It takes an insecure liar to catch a liar: The link between attachment insecurity, deception, and detection of deception☆

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ABSTRACT

Lies and deceptions are prevalent in our daily lives, yet most people merely guess when attempting to distinguish between lies and truths. In the current research, we examined the validity of the saying that "it takes a thief to know a thief" by showing that it takes a good liar – one high in attachment insecurity – to detect another liar. In Study 1, 68 card players participated in a *Bullshit* tournament – a card game in which players try to deceive other players while also striving to detect their deceptions. In Study 2 ($N = 99$), people who cheated on their romantic partner (versus those who did not) were asked to detect cues of infidelity. Results confirmed our expectations and showed that good liars and cheaters, who are usually insecure individuals, are better at detecting lies and dishonesty. These results are discussed from the perspective of social defense theory, highlighting the utility of personality traits that are often deemed maladaptive.

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Research shows that people are naïve when it comes to detecting deception, and tend to do so only slightly better than chance (for a meta-analysis see Bond & DePaulo, 2006). To date, over 100 studies were conducted to predict individual differences in deception-detection accuracy (Aamodt & Custer, 2006), but none have examined whether the cliché that "it takes a thief to know a thief" has any merit, and could be applied to the study of detection of lies and deception. In the present research, we take a social defense theory perspective (SDT; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, & Shaver, 2010) to address the possibility that it takes a good liar to detect a liar, while suggesting that this liar may possess a unique constellation of characteristics that enable such interpersonal sensitivity.

Lying and deceptions are an integral part of human life. Research shows that over 90% of all people lie about their true feelings, income, accomplishments, sex life, and age (Patterson & Kim, 1991). Although Freud (1905/1997) contended that lying is blatantly apparent, and that "no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (p. 94), the preponderance of research portrays an abysmal human ability to detect deception in a wide variety of contexts (professional judgments, interpersonal interactions, business exchanges, close relationships) – an ability (or inability) that is seldom better than chance (Bond & DePaulo, 2006, p. 231).

This seeming human failure to detect deceit stands against the pivotal importance that detecting deceit has for human life. According to hazard management theory (Fiddick, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2000), the detection of interpersonal deceit is essential because it enables people to take appropriate precautions to avoid a variety of substantial hazards. How can we reconcile the central importance of detecting deceit with the seemingly poor human ability to do so? In the present research, we contend that certain individuals are better equipped at detecting lies and cheating and that this ability has many social benefits. Specifically, we suggest that people who are good at lying and/or had extensive experience in lying are also better than others in detecting lies and deceptions. Previous research has mainly focused on situational factors in the ability to successfully detect lies (Reinhard, Scharmach, & Siegfried, 2012; Reinhard, Sporer, & Scharmach, 2013; Reinhard, Sporer, Scharmach, & Marksteiner, 2011). In the current research, we take an individual difference perspective and contend that some individuals are better liars than others (are less likely to be caught), and that these individuals are also better than others in detecting lies.

According to social defense theory (SDT; Ein-Dor et al., 2010), people who are highly anxious about separation and abandonment are more able than others to quickly and accurately detect threats and danger such as interpersonal lies (Ein-Dor & Perry, 2014; Ein-Dor, Perry-Paldi, Daniely, Zohar-Cohen, & Hirschberger, 2016). Anxiety from separation and abandonment, or attachment anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), relates to the activation of an innate psychobiological system (*the attachment behavioral system*) that was perfected by evolution and which motivates people to seek proximity to significant others (*attachment figures*) when in need of protection from danger. Social and

personality psychologists generally conceptualize adult attachment patterns as regions in a continuous two-dimensional space (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The dimension of attachment-related anxiety reflects the extent to which a person worries that others will not be available or helpful in times of need. Anxious individuals exaggerate their sense of vulnerability and insistently call on others for help and care, sometimes to the point of being intrusive (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1990). The second dimension, attachment-related avoidance, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts relationship partners' goodwill, strives to maintain independence, and relies on deactivating strategies for dealing with threats and negative emotions (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Attachment security is defined by low scores on both anxiety and avoidance. Secure people generally cope with threats by relying on internal resources developed with the help of security-enhancing attachment figures or by effectively seeking support from others or collaborating with them (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

According to SDT, attachment-related anxiety, but not avoidance or security, is associated with an adaptive reaction termed *sentinel behavior* – an enhanced ability to notice ambiguous signs of threat, and a propensity to quickly warn others about the threat (Ein-Dor, 2013; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011a, 2011b; Ein-Dor & Orgad, 2012; Ein-Dor & Perry, 2012; Ein-Dor et al., 2010). Recently, Ein-Dor and Perry (2014) found that people high in attachment anxiety were more accurate in detecting deceitful statements, and were better poker players – a social game that is based to a large extent on players' ability to detect deception compared with people low on that domain (and, hence, more secure). Groups with greater number of anxious members were also found to be better than other groups in the ability to distinguish between truths and lies (Ein-Dor et al., 2016). In addition, people high on attachment anxiety tend to be both highly familiar with dishonesty, and highly involved in interpersonal exchanges. Specifically, research indicates that people high on attachment anxiety carry with them a history of negative interactions and are familiar with various forms of inauthenticity and dishonesty (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010). They also tend to ruminate on distressing feelings and to be cognitively involved in thoughts about the honest intentions of others (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). On this basis, we predicted in the current research that people high on attachment anxiety are more prone than others to behave dishonestly, to do so without being caught, and are also better than others in detecting signs of deceit. To examine this hypothesis, we conducted two studies. In Study 1, we examined whether people high in attachment anxiety are better liars (lying without being caught), and thus better at detecting lies. In Study 2, we examined whether anxiously attached people (and/or avoidantly attached) are more likely to cheat on their romantic partner (as opposed to being cheated on by a romantic partner), and are, thus, better at detecting infidelity.

1. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether it takes a liar, and specifically an anxiously attached liar, to catch a liar. To do so, we invited a group of non-professional card players to play the card game *Bullshit*, examined their attachment styles, and monitored their ability to detect lies and to tell lies without being caught.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants
The sample consisted of 68 non-professional card players who play cards on a regular basis, recruited from the general community (30 men and 38 women aged 19–40, $M = 24.09$, $SD = 4.93$), and volunteered to participate in the study.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure
Participants, a convenience sample recruited from a wide variety of sources (postings on bulletin boards and in online forums), were invited

to an apartment near campus to play the card game *Bullshit* (called *Cheat* in Britain and sometimes known as *I Doubt It*). Each participant was randomly assigned to a group of three to four players (for a total of 18 groups).

Upon their arrival, participants completed a Hebrew version of the Experiences in Close Relationships scales (Brennan et al., 1998). Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their experiences in close relationships on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) *to very much* (7). Eighteen items assessed attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned") and 18 assessed attachment avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down"). The reliability and validity of these scales have been repeatedly demonstrated (Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In the present study, Cronbach's αs were 0.90 for the anxiety items and 0.86 for the avoidance items, and the two scores were significantly correlated, $r_{(66)} = 0.32$, $p = 0.008$.

Following the completion of the questionnaire, each group began the first round of the game. In *Bullshit*, an entire deck of cards is dealt out to the players and the objective is to get rid of all of your cards. On the table is a discard pile, which starts empty. A turn consists of discarding one or more cards face down on the pile, and calling out their rank. The first player must discard Aces, the second player discards Twos, the next player Threes, and so on. Since the cards are discarded face down, players do not, in fact, have to play the rank they are calling (e.g., a player calls "two Sevens" even though he or she has no Sevens). Any player who suspects that the card(s) discarded by a player do not match the rank called can challenge the play by calling out loud: "Bullshit!" Then the cards played by the challenged player are exposed and one of two things happens. If they are all of the rank that was called, the challenge is false, and the challenger must pick up the whole discard pile; if any of the played cards is different from the called rank, the challenge is correct, and the person who played the cards must pick up the whole discard pile. After the challenge is resolved, play continues in normal rotation. The first player to get rid of all of his or her cards, and survives any challenge resulting from their final play, wins the game.

Two research assistants serving as coders sat behind the players (players were instructed to show the cards to the coders) and coded the amount of successful lie-detecting (hits; correctly stating "Bullshit" when a player cheated), false alarms in lie-detecting (stating "Bullshit" when the player did not cheat), successful cheats (cheating without someone stating "Bullshit") and unsuccessful cheats (cheating and getting caught). Each group played between 2 and 3 full rounds of Bullshit (each round goes through an entire deck of cards). For each participant, we calculated his or her ability to cheat (successful cheats minus unsuccessful cheats; ranging from −2 to 2, $M = 0.07$, $SD = 1.14$), and detect cheating (successful lie-detecting minus false alarms in lie-detecting; ranging from −2 to 3, $M = 0.31$, $SD = 1.03$) as well as the number of wins (ranging from 0 to 2, $M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.66$).

After the completion of the game, participants completed a socio-demographic questionnaire, which included their familiarity with *Bullshit* (ranging from 1 "not familiar at all" to 7 "highly familiar", $M = 4.10$, $SD = 2.53$), were debriefed and thanked. Higher familiarity with *Bullshit* was linked with more wins ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.028$) and better ability to cheat ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.059$; marginally significant) but not with the ability to detect cheating ($r = 0.11$, $p = 0.355$).

1.2. Results and discussion

To examine whether players' group affiliation accounted for a significant portion of the variance in their ability to cheat, detect cheating and win more games, we conducted a series of Hierarchical Liner Models (HLM; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2004). The models indicated that group affiliation accounted for a small and non-significant portion of the variance [<1%; $\chi^2_{(17)} = 16.34$, $p = 0.501$ for cheating, $\chi^2_{(17)} = 10.97$, $p = 0.858$ for detecting cheating, and $\chi^2_{(17)} = 2.86$, $p = 1.00$ for number of wins]. Therefore, to examine whether players' ability to