Article

Expressed and Perceived Honesty Benefits Relationships Even When Couples Are Not Accurate

Bonnie M. Le[1] (iD)**, Princeton X. Chee**[1]*****, Claire J. Shimshock**[1]*****,
and Jenny D. V. Le**[1]

Abstract
Honesty is a highly valued virtue, yet it can be challenging to enact when it may compromise our most valued relationships. We tested preregistered hypotheses examining the distinct effects of *expressed*, *perceived*, and *accurate perceptions of honesty* on well-being and change. Romantic partners ($N_{couples}$ = 214; $N_{individuals}$ = 428) discussed a desired change in the lab and reported on outcomes concurrently and three months later. Honesty was self-reported and rated by observers, with correspondence between these measures observed. Results of multilevel response surface analyses showed that greater expressed and perceived honesty—but not accurate perceptions of honesty—predicted greater well-being, relationship satisfaction, and target motivation to change concurrently, with some benefits emerging over time. The current results indicate that honesty can benefit relationships even when the truth may hurt, with more expressed and perceived honesty fostering better relationships regardless of whether couples share in that perception of honesty.

Keywords
accuracy, change, honesty, interpersonal relationships, well-being

Honesty is valued across societies and is a desired characteristic sought in relationship partners (Anderson, 1968; Mogilski et al., 2019; Regan et al., 2000). Honesty can be a crucial avenue for people to come to know one another, shaping relationships for the better (Clark et al., 1996; LaFollette & Graham, 1986). However, honesty may have costs when honest communication hurts or strains a relationship. Because of these potential costs, people have misconceptions about the effects of honesty—through overperceiving its harm and underestimating its benefits (Levine & Cohen, 2018). These misperceptions may create barriers to honest expressions that may in fact promote closeness. To the extent that honesty can strengthen our connections, uncovering when honesty helps versus hurts is essential for promoting satisfying relationships that bolster our health and well-being (Le et al., 2022; Levine et al., 2023).

We conducted a multimethod study to elucidate the effects of honesty in one of our most intimate relationships, those between romantic partners. We examined a relationship-threatening context in which honesty may be challenging, but necessary: requesting partner change. Honestly requesting change from a partner can be threatening because couples often raise highly sensitive issues (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). This may prompt

individuals to avoid or lie about these topics to avoid punishment or hurting their partner's feelings (Cole, 2001; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Metts, 1989). However, honesty matters for change requests since people are unable to change without awareness of their partner's concerns.

The current work is informed by recent theories positing that honesty is an interpersonal communication process that includes the intellectual element of sharing the truth and the relational element of communicating in ways that foster an accurate understanding in others (Cooper et al., 2023; Fritz, 2020). We undertake two notably novel directions. To address challenges of studying honesty, a moral characteristic that may be susceptible to social desirability, we examine honesty using both self- and observer-reported measures. In addition, we take an interpersonal approach examining how expressed

[1]University of Rochester, NY, USA

*Princeton X. Chee and Claire J. Shimshock contributed equally to this work.

Corresponding Author:
Bonnie M. Le, Department of Psychology, University of Rochester, 479
Meliora Hall, Rochester, NY 14627, USA.
Email: bonnie.le@rochester.edu

and perceived honesty from both members of a relationship shapes well-being and change.

Identifying the Personal and Interpersonal Effects of Honesty

We test three sets of preregistered hypotheses concerning the effects of *expressed honesty* by an agent requesting change; *perceived honesty* by a target receiving a change request; and *accurate perceptions of honesty* at higher, relative to lower, levels of agent-expressed and target-perceived honesty. We propose that personal and interpersonal benefits may be observed from just one, or a combination, of these facets of honesty. We additionally propose that in the context of requesting change, these benefits will emerge primarily over time.

Our first set of hypotheses examines the effects of *agent-expressed honesty*. Agents and targets may experience negative emotions and stress when agents are honest about a desired change due to the actual or perceived harm of sharing truthful, but potentially hurtful, information (Levine & Cohen, 2018; Levine et al., 2020, 2023). These negative feelings may cancel out the relational benefits of honesty in increasing intimacy, having a neutral effect on short-term well-being (Levine et al., 2023; Overall et al., 2009). However, in the longer-term after the initial sting of a change discussion has passed, agents may feel a greater sense of well-being from being honest and acting in a forthright, moral way with their partner (Allan & Alba-Fisch, 2015; Levine & Cohen, 2018). Furthermore, an agent's honesty provides useful feedback that spurs targets' long-term growth and improves relationship quality for both relationship partners (LaFollette & Graham, 1986; Levine et al., 2020, 2023; Overall et al., 2009). Altogether, we hypothesized that an agent's honest change requests would predict greater target motivation to change in the moment. In the longer-term, we hypothesized that agent honesty would predict greater personal and relationship well-being for both partners and greater target (reported and agent perceived) change success.

Our second set of hypotheses examines the effects of *target-perceived agent honesty*. Meta-analytic research indicates that perceptions of our partners' characteristics and behaviors shape relationship satisfaction more than our partner's actual qualities and behaviors (Joel et al., 2020). Thus, it may be target *perceived* honesty that primarily shapes couple outcomes. In both the short- and longer-term, the negative feelings elicited for agents and targets (i.e., due to sharing and hearing hurtful information) may cancel out any positive feelings associated with perceived honesty, neutralizing effects on personal well-being. However, *relational* benefits of perceived honesty may emerge through increased couple intimacy (Fritz, 2020; LaFollette & Graham, 1986) and a target's desirable perception of their partner as moral (Anderson, 1968;

Mogilski et al., 2019; Regan et al., 2000). Perceived honesty may additionally prompt targets to feel they received a clear message that facilitates growth, spurring them to change (Levine et al., 2023; Overall et al., 2009). Thus, we hypothesized that target-perceived honesty would predict higher relationship satisfaction for both partners and target change in the moment and over time, even if it does not improve personal well-being per se.

Our final set of hypotheses examines the effects of accurate perceptions of honesty at higher, relative to lower, levels of agent-expressed and target-perceived honesty. Recent theories highlight that honesty does not end with the expression of truthful thoughts, but honest individuals must also aim to foster an understanding of the truth in a target (Cooper et al., 2023). Accordingly, we theorize that the shared perception of honesty, through expressed and perceived truth, may be key to maximizing well-being and change. Accurate perceptions of honesty may help couples behave in synchronized ways that promote relationship quality (Gregory et al., 2020; Sened et al., 2017). Specifically, targets may not know what to change if they do not accurately perceive agents to be communicating their honest desires. Relatedly, an agent's lack of honesty may compromise a target's understanding of important changes they can make (Cooper et al., 2023; Fulham et al., 2022). Thus, accurate perceptions of honesty may be important, above and beyond agents' expressed and targets' perceived honesty, given the possibility that partners' perceptions of one another must be grounded in reality for benefits to emerge. Consistent with our previous theorizing, we hypothesized that accurate perceptions of honesty would promote personal and relationship well-being for both agents and targets in the longer-term after the initial sting of a change discussion has passed. We additionally hypothesized that accurate preceptions of honesty would predict greater concurrent and longer-term target change.

We test our hypotheses in a three-part study (background survey, lab interaction, and three-month follow-up survey). We use both self- and observer-reported measures to assess expressed honesty and well-being. In addition to our key hypotheses, we test whether an agent's communication style magnifies or attenuates honesty's benefits. Finally, we sought to rule out third variable explanations for our effects.

Method

Participants

We recruited 214 romantic couples (428 individuals) from the community through Facebook and our university. We aimed to recruit 200 couples to exceed samples used in previous research examining change and relationship outcomes (Le et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2009). Our preregistration, measures, analysis scripts, and supplemental materials are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://

osf.io/dyzb4/?view_only = de65e844cc0f4f548bfcdd989d-da0aa1. Our hypotheses and analysis plan were preregistered prior to completing data collection.

Participants were 35.94 years old on average ($SD = 13.68$; range = 18–87). The sample was 46.73% male, 49.77% female, and 3.5% gender variant/non-conforming, other, or did not report their gender. The average relationship length was 15.15 years ($SD = 11.96$) with 53.27% of participants in monogamous marriages; 43.94% in unmarried, monogamous relationships; and 2.79% in open or polyamorous marriages or relationships, unmarried, or did not report their status. Participants were 80.61% White, 7.71% Asian, 3.50% Biracial, 2.34% Black or African American, 2.10% other ethnicity, 1.64% multiracial, one participant was American Indian or Alaskan, and eight participants did not report their ethnicity.

Procedure

Couples completed a background survey, lab session, daily experience survey (not reported in the current paper),[1] and three-month follow-up survey. In the background survey, participants reported on demographic, control, and individual difference measures. In addition, participants reported two topics they would like their partner to change, with one selected for discussion in the lab. The selected change topic was the one that participants reported they would be willing to discuss (an ethical consideration taken for the study) and would be most uncomfortable to share with their partner (i.e., would be more challenging to be honest about).

Participants were asked to be as honest as possible when describing their desired partner changes and were informed their responses would be kept confidential from their partner. Informed by research on lying (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), participants were given the definition of honesty (i.e., "the truthful expression of [their] thoughts and feelings" and "not lying, omitting information, or use of deception") to maximize honest responding.

In the lab, participants engaged in four video-recorded conversation topics structured as in previous research (Fritz et al., 2003; Le et al., 2020): a baseline conversation about their day, desired partner change, and two other conversations not assessed in the current work. In the background and lab measures, we included filler questions to mask the goals of the study (none of which participants identified in pilot sessions).

Partners were randomly assigned to the role of the agent or target of change in the first discussion and then switched roles for the second. Agents were first given an envelope that included a paper copy of the selected change they described in the background survey. They read their responses silently and then returned the envelopes to research assistants. We provided these original responses to ensure that any discrepancies between what agents stated privately in the survey and to their partner in the lab were not due to forgetting their original response (a

consideration for observer-rated honesty). Agents were then instructed to tell their partner their desired change and that they could share as much or as little as they preferred. Each discussion lasted six minutes, with agents and targets switching off speaking for one minute until the last two minutes when they spoke freely. After each discussion, participants completed self-report measures on honesty, change, and well-being.

Measures

Background, lab, and follow-up measures were self-reported. Observer-rated lab measures were coded after the lab sessions. Two teams of five research assistants independently rated agent and target measures. Reliability for observer codes was computed with intraclass correlation coefficients ($ICCs$) using two-way random effects models assessing absolute agreement among raters (i.e., agreement within the coding team; Bliese, 2000). Items were rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly disagree* and averaged into composites unless otherwise noted. A comprehensive list of measures is accessible on our OSF page.

Background Measures

Change Characteristics. Participants reported in free response format on two *desired partner changes* and described why they desired these changes. Participants also rated their *willingness to discuss each change* with their partner (1 = *not at all willing*, 7 = *extremely willing*; $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.70$) and their *(dis)comfort discussing each change topic* (1 = *not at all comfortable*, 7 = *extremely comfortable*; $M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.71$).

Lab Measures

Honesty. Agents rated their *expressed honesty* when requesting change with a 12-item measure created for the current study. This measure adapted existing honesty measures (Lopez & Rice, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2024) and included new items capturing key theoretical facets of honesty ($\alpha = .93$; $M = 6.58$, $SD = 0.58$) including truthful communication, (reverse-scored) deception and sharing misinformation, and (reverse-scored) omission of information. Targets rated their *perceptions of agent honesty* with the same 12 items adapted to capture perceptions, rather than expressions, of honesty ($\alpha = .90$; $M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.76$). Full measure details appear in the Supplement Appendix A.

Informed by previous research on couple observations (Simpson et al., 2003), *agent observer-rated honesty* was assessed by having coders compare agents' private background survey responses of desired partner change with video footage of what they verbally asked their partners to change in the lab. Coders rated the item, "How honest would you characterize this person to be in this conversation?" ($ICC = .82$; $M = 6.23$, $SD = 0.76$). The item-rating points included

detailed instructions for assessing the same key facets of honesty that were assessed in our self-report measure of honesty (full details appear in the Supplement Appendix B).

Emotional Well-Being. Self-reported agent (α = .77; M = 3.69, SD = 0.66) and target (α = .82; M = 2.67, SD = 0.47) emotional well-being were assessed immediately after the change discussions (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; Le et al., 2020). Positive emotion was captured with the item "happy." Negative emotions were captured with nine items (e.g., "angry," "sad," "resentful"). *Observer-rated emotional well-being* was assessed for agents (ICC = .65; M = 3.71, SD = 0.46) and targets (ICC = .64; M = 3.48, SD = 0.51; 1 = *none at all*, 5 = *an extreme amount*). Positive emotions were assessed with the code "How much positive emotion did this person express in this conversation?" Negative emotions were assessed with an average of three codes: "irritation/frustration/hostility," "anxiousness/uncomfortableness/nervousness," and "sad/upset." We created composite measures of self- and observer-rated emotional well-being by averaging positive and (reverse-scored) negative emotions.

Relationship Measures. Agent (α = .85; M = 6.01, SD = 0.97) and target (α = .87; M = 6.00, SD = 1.00) self-reported relationship satisfaction were assessed using a composite of five items tapping satisfaction, closeness, love, (reverse-scored) tension, and (reverse-scored) conflict (Impett et al., 2013). *Observer-rated agent* (ICC = .81; M = 3.20, SD = 0.67) and *target* (ICC = .83; M = 3.27, SD = 0.65) *relationship satisfaction* were also assessed (e.g., "In this conversation, how satisfied and happy do you think this person is with their relationship?"). *Couple conflict* was assessed with the item "How much conflict did the couple experience in this conversation?" (ICC = .75; M = 1.47, SD = 0.55; 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *an extreme amount*; Le et al., 2020).

Target Motivation to Change. Target motivation to change was assessed with a composite of four items from previous research (α = .89; M = 5.94, SD = 0.85; Le et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2009; Sisson et al., 2022).

Follow-Up Measures

Well-Being. Satisfaction with life was assessed with the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (α = .88; M = 5.21, SD = 1.17; Diener et al., 1985). *Emotional well-being* was assessed with the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (1 = *very slightly or not at all*; 5 = *extremely*; Watson et al., 1988). Participants reported on the emotions they felt in the last week, including 12 positive (e.g., "happy," "excited") and 10 negative emotions (e.g., "distressed," "hostile"). A composite measure was created by averaging the positive and (reverse-scored) negative emotion items (α = .91; M = 3.74, SD = 0.59).

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed using the 32-item Couples Satisfaction Index. As per Funk and Rogge (2007), each item had unique scale points and items were summed into a composite score (α = .96; M = 128.86, SD = 25.66).

Change Success. Target-reported change success (α = .93) was assessed with six items drawn from previous research (Le et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2009; Sisson et al., 2022) and created for the current study. Items assessed participants' perceived change in response to their partner's request in the lab (rated on seven-point scales, with one item rated from 0% to 100% change success). Participants also reported on *perceived target change success* (α = .96) using the same six items as before, except reworded to capture perceived partner (target) success. All items had the rating option of "I don't remember the change discussed," with these responses excluded from analyses. Due to differing scale points, items were standardized prior to creating their respective mean composites (Ms = 0.00, SDs = 1.00).

Moderator Variables. We examined whether agents' communication style in the lab shaped the benefits of honesty using four observer-rated measures informed by previous research (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; Levine & Cohen, 2018). These communication styles assessed the extent to which agents communicated with *benevolence* (ICC = .71, M = 3.14, SD = 0.57), *bluntness* (ICC = .65, M = 1.74, SD = 0.54), *disclosure* (ICC = .69, M = 3.24, SD = 0.58), and *restraint* (ICC = .73, M = 1.89, SD = 0.62).

Results

We conducted multilevel response surface analyses (ML-RSA) to test all three sets of hypotheses parsimoniously in one model (Nestler et al., 2019). Analyses were conducted in R v. 4.3.1 (R Core Team, 2023) using the RSA (Schönbrodt & Humberg, 2023), lme4 (Bates et al., 2015), and lmerTest (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) packages and additional functions by Nestler et al. (2019). ML-RSA allows for testing the effects of accuracy, and the main effects of the components of accuracy (i.e., honest expressions and perceptions), while preserving all information from continuously measured variables. Specifically, these effects are modeled in three-dimensional space, which prevents inferential errors that may occur from other methods of testing accuracy (i.e., difference scores; Edwards, 2002; Nestler et al., 2019). All models included the following predictors: agent self-reported (or observer-rated) honesty (X), target-perceived honesty (Y), squared terms of agent self-reported (or observer-rated) honesty (X^2) and target-perceived honesty (Y^2), and the interaction between agent self-reported (or observer-rated) honesty and target-perceived honesty (the linear terms; XY).
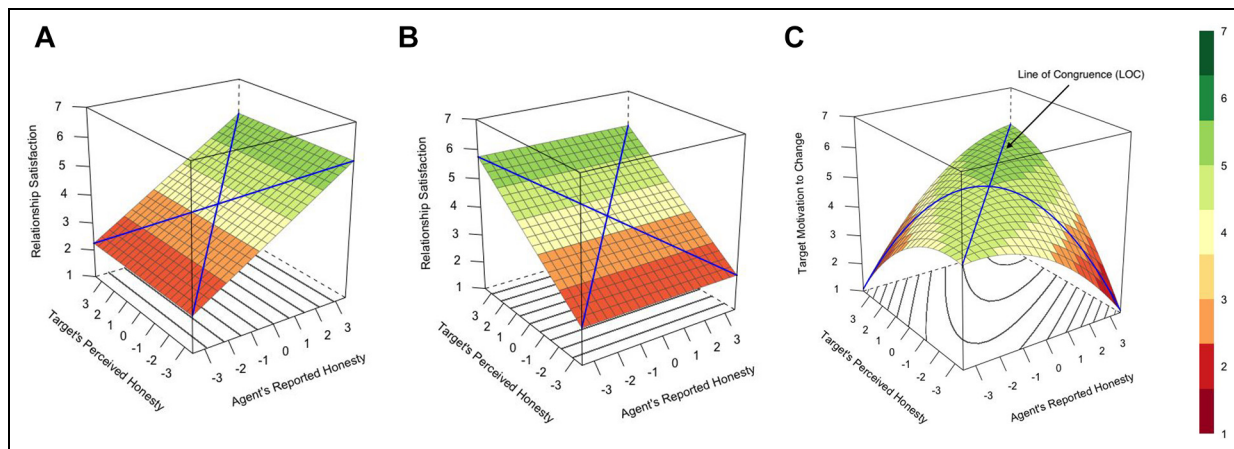
Figure 1. *Example Response Surface Plots for Each Set of Hypotheses. Graph (A) depicts the expected pattern for the positive effects of agent honesty on one example outcome of relationship satisfaction (along the X-axis). Graph (B) depicts the positive effects of target-perceived honesty on one example outcome of relationship satisfaction (along the Y-axis). Graph (C) depicts the positive effects of accuracy, or congruence, between agent's expressed and target's perceived honesty at higher, relative to lower, levels on one example outcome of target motivation to change (along the line of congruence)*

For all graphs here and throughout, the darker-shaded parts of the graphs indicate higher values of the outcome whereas the lighter-shaded parts of the graph indicate lower values of the outcome.

In all models, individuals were nested in couples, intercepts were specified as random, and slopes were fixed. All concurrent and longitudinal analyses use the same predictors. The longitudinal models also included one additional variable to model change over time (i.e., when predicting emotional well-being at follow-up, we control for emotional well-being in the lab).

The hypotheses concerning the effects of agent-expressed honesty were captured by the main effect of agent self-reported (or observer-rated) honesty, controlling for all other variables in the model (i.e., X in all tables; Figure 1, Graph A). The effects of target-perceived honesty were captured by the main effect of target-perceived honesty, controlling for all other variables in the model (i.e., Y in all tables; Figure 1, Graph B). As we explain below, the squared and interactive terms in the polynomial models (along with the main effects) are used for computing the response surface coefficients required for testing questions about accuracy.

For hypotheses concerning the effects of accuracy, we examined five response surface coefficients derived from the effects estimated in the multilevel polynomial models: $\hat{\alpha}_1$, $\hat{\alpha}_2$, $\hat{\alpha}_3$, $\hat{\alpha}_4$, and $\hat{\alpha}_5$ (Nestler et al., 2019). These five response surface coefficients are computed using combinations of the five polynomial coefficients as described in Nestler et al. (2019), in turn allowing us to test new slopes along the three-dimensional graph. Notably, we focused on the $\hat{\alpha}_4$ slope along the line of congruence, or LOC (computed as the coefficients for $X^2 - XY + Y^2$). The LOC is where values of an agent's honesty match with values of a target's perceived honesty (i.e., congruence/matching versus not, whether that be high or low levels of honesty)—or

where *accurate perceptions of honesty* occur. In addition, we focus on the $\hat{\alpha}_1$ slope along the LOC (computed as the coefficients for $X + Y$). This slope tests whether a positive or negative mean-level effect is observed (i.e., the combined main effects of agent-expressed [X] and target-perceived honesty [Y]), indicating whether accurate perceptions of honesty that occur at higher, rather than lower, levels of expressed and perceived honesty predict higher (or lower) values on the outcome. Altogether, the following pattern of parameters must be observed to meet the criteria for broad congruence (Nestler et al., 2019) to test our hypotheses that accurate perceptions of higher levels of honesty predict benefits: $\hat{\alpha}_1 > 0$, $\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0$, $\hat{\alpha}_3 = 0$, $\hat{\alpha}_4 < 0$, and $\hat{\alpha}_5 = 0$ (Figure 1, Graph C).

Correspondence Between Self-Report and Observer Ratings

We first examined whether there was correspondence between self- and observer-rated honesty measures. We report bivariate multilevel coefficients to account for dependencies between romantic partners' reports. Agent observer-rated honesty was positively associated with self-reported agent honesty ($b = 0.168$, 95% CI = [0.098, 0.239], $p < .001$) and target-perceived honesty ($b = 0.106$, 95% CI = [0.011, 0.202], $p = .029$). In addition, agent self-reported honesty was positively associated with target-perceived honesty ($b = 0.378$, 95% CI = [0.259, 0.496], $p < .001$). These positive associations are consistent with research indicating that people's self-perceptions, although not perfect, are tethered to reality and correspondent with others' perceptions (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Consistent

with our preregistration, we test our hypotheses separately for agent self-reported and observer-rated honesty. However, we note that including both self-reported and observer-rated honesty as simultaneous predictors in the same models yields consistent results as when assessing these measures of honesty in separate models.

For the well-being measures, all self- and observer-rated indicators of the same constructs were positively associated for agent and target emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction ($0.117 \leq$ all bs ≤ 0.189, all ps $< .001$). Observer-rated couple conflict was negatively associated with agent self-reported relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.046$, 95% CI = $[-0.097, 0.002]$, $p = .034$) but unassociated with target self-reported relationship satisfaction ($b = 0.007$, 95% CI = $[-0.045, 0.56]$, $p = .720$). Consistent with existing research (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009), these findings provide some validity for our assessments of well-being across methods.

The Personal and Interpersonal Effects of Honesty

We first explored whether couples found the change conversations to be challenging, suggesting it may be difficult to be honest. We indeed found that the discussions were unpleasant, with both agents ($b = -0.190$, 95% CI = $[-0.225, -0.154]$, $p < .001$) and targets ($b = -0.255$, 95% CI = $[-0.292, -0.218]$, $p < .001$) experiencing lower emotional well-being after the change, relative to the baseline, conversation.

The Effects of Agent-Expressed Honesty. Turning to our key hypotheses, and as shown in Table 1 (rows labeled *X*) and Figures 2 and 3 (slopes along the *X*-axes), agents' self-reported honesty significantly predicted greater agent and target emotional well-being and greater agent and target relationship satisfaction following the change discussion. These effects were observed across self-reported and observer-rated outcomes. Agents' self-reported honesty also marginally predicted greater target motivation to change. As seen in Table 2 (rows labeled *X*), observer-rated agent honesty also predicted greater observer-rated target emotional well-being and observer-rated relationship satisfaction.

Agents' self-reported honesty also had a few positive over-time effects. Agents' self-reported honesty predicted greater agent emotional well-being ($b = 0.146$, 95% CI = $[0.020, 0.272]$, $p = .024$) and agent-perceived target change success three months after the change discussion ($b = 0.192$, 95% CI = $[0.008, 0.377]$, $p = .043$). Observer-rated agent honesty also predicted target relationship satisfaction ($b = 6.108$, 95% CI = $[2.125, 10.102]$, $p = .003$), but no other outcomes, in the longer-term. All longitudinal results can be viewed in the Supplement, Tables S1 and S2 and Figure S1.
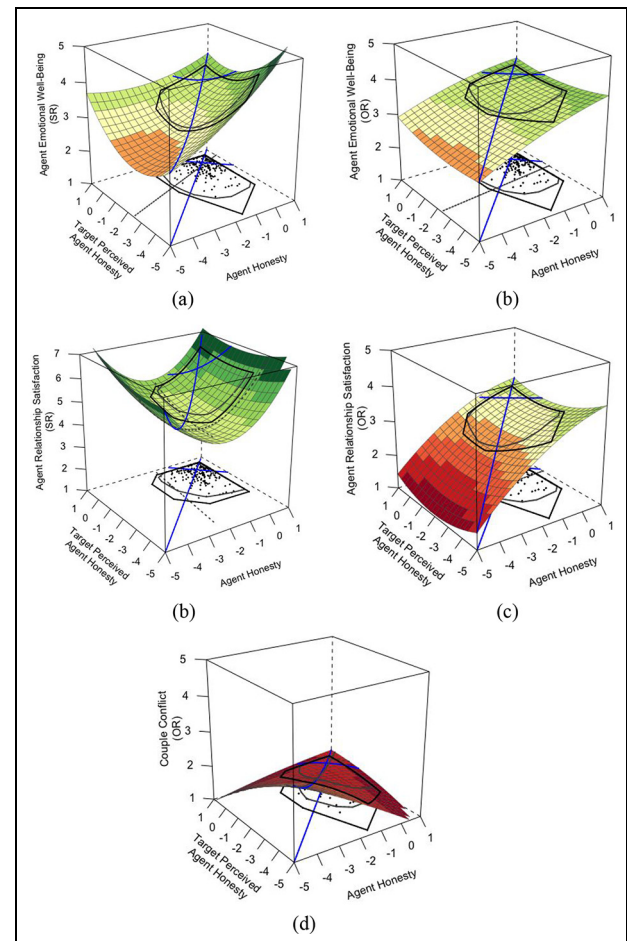

Figure 2. *Response Surface Plots of Agents' Self-Reported Honesty and Targets' Perceived Honesty Predicting Concurrent Agent Outcomes and Couple Conflict*
Agent's self-reported honesty corresponds to the *X*-variable in Table 1, target's perceived honesty corresponds to the *Y*-variable in Table 1, and accurate perceptions of honesty occur along the line of congruence as indicated in Figure 1 and correspond to the $\hat{\alpha}_1$ and $\hat{\alpha}_4$ variables in Table 1. SR = self-report and OR = observer rating. Bag plots on the graph floors indicate areas in which data were observed.

The Effects of Target-Perceived Honesty. As shown in Table 1 (rows labeled *Y*) and Figures 2 and 3 (slopes along the *Y*-axes), target-perceived honesty significantly predicted greater agent and target emotional well-being, greater agent and target relationship satisfaction, and greater target motivation to change concurrently after a change discussion. These effects were observed across both self-reported and observer-rated outcomes. Similar benefits of target-perceived honesty emerged after accounting for observer-rated honesty, but these benefits emerged particularly for self-reported, rather than observer-rated, outcomes (Table 2, rows labeled *Y*). Targets' perceived honesty had a positive effect on target emotional well-being three months after the change discussion ($b = 0.159$, 95%
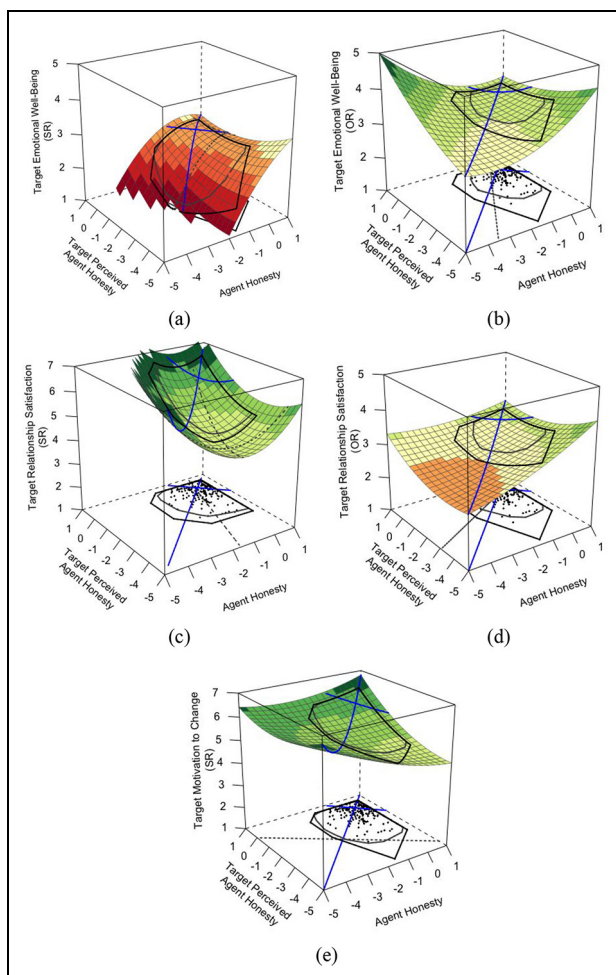
Figure 3. *Response Surface Plots of Agents' Self-Reported Honesty and Targets' Perceived Honesty Predicting Concurrent Target Outcomes*
Agent's self-reported honesty corresponds to the X-variable in Table 1, target's perceived honesty corresponds to the Y-variable in Table 1, and accurate perceptions of honesty occur along the line of congruence as indicated in Figure 1 and correspond to the $\hat{\alpha}_1$ and $\hat{\alpha}_4$ variables in Table 1. SR= self-report and OR = observer rating. Bag plots on the graph floors indicate areas in which data were observed.

CI = [0.046, 0.272], *p* = .006), but on no other long-term outcomes.

The Effects of Accurate Perceptions of Honesty. We did not find support for accurate perceptions of honesty predicting well-being and target motivation to change concurrently (Tables 1 and 2, rows labeled $\hat{\alpha}_1$ and $\hat{\alpha}_4$; Figures 2 and 3, slopes along the LOC) or longitudinally (Supplement, Tables S1 and S2 and Figure S1). Instead, we observed consistent and significant positive $\hat{\alpha}_1$ effects, indicating that the combination of greater agent and target-perceived honesty together are predictive of greater agent and target personal and relationship well-being and greater target motivation to change

concurrently and (to a lesser degree) longitudinally. Thus, it was more important that agents felt honest and targets perceived them to be honest—regardless of whether they shared in their perception of honesty—for couples to benefit.

Additional Analyses. The benefits of honesty may be shaped by an agent's communication style. When honest change requests are communicated more benevolently and less bluntly, agents may convey their messages more sensitively, facilitating positive outcomes (Fritz, 2020; Levine et al., 2020). Further unfettered honesty and disclosure can be hurtful to partners (Levine & Knapp, 2018). Accordingly, we tested preregistered hypotheses that the benefits of honesty would be magnified when agents were highly benevolent, less blunt, and moderately restrained and disclosing. Moderated multilevel polynomial models (conducted as per Edwards [n.d., 2002]) indicated no consistent pattern of moderation by communication styles, suggesting consistency in the effects of expressed and perceived honesty across agent communication styles (details appear in the Supplement, Appendix C).

Finally, we sought to rule out the possibility that the benefits of agent-expressed and target-perceived honesty could be explained by couples having higher *baseline satisfaction* prior to discussing change, agents using *direct positive and negative communication styles* that elicit change (Overall et al., 2009), and the *severity of the issue* couples discussed. When controlling for each of these variables in separate sets of analyses, the large majority of results remain consistent with a few exceptions: agents' baseline satisfaction could account for some of the longer-term benefits agents experienced and target baseline satisfaction could explain many of the benefits agents, but not targets, experienced when targets perceived higher honesty.

Discussion

Being honest is challenging, especially when doing so may compromise our valued relationships. In the current study, we found, in support of our hypotheses, that couples benefited in both the short- and longer-term when agents expressed and targets perceived honesty about a desired change. These benefits were consistent regardless of agents' communication styles. Further, baseline satisfaction, agents' direct communication, and the severity of issues raised could not explain the majority of the benefits observed. Importantly, and contrary to our hypotheses, accurate perceptions of honesty were not required for couples to benefit. These results provide a new understanding of the relational nature of honesty (Cooper et al., 2023; Fritz, 2020), indicating that expressed and perceived honesty can benefit the self and others, regardless of whether partners share in their perceptions of honesty.

Table 1. Concurrent Effects of Agent Self-Reported and Target-Perceived Honesty on Outcomes

Predictor	Agent emotional well-being (SR)			Agent emotional well-being (OR)			Agent relationship satisfaction (SR)			Agent relationship satisfaction (OR)			Couple conflict (OR)		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
Intercept	**3.610**	**0.047**	**<.001**	**3.703**	**0.034**	**<.001**	**5.775**	**0.063**	**<.001**	**3.184**	**0.049**	**<.001**	**1.480**	**0.042**	**<.001**
X	**0.278**	**0.068**	**<.001**	**0.106**	**0.044**	**.016**	**0.913**	**0.088**	**<.001**	**0.175**	**0.061**	**.004**	−0.014	0.049	.773
Y	**0.165**	**0.063**	**.009**	**0.082**	**0.041**	**.043**	**0.211**	**0.086**	**.015**	**0.122**	**0.057**	**.033**	−0.028	0.046	.548
X^2	0.035	0.067	.600	−0.016	0.042	.700	**0.255**	**0.085**	**.003**	−0.044	0.059	.459	−0.007	0.047	.882
XY	−0.069	0.066	.293	−0.010	0.043	.820	−0.048	0.088	.584	−0.009	0.060	.880	0.078	0.049	.114
Y^2	**0.096**	**0.033**	**.004**	0.020	0.021	.341	0.051	0.052	.330	0.044	0.029	.136	−0.017	0.024	.474
$\hat{\alpha}_1$	**0.443**	**0.086**	**<.001**	**0.188**	**0.061**	**.002**	**1.123**	**0.118**	**<.001**	**0.297**	**0.086**	**.001**	−0.042	0.070	.552
$\hat{\alpha}_2$	0.062	0.077	.418	−0.006	0.050	.906	**0.257**	**0.113**	**.023**	−0.009	0.071	.902	0.054	0.057	.351
$\hat{\alpha}_3$	0.113	0.100	.260	0.023	0.059	.694	**0.702**	**0.128**	**<.001**	0.053	0.081	.513	0.013	0.065	.835
$\hat{\alpha}_4$	0.200	0.120	.096	0.014	0.077	.861	**0.354**	**0.155**	**.022**	0.009	0.108	.931	−0.102	0.088	.245
$\hat{\alpha}_5$	−0.061	0.073	.400	−0.036	0.045	.420	**0.203**	**0.097**	**.036**	−0.088	0.063	.163	0.010	0.050	.843

Predictor	Target emotional well-being (SR)			Target emotional well-being (OR)			Target relationship satisfaction (SR)			Target relationship satisfaction (OR)			Target motivation to change (SR)		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
Intercept	**2.618**	**0.033**	**<.001**	**3.443**	**0.039**	**<.001**	**5.921**	**0.063**	**<.001**	**3.237**	**0.046**	**<.001**	**5.938**	**0.056**	**<.001**
X	**0.132**	**0.049**	**.007**	**0.099**	**0.047**	**.035**	**0.300**	**0.091**	**.001**	**0.146**	**0.043**	**.001**	0.160	0.085	.061
Y	**0.163**	**0.045**	**<.001**	0.054	0.044	.222	**0.774**	**0.085**	**<.001**	**0.105**	**0.040**	**.009**	**0.536**	**0.079**	**<.001**
X^2	**0.129**	**0.048**	**.007**	0.063	0.045	.163	**0.245**	**0.089**	**.006**	0.019	0.040	.629	0.041	0.083	.623
XY	**−0.095**	**0.047**	**.042**	−0.076	0.046	.102	−0.083	0.088	.349	−0.037	0.042	.379	0.069	0.081	.395
Y^2	0.041	0.024	.086	0.027	0.023	.227	**0.122**	**0.044**	**.006**	**0.040**	**0.020**	**.045**	0.060	0.041	.141
$\hat{\alpha}_1$	**0.295**	**0.061**	**<.001**	**0.153**	**0.066**	**.022**	**1.073**	**0.115**	**<.001**	**0.251**	**0.064**	**.000**	**0.696**	**0.103**	**<.001**
$\hat{\alpha}_2$	0.075	0.055	.172	0.014	0.054	.791	**0.284**	**0.103**	**.006**	0.023	0.049	.646	0.170	0.094	.071
$\hat{\alpha}_3$	−0.031	0.072	.664	0.046	0.062	.460	**−0.474**	**0.133**	**<.001**	0.042	0.052	.424	**−0.376**	**0.127**	**.003**
$\hat{\alpha}_4$	**0.266**	**0.086**	**.002**	**0.166**	**0.083**	**.046**	**0.449**	**0.161**	**.005**	0.096	0.074	.195	0.033	0.148	.825
$\hat{\alpha}_5$	0.088	0.052	.087	0.036	0.048	.456	0.123	0.097	.202	−0.021	0.041	.607	−0.020	0.091	.829

Note. Values represent the unstandardized multilevel coefficients and associated standard errors and *p*-values. The multilevel polynomial coefficients include the intercept, X, Y, X^2, XY, and Y^2. The response surface coefficients include $\hat{\alpha}_1$, $\hat{\alpha}_2$, $\hat{\alpha}_3$, $\hat{\alpha}_4$, and $\hat{\alpha}_5$. Significant effects are bolded. X = agents' self-reported honesty. Y = targets' perception of agents' honesty. Accurate perceptions of honesty are captured by the $\hat{\alpha}_1$ to $\hat{\alpha}_5$ coefficients. SR = self-report; OR = observer rating.

Table 2. *Concurrent Effects of Agent Observer-Rated and Target-Perceived Honesty on Outcomes*

Predictor	Agent emotional well-being (SR)			Agent emotional well-being (OR)			Agent relationship satisfaction (SR)			Agent relationship satisfaction (OR)			Couple conflict (OR)		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
Intercept	**3.674**	**0.039**	**<.001**	**3.722**	**0.030**	**<.001**	**6.015**	**0.058**	**<.001**	**3.212**	**0.044**	**<.001**	**1.462**	**0.038**	**<.001**
X	0.029	0.056	.602	0.041	0.035	.245	0.132	0.081	.102	0.087	0.049	.078	0.049	0.043	.254
Y	**0.176**	**0.063**	**.006**	0.065	0.039	.097	**0.334**	**0.098**	**.001**	0.090	0.055	.101	0.010	0.043	.823
X^2	0.016	0.031	.593	−0.004	0.019	.834	0.061	0.044	.168	−0.014	0.027	.593	0.011	0.028	.703
XY	−0.006	0.058	.919	−0.004	0.036	.904	−0.112	0.085	.188	0.011	0.050	.830	−0.006	0.043	.890
Y^2	**0.068**	**0.030**	**.023**	0.009	0.018	.641	0.046	0.059	.432	0.026	0.026	.309	0.009	0.020	.652
$\hat{\alpha}_1$	**0.206**	**0.083**	**.014**	**0.106**	**0.053**	**.044**	**0.466**	**0.126**	**<.001**	**0.176**	**0.074**	**.017**	0.059	0.062	.344
$\hat{\alpha}_2$	0.078	0.055	.153	0.000	0.035	.995	−0.004	0.083	.958	0.022	0.050	.652	0.014	0.055	.800
$\hat{\alpha}_3$	−0.147	0.086	.089	−0.024	0.052	.641	−0.202	0.128	.114	−0.003	0.073	.965	0.039	0.060	.514
$\hat{\alpha}_4$	0.090	0.086	.293	0.009	0.052	.866	0.219	0.138	.112	0.001	0.073	.990	0.026	0.058	.652
$\hat{\alpha}_5$	−0.051	0.043	.233	−0.013	0.026	.634	0.014	0.071	.840	−0.040	0.037	.273	0.002	0.034	.963

Predictor	Target emotional well-being (SR)			Target emotional well-being (OR)			Target relationship satisfaction (SR)			Target relationship satisfaction (OR)			Target motivation to change (SR)		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
Intercept	**2.669**	**0.027**	**<.001**	**3.471**	**0.035**	**<.001**	**6.050**	**0.053**	**<.001**	**3.258**	**0.045**	**<.001**	**5.962**	**0.046**	**<.001**
X	0.040	0.040	.315	**0.093**	**0.041**	**.024**	0.029	0.074	.696	**0.080**	**0.036**	**.030**	0.094	0.068	.166
Y	**0.147**	**0.045**	**.001**	0.021	0.042	.612	**0.770**	**0.083**	**<.001**	0.054	0.037	.148	**0.565**	**0.076**	**.000**
X^2	0.035	0.021	.108	0.026	0.027	.337	0.025	0.040	.530	0.022	0.024	.345	0.040	0.037	.276
XY	0.010	0.041	.799	0.011	0.042	.793	0.018	0.076	.810	0.029	0.037	.433	0.035	0.070	.614
Y^2	0.015	0.021	.487	0.006	0.020	.778	**0.098**	**0.039**	**.013**	0.018	0.017	.299	**0.071**	**0.036**	**.048**
$\hat{\alpha}_1$	**0.187**	**0.058**	**.001**	0.114	0.059	.054	**0.799**	**0.110**	**<.001**	**0.133**	**0.053**	**.012**	**0.660**	**0.100**	**<.001**
$\hat{\alpha}_2$	0.060	0.038	.122	0.042	0.053	.421	**0.141**	**0.072**	**.050**	0.069	0.047	.140	**0.147**	**0.066**	**.026**
$\hat{\alpha}_3$	−0.107	0.061	.079	0.072	0.058	.213	**−0.741**	**0.113**	**<.001**	0.026	0.051	.608	**−0.471**	**0.104**	**<.001**
$\hat{\alpha}_4$	0.039	0.060	.518	0.021	0.055	.709	0.105	0.112	.352	0.011	0.049	.813	0.076	0.103	.460
$\hat{\alpha}_5$	0.020	0.030	.508	0.020	0.032	.526	−0.072	0.056	.201	0.004	0.028	.877	−0.031	0.052	.554

Note. Values represent unstandardized multilevel coefficients and associated standard errors and *p*-values. The multilevel polynomial coefficients include the intercept, X, Y, X^2, XY, and Y^2. The response surface coefficients include the $\hat{\alpha}_1$, $\hat{\alpha}_2$, $\hat{\alpha}_3$, $\hat{\alpha}_4$, and $\hat{\alpha}_5$. Significant effects are bolded. X = agents' self-reported honesty, Y = targets' perception of agents' honesty. Accurate perceptions of honesty are captured by the $\hat{\alpha}_1$ to $\hat{\alpha}_5$ coefficients. SR = self-report; OR = observer rating.

There are a number of limitations of the current study. While the lab design allowed for behavioral observation of honesty, observing couples in the lab may have limited ecological validity. Couples may have held back from engaging in less socially desirable communication styles (i.e., suppressed more aggressive and confrontational styles, focused on constructive rather than hurtful expressions of honesty). Furthermore, the couples who volunteered for the study may be more open to feedback or change knowing that they would be reporting on these issues in the study. Observing couples in more naturalistic settings, such as in therapy, may provide opportunities to address these limitations. Furthermore, it will be important to examine the effects of honesty in other relationship-threatening contexts to ascertain the generalizability of the current findings (i.e., during relationship disagreements).

While it will be important to address these limitations in future work, the current multimethod approach provides some new insights. Using a novel paradigm to compare couples' private thoughts to what they actually shared with their partners in the lab, we found convergence between self- and observer-reported honesty. These results suggest that self-reports of honesty have some validity, buttressing existing research (Fleeson et al., 2022). At the same time, we also observed distinct predictive validity, indicating that self- and observer-reports can provide unique insights into the effects of honesty.

The current findings help us disentangle when honesty uniquely benefits those who express and perceive it during challenging discussions. When agents were honest, both agents and targets benefited. However, targets' mere perception of honesty, irrespective of whether agents were actually honest, predicted benefits only for target themselves (after accounting for targets' baseline satisfaction). These results suggest that it is important for actual honesty, rather than the mere perception of honesty, to arise for *both* individuals to benefit during challenging discussions.

It is important to note that it was particularly important that agents *subjectively felt* honest for them to experience enhanced personal well-being. The importance of felt, rather than observer-rated, honesty in predicting intrapersonal outcomes may be true particularly in close relationships, where being honest is considered a subjective impression (i.e., feelings about a partner) rather than a factual one (i.e., a scientific fact). Thus, observers may have limited knowledge of agents' honesty in these contexts. Indeed, correspondence between self- and observer assessments tends to be lower for less observable, but highly evaluative traits, which may be true of honesty (Vazire & Carlson, 2011). For targets, positive outcomes were identified across both self- and observer-reported agent honesty. These results suggest that couples may be able to "handle the truth" immediately after hearing hurtful information, rather than in the longer-term as we originally expected.

Thus, honesty may benefit couples while not increasing short-term harm as we often believe it will (Levine & Cohen, 2018; Levine et al., 2020).

The current findings also revealed that target-perceived honesty, irrespective of agents' actual honesty, motivated targets to change and boosted their well-being. Importantly, these outcomes were all intrapersonal and largely concurrent (after accounting for targets' baseline satisfaction), suggesting that perceived honesty confers only short-term, one-sided benefits to individuals with this positive illusion. It will be important to identify what drives the benefits of mere perceptions of honesty that are untethered from a partner's actual honesty. It may be that individuals who perceive their partners as honest are inclined to give their partners the benefit of a doubt, are motivated to see their partners as moral, or are generally trusting, resulting in personal benefits for targets.

Of importance, a shared perception of honesty need not emerge for couple members to benefit. It may be that honesty is challenging to ascertain in others, as we know to be true with lies (Brennen & Magnussen, 2023), thereby making it challenging to reap the benefits of accurately perceiving honesty. While we did not see benefits of accuracy emerge, it is important to note that we did identify honesty as a *dyadic phenomenon*: when agents were honest about desired change, this shaped both their own and their partners' outcomes. While it has been theorized that key aspects of honesty include sharing the truth and fostering a truthful understanding in a target, the current results suggest that at least in the context of requesting change, a truthful message alone predicts benefits for both relationship partners. Thus, while sharing truthful information can be challenging, the current findings suggest that in our close relationships, being honest about our desires, even if it might hurt, can benefit the self and others.

ORCID iD

Bonnie M. Le https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1857-6716

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material for this article is available online at https://osf.io/dyzb4/?view_only = de65e844cc0f4f548bfcdd989dd a0aa1.

Note

1. We focused on the lab, rather than diary, because it allowed for the most rigorous tests of accuracy through observational coding of honesty. In the lab, we were also able to ensure that participants discussed and reported on the same change topic, as opposed to in the diary when they may have reported on different events in the same day.

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Author Biographies

Bonnie M. Le is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Rochester. Her research focuses on how emotions, motivations, and character strengths shape well-being in close relationships.

Princeton X. Chee is a Ph.D. candidate in Social-Personality Psychology at the University of Rochester. His research encompasses topics such as awe, pride, prosociality, and well-being in parent-child relationships.

Claire J. Shimshock is a Ph.D. candidate in Social-Personality Psychology at the University of Rochester. In her research, she investigates how positive emotions and motivational factors shape romantic couples' interactions and overall well-being.

Jenny D. V. Le is a Ph.D. candidate in Social-Personality Psychology at the University of Rochester. In her research, she explores how people can support the emotional well-being of their close partners and foster satisfying relationships.