:” or “I was feeling:” on the coding sheet), (3) the specific content of the thought/feeling entry, and (4) whether the entry was positive, negative, or neutral in its overall affective tone. The importance of being completely candid was emphasized, and the participants were assured that the thoughts and feelings they recorded would not be seen by any of the other participants. On the other hand, the instructions cautioned them to report only those thoughts and feelings they distinctly remembered having had during the observation period. They were not to report any new thoughts and feelings that occurred to them for the first time while viewing the videotape. Although it might seem naive to assume that people are capable of accurately differentiating their past thoughts and feelings from their current ones, considerable evidence for the construct validity of this method of thought-feeling assessment is available to support the assumption (see Ickes, Robertson, Tooke and Teng, 1986).

At each time the tape was stopped by one or more of the participants, the three other members of the quartet were asked to make their own respective inferences about the nature of the specific thought or feeling being reported by the actor at that point. Using the same type of coding form, the three remaining participants each recorded the inferred content of the actor’s thoughts and feelings by entering (1) the time the thought or feeling occurred, (2) whether the entry was presumed to be a thought or a feeling, (3) the specific content of the thought or feeling, and (4) whether the entry was presumed to be positive, neutral, or negative in its overall affective tone.

**Phase 3: Collection of the posttest self-report measures.** In the final part of the study, the four participants were asked to individually complete a computer-administered post-test questionnaire. This questionnaire included items that assessed several characteristics of the couples’ actual dating relationships. It also assessed the participants’ perceptions, with regard to their experience in the role-played discussions, of their salient interaction
goals and the degree of incompatibility of these goals. When all four participants had completed the posttest questionnaire, they were debriefed more fully and thanked for their participation in the study. A small monetary reward was then given to them for their participation.

**Measures**

*Posttest questionnaire: Incompatibility-of-goals index.* The posttest questionnaire required the participants to rate the absence versus presence of 23 goals during their interactions. Five categories of goals were presented to the participants: (1) sharing opinions (3 items, e.g., tell my opinion, have the same opinion as the others); (2) making myself clear (4 items, e.g., to be direct, to explain exactly what I mean); (3) being friendly and considerate (5 items, e.g., to respect the feelings of the others, to avoid causing them embarrassment); (4) not stressing one’s relationships with others (5 items, e.g., to contribute to a good relationship with the others, to increase intimacy); and (5) standing up for oneself (6 items, e.g., to protect my privacy, to win). The participants were then asked to rate the absence versus presence of incompatibility among the five categories of goals on a series of 5-point scales, 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*. The scores on the 23 posttest items were summed over participants and quartets to create an index of the number of multiple goals reported by each quartet. The scores on the 5 incompatibility posttest items were summed to create an index of the global incompatibility of salient goals for each quartet. Finally, each quartet’s incompatibility index was divided by the quartet’s multiple goal index to create the overall *incompatibility-of-goals index*.

*Thought/feeling transcripts: Proportion of topic-relevant thoughts and feelings.* All of the thought/feeling entries were coded by two independent raters who determined the focus/foci or “theme(s)” of each thought or feeling (i.e., what it was “about”). More specifically, the raters determined whether the focus (or foci) of the thought or feeling was on (1) the self, (2) the discussion partner, (3) the actual dating partner, (4) other person(s), (5) the experiment, (6) some other environmental event or circumstance, or (7) the current topic under discussion (sexuality vs. leisure time activities). Because the rates of inter-rater agreement for these categorical classifications were acceptable, ranging from 0.70 to 0.89, the two raters’ scores were averaged in each case. The proportions of “unspecified” and topic-relevant thought/feeling entries were calculated for each quartet. The proportion of topic-relevant entries for each quartet was then divided by the proportion of unspecified entries to create a *topic-relevance index* for each quartet.

*Thought/feeling transcripts: Empathic accuracy measures.* Three measures of empathic accuracy were computed from comparisons of the actual and inferred thought/feeling entries. The first measure, *valence accuracy*, was an index of the proportion of instances

---

2 The reader should be reminded that only half of the initial quartets (28/56) completed posttest questionnaires. The data for all the quartets who completed posttest questionnaires are reported here.

3 Some examples of thought/feeling entries generated by the participants: I was thinking about my last holiday in Spain; I was feeling really good, like if we were going to leave for a vacation; I was thinking that he asked me a really stupid question; I was thinking that I would never do something like this; I was thinking about alternative contraceptives; I was thinking that she made problems of something that isn’t worth worrying about; I was thinking about the experimental room that is decorated well.

4 For details concerning the measures of empathic accuracy, see Ickes, Bissonnette, Garcia and Stinson (1990).
in which each inference about the overall emotional tone (positive, neutral or negative) matched the actual valence label assigned to the entry. Following the logic and procedures described by Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette and Garcia (1990), the numbers of matches and mismatches between the rated valence of the actual entries and the corresponding inferred entries for the members of each quartet were computed. The sum of the matches and mismatches was then used as the denominator for computing the percentage of correct matches for the individual members of each quartet.

The two other accuracy measures, reflecting different aspects of empathic accuracy, were indexes of the degree to which each written description of the inferred content matched the actual content of the sentence. To create a measure of global empathic accuracy, the written reports of the actual thought-feeling entries and the corresponding inferences made by the three other members of the quartet were given to three independent judges who were all kept unaware of the design and purposes of the study. Their task was to compare the written content of each actual entry with that of the corresponding three inferred entries and to rate the degree of similarity in each case on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 = not at all similar, to 10 = extremely similar.

To create a measure of thematic accuracy, the content codes assessing the foci for each of the actual thoughts and feelings were compared with the content codes for the corresponding inferred thoughts and feelings. First, the data assessing the foci of each of the actual entries and the corresponding inferred entries were coded into absence (0) versus presence (1) of a focus on (1) self, (2) discussion partner, (3) dating partner, (4) some other person(s), (5) the situational context, and (6) the specific topic being discussed. The numbers of matches and mismatches between the foci of the actual entries and the corresponding inferred entries were computed for each person within each quartet, and were then used to derive the percentage of correct matches for each quartet member. Because the internal consistency of the raters’ judgments was acceptable for both the global content accuracy measure (0.69) and for the thematic accuracy measure (0.73), the raters’ scores were averaged in each case.

Statistical Analysis

The basic data structure of the present study can be viewed as a double-nested design, with dyads nested within quartets and individuals nested within dyads. Because individuals were nested within dyads, which in turn were nested within quartets, the quartet members’ scores on the various measures could not be regarded as independent observations. In acknowledgment of this nonindependence (cf. Gonzalez and Griffin, 1998; West and Hepworth, 1991), the quartet was used as the major unit of analysis in the general hypothesis tests reported below. For these between-quartet analyses, the responses of the four quartet members were averaged to create aggregated quartet-level variables. These aggregated scores were entered as dependent variables in analyses of variance and multiple regression analyses.

On the other hand, for the analyses that focus specifically on the empathic accuracy measures, both between-quartet and within-quartet comparisons were made. The within-quartet comparisons required that 12 dependent variables be created for each of the three empathic accuracy measures. These variables included the empathic accuracy score obtained by each member of the quartet when inferring the thoughts and feelings of each of the three remaining members. For example, the female in couple 1 (W1) inferred the thoughts and feelings of the remaining quartet members, resulting in the variables W1M1
(the female in couple 1 inferred the thoughts and feelings of the male in couple 1), W1M2, and W1W2. Adding to these 3 variables the corresponding pairings for the three remaining persons in each quartet ($3 \times 3 = 9$) resulted in the 12 variables for each empathic accuracy measure. A series of planned contrasts was used on these 12 variables to test for additional effects on empathic accuracy that we expected to find in various within-quartet comparisons.

RESULTS

Analysis of Variance

As expected, the quartets in the two topic conditions differed in the degree to which they reported experiencing incompatibility in the multiple goals they tried to achieve during their interactions ($F(1,26) = 4.26, p < 0.05$, see Table 1). Also as predicted, quartets in the safer sex condition reported fewer topic-relevant thoughts and feelings ($F(1,26) = 5.83, p < 0.05$), and displayed significantly less empathic accuracy than did quartets in the leisure activity condition ($F(1,26) = 5.21, p < 0.05$, for valence accuracy, $F(1,26) = 9.62, p < 0.005$, for global accuracy and, $F(1,26) = 4.27, p < 0.05$, for thematic accuracy).

Moderating Effect of Perceived Goal-incompatibility

Also as predicted, the interaction between the discussion topic and the degree of perceived goal-incompatibility was the only significant predictor in stepwise multiple regression analyses of the quartet members’ incidence of topic-relevant thoughts and

| Table 1 Mean scores for quartets in the safer sex and leisure activities conditions |
|----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| **Condition**                   | **Safer sex**    | **Leisure activities** |
|                                 | $(N=14$ quartets) | $(N=14$ quartets) | $(F(1,26))$      |
| Measures                        | M(SD)            | M(SD)            | F(1,26)          |
| Goal-incompatibility            | 0.45(0.04)       | 0.33(0.05)       | 4.26*            |
| Topic-relevance                 | 0.29(0.39)       | 1.71(0.42)       | 5.83*            |
| Valence accuracy                | 0.34(0.02)       | 0.41(0.02)       | 5.21*            |
| Global* accuracy                | 0.19(0.01)       | 0.25(0.01)       | 9.62*            |
| Thematic accuracy               | 0.22(0.02)       | 0.28(0.02)       | 4.27*            |

* $p < 0.05$.

7 Because the items used to assess the dating couples’ perceptions of goal-incompatibility were measured in the post-test questionnaire after a second role-play, certain assumptions had to be met before we could treat them as variables. Specifically, the scores on these items (1) should not be highly interdependent within quartets, but (2) should be highly interdependent within dyads. The appropriate statistical tests revealed that both of these assumptions were met. First, none of the aggregated dyad-level responses for the post-test measures (or for the three empathic accuracy measures) were significantly correlated within quartets. Second, all of the corresponding within-dyad correlations were statistically significant, with $r$ ranging from 0.27 to 0.76.

Copyright © 1999. All rights reserved.
feelings, and of their global, thematic, and valence accuracy. This interaction was not only significant, but also took the expected form, for the incidence of topic-relevant thoughts and feelings (\(R^2=0.24, b=0.49, F(1,26)=7.65, p=0.01\)), global accuracy (\(R^2=0.24, b=0.49, F(1,26)=8.12, p<0.01\)), thematic accuracy (\(R^2=0.18, b=0.42, F(1,26)=5.69, p<0.05\)), and valence accuracy (\(R^2=0.15, b=0.39, F(1,26)=4.63, p<0.05\)). Although all of these interaction effects were significant and consistent with our predictions, none of the correlations between the incompatibility-of-goals index (predictor variable) and the levels of topic-relevant cognitions and empathic accuracy (criterion variables), attained statistical significance in either of the topic conditions.\(^5\)

Planned Comparisons

A series of planned contrasts was used to test for additional effects on empathic accuracy that we expected to find in various within-quartet comparisons (see Table 2). The first three contrasts pitted the empathic accuracy scores of female “perceivers” against the empathic accuracy scores of male “perceivers.” These contrasts revealed a significant difference between males and females in their global ability to accurately infer others’ thoughts and feelings (\(F(1,26)=4.99, p<0.05\)) with the empathic accuracy of the females being higher than that of the males. This result was not replicated, however, for the measures of thematic accuracy or valence accuracy (\(F's < 1\)).

The second three contrasts compared the empathic accuracy for female versus male “target persons” – that is, the persons whose thoughts and feelings are being inferred. These contrasts revealed that the thoughts and feelings of females were not easier to infer than those of males for any of the empathic accuracy measures (global accuracy, \(F(1,26) < 1\); thematic accuracy, \(F(1,26) = 1.27\); valence accuracy, \(F(1,26) = 1.24\)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Contrast effects for the valence, global and thematic accuracy measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accuracy measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>Valence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(F(1,26))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of Perceiver</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of Target</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate vs. Non-Intimate Partner</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same- vs. Opposite-Sex Partner</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same- vs. Opposite-Sex Partner X</td>
<td>2.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned Discussion Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^* p<0.05\) \(^** p<0.001\).

\(^5\) Power analysis was used to determine whether the sample size is sufficiently large to test the hypotheses. With the hypotheses formulated as directional, \(\alpha=0.05\) as a significance criterion, the expectation of a medium effect size (\(r=0.40\), which equals the mean correlation obtained in the analyses in the present sample) and a sample of \(n=14\) quartets, the power of the correlational analyses was 0.83 (Cohen, 1988, p. 86). The correlational analyses therefore have not much more than 45% chance of rejecting the null hypothesis when the population \(r=0.40\). Given the significance of the interaction effect in the multiple regression analyses, it can be expected that the correlational analyses would be significant when a larger sample of quartets is used. To obtain a power of 0.80 with the same significance criterion and effect size, a sample of 37 quartets would be necessary (Cohen, 1988).
In the next three contrasts, the empathic accuracy scores of actual dating couples were compared with those of the previously unacquainted opposite-sex couples. These analyses revealed that individuals more accurately inferred the theme of their own dating partner's thoughts and feelings than the theme of the opposite-sex stranger's thoughts and feelings. However, this effect was found only for thematic accuracy ($F(1, 26) = 43.14$, $p < 0.001$); it was not evident in the data for either global accuracy ($F(1, 26) = 1.09$) or valence accuracy ($F(1, 26) < 1$).

In the last three contrasts, the empathic accuracy scores of same-sex pairs were compared with those of opposite-sex pairs. These contrasts yielded only a significant main effect for thematic accuracy ($F(1, 26) = 5.94$, $p < 0.05$), with opposite-sex pairs displaying greater accuracy than same-sex pairs. Once again, no corresponding main effect was found for the measures of global accuracy ($F(1, 26) < 1$), or valence accuracy ($F(1, 26) < 1$). However, for both of these latter types of accuracy there was a significant interaction between the assigned communication topic and the opposite- versus same-sex variable ($F(1, 26) = 4.20$, $p < 0.05$ for global accuracy, and $F(1, 26) = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$ for valence accuracy). Follow-up analyses revealed that the difference in global accuracy between the two topic conditions was significant only when the thoughts and feelings of opposite-sex quartet members were inferred ($F(1, 26) = 12.87$, $p < 0.001$). It was not significant when the thoughts and feelings of same-sex participants were inferred ($F(1, 26) = 1.20$). The same pattern was evident for the measure of valence accuracy: The difference was significant for the opposite-sex pairs ($F(1, 26) = 7.18$, $p < 0.01$), but not for the same-sex pairs ($F(1, 26) < 1$).

**DISCUSSION**

The present study sought to explore some of the mechanisms that make safer sex such a difficult topic for dating couples to talk about. Based on our interpretation of previous findings by Abraharn and Sheeran (1993) and Buysse (1998), we predicted that discussions of safer sex evoke in dating partners a set of reactions (a high level of perceived goal-incompatibility, difficulty maintaining one's focus on the topic, and impaired empathic accuracy regarding the other's thoughts and feelings) that are not likely to occur in response to a control topic such as leisure activities. To test this hypothesis, the opposite-sex members of two pairs of dating couples engaged in two discussions of safer sex (or of leisure activities), each time with a different opposite-sex partner.

The three predicted reactions were found to distinguish discussions about safer sex - either with or in the presence of one's intimate partner - from discussions about leisure activities under the same circumstances. First, quartets who talked about safer sex reported perceiving more conflict in the multiple goals they tried to achieve during their discussions. Consequently, talk about safer sex was perceived as a situation in which highly incompatible goals were evoked and highly conflictive issues were confronted. Second, partners apparently reacted to their internal conflict about discussing safer sex by allowing themselves to be more easily distracted from the safer-sex topic. Third, partners in the safer-sex condition were significantly less likely to accurately infer the content, theme, and valence of their discussion partners' thoughts and feelings. Within-quartet analyses further revealed that impaired global and valence accuracy during safer sex talk occurred only with respect to opposite-sex quartet members. In general, the data suggest that the safer sex discussions evoked high levels of goal-incompatibility that in turn impaired...
both the partners’ focus on the topic (i.e., fewer topic-relevant thoughts and feelings) and their empathic accuracy. This set of reactions did not occur in the control discussions of leisure activities.

At least two complementary mechanisms could account for the impairment of both the topic-relevance of the safer-sex discussants’ reported thoughts and feelings and their level of empathic accuracy. First, the pursuit of multiple and incompatible goals should have resulted in an increased cognitive load. That is, the participants had to attempt to achieve multiple incompatible goals simultaneously. Both the participants’ distraction from topic-relevant thoughts and feelings and their impaired empathic accuracy can therefore be interpreted in terms of the greater information processing demands that derived from the incompatible goals evoked in the safer-sex discussions (see also Gilbert and Krull, 1988; Gilbert et al., 1988; Ickes and Simpson, 1997).

Second the concept of motivated inaccuracy, as described in recent articles by Simpson et al. (1995) and Ickes and Simpson (1997), can be viewed as a complementary mechanism that might have been operating in the safer-sex condition. Both the participants’ distraction from thoughts and feelings about a high-conflict-evoking topic and their relative inability (or unwillingness) to make accurate inferences about these thoughts and feelings could serve as lines of defense against destabilization of the dating partners’ relationship (Ickes and Simpson, 1997). Simpson et al. (1995) have demonstrated that motivated inaccuracy can occur when highly conflictive relational issues are confronted that the partners perceive as having the potential to undermine their relationship (cf. Ickes and Simpson, 1997; Sillars and Scott, 1983). Extending this reasoning to the present case, partners in close relationships seem to be motivated not only to distract themselves from their own destabilizing thoughts and feelings, but also to inaccurately infer the potentially destabilizing thoughts and feelings of their partner.

Because the information-processing account and the motivated accuracy account are largely complementary in their predictions, it may prove difficult to distinguish them in future research on conflict-evoking relationship topics. Their respective roles in accounting for the present findings must be regarded as speculative, however, until such research is conducted.

Other influences on empathic accuracy were also explored in this study. Sources of variance due to specific pairings were evident in the series of within-quartet planned contrasts. Complementing earlier reports of an “acquaintanceship effect” in empathic accuracy (e.g., Graham, 1994; Stinson and Ickes, 1992), individuals inferred the themes (but not the specific content or valence) of their own dating partners’ thoughts and feelings more accurately than the themes in the thoughts and feelings of the opposite-sex strangers. The restriction of this effect to the thematic accuracy measure was not expected and warrants further study. More interesting, perhaps, was the finding that the significant impairment in empathic accuracy in discussions of safer sex applied specifically to opposite—rather than same-sex quartet members. This finding makes sense because the degree of goal-incompatibility the participants experienced in each other’s presence should have been greatest in this case.

The present study has several features that limit the scope of its conclusions. First, because the primary aim of the present study was to explore impairment in attention during safer-sex discussions, it was necessary to limit ourselves to laboratory observations. The study is therefore limited in its ecological validity. The hypotheses were tested in a laboratory setting in which discussion partners interacted in 90-second role-plays, with two non-interactants present and overhearing each discussion while it was being
videotaped. Accordingly, it is premature to generalize the results to real-life situations in which safer-sex issues are discussed in the privacy of the bedroom or bathroom with no other persons present and with all of the time one needs to find the right moment to introduce a topic such as condom use. Because the more modest goal of the present study was to provide some preliminary insight into the impairment in attention that is apparent in laboratory discussions of safer sex we decided to conduct an experimental, observational study with 'real-world' couples. The results of our study should therefore be considered preliminary and heuristic rather than definitive.

Second, although the selection of the leisure activities control topic made it possible to compare discussions of safer sex with those of a topic that evoked substantially less goal-incompatibility, it also limits our interpretation of the results. Undoubtedly, safer-sex and leisure activity discussions differ on a number of dimensions besides goal-incompatibility, including the degree to which they are seen as intimate/non-intimate, consequential/inconsequential, and so on. Because our primary objective was to contrast the topic of safer sex with a topic which we could be reasonably sure would evoke significantly less goal-incompatibility, we opted for a comparison that accomplished this aim without attempting to control all other dimensions of potential relevance to our results. Although the results of this initial demonstration study are important with respect to the processes they implicate, they are also in need for further clarification with respect to the specific conditions in which these processes do, and do not, occur. Studies focusing exclusively on dyadic interactions and on real-life discussions are also needed to further specify the source(s) of the effects that we have observed.

Despite these limitations of the present study, we suggest that some useful implications for the prevention of AIDS and other STDs can still be drawn from the results. In our attempt to understand why it is so difficult to talk about safer sex with or in the presence of one's dating partner, we found evidence that at least part of the answer resides in the inherent incompatibility between romantic relationship goals and the more blunt and potentially disillusioning goals associated with clear and direct talk about safer sex. Quite simply, although better understanding of the partner's thoughts and feelings during safer sex talk is associated with an increase in safer sexual practices, it may also be associated with a more cynical view of the relationship partners and of the relationship itself.

If talking about safer sex is necessary for practicing safer sex – as the positive correlation for these variables in previous studies indicate (see e.g. Barthlow, Horan, DiClemente and Lanier, 1993; Catania, Coates and Kegeles, 1994) – intimate dating partners are in a decidedly paradoxical position. On the one hand, they should be encouraged to talk about safer sex in order to practice safer sex, but on the other hand they may need to protect themselves from (a) experiencing distressing, topic-relevant thoughts and feelings, and (b) having to understand and acknowledge the potentially destabilizing thoughts and feelings that their partners may be experiencing during safer-sex talk. In other words, although effective safer-sex talk can be good for the partners' sexual health, it can also have strong negative implications for their views of self, partner, and relationship.

Resolving this paradox may not be easy, as it may require the partners to suddenly and dramatically redefine their relationship, seeing it perhaps as less unique, less exclusive, less romantic, and less committed. Because many, if not most, couples will resist such redefinition, the dilemma for health educators should be clear. How can health educators reframe the emotional and relational significance of safer-sex talk in a way that is less threatening to relationship partners? For there can be little doubt that discussions of
previous sexual partners, history of condom use, and so on, can be profoundly threatening in just the ways we have described.

This is still a largely unexplored area. However, several writers have made useful suggestions that include (a) talking about safer sex in the context of birth control or in the context of stories about the experiences of friends and acquaintances, (b) making safer sex an issue in the very beginning of a relationship, and (c) using humor to discuss safer sex issues in a less threatening way (see Adelman, 1992; Bysse, 1998; Buysse and Van Oost, 1997; Metts and Fitzpatrick, 1992). Empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of these techniques is still lacking, however. Although the findings of the present study help to clarify why it so difficult to talk about safer sex in stable dating relationships, we still need clearer answers to the question of exactly how such talk should be integrated into the sexual scripts of intimate partners in stable relationships.

Acknowledgments

This research was conducted as part of the first author’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Ghent under the supervision of Paulette Van Oost, to whom the authors express their thanks. Our thanks also go to Dale Griffin for his statistical advice and to Inge Antrop, Edward Balse, Francy De Smet, Ilse Louis, Kurt Reynaert, Karolien Sonk, Elly Steenbrugge, Nathalie Stroobant, Alain Uyttendaele, Dirk Verbeke and Lesly Verhofstadt for their assistance in coding the data. The study was supported by a doctoral fellowship awarded to the first author by the Fund for Scientific Research.

References


Copyright © 1999. All rights reserved.

