When Accuracy Hurts: Reactions of Anxious-Ambivalent Dating Partners to a Relationship-Threatening Situation

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Why are anxious-ambivalent individuals especially likely to have turbulent and unstable relationships?

To help answer this question, the authors use 3 theoretical perspectives to examine how heightened empathic accuracy in a relationship-threatening situation is associated with personal and relational distress. Dating couples inferred their partners’ thoughts and feelings from a videotaped interaction in which they each rated slides of opposite-sex individuals. Highly anxious-ambivalent individuals were more empathically accurate in this relationship-threatening situation; however, their self-reported thoughts and feelings indicated greater distress and less confidence in their partners and relationships. The more anxious-ambivalent women reported a slight decrease in the perceived closeness of their relationships. Four months later, more anxious-ambivalent men’s relationships were more likely to have ended. These findings are discussed in terms of their theoretical and applied implications.

Why are people who are anxious and uncertain about their partner’s love and commitment especially likely to have turbulent and unstable relationships? Recent studies have shown that anxious-ambivalent individuals are more likely than their less anxious counterparts to have relationships characterized by intense conflict (Pistole, 1989; Simpson, Rhoades, & Phillips, 1996), pronounced emotional ups and downs (Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996), and greater vulnerability to dissolution (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). These and conceptually similar findings have been documented by researchers working from different theoretical perspectives, including that of attachment theory (see Hazan & Shaver, 1994, and Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996, for reviews), the appraisal model of relational trust (Holmes, 1991; Holmes & Rempel, 1989), and dispositional theories of emotional instability (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Kelly & Conley, 1987).

Relatively little is known about the specific social-psychological processes that produce and sustain these negative outcomes. There is a growing consensus, however, that these outcomes may be derived from the way that highly anxious-ambivalent people perceive and respond to relationship-threatening situations (cf. Ickes & Simpson, 1997). The purpose of the present study was to explore how one specific psychological process—greater empathic accuracy about the thoughts and feelings harbored by one’s romantic partner in a relationship-threatening situation—is associated with both personal and relational distress. As an important exception to the general rule that “To understand all is to forgive all,” we propose that by understanding the private thoughts and feelings of their partners too well in relationship-threatening situations, highly anxious-ambivalent individuals illustrate the contrasting case in which “To understand all is to forgive nothing.”

Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) Empathic Accuracy Perspective

The notion that greater empathic accuracy can, in some circumstances, actually harm relationships led Ickes and Simpson (1997) to propose a model of how empathic accuracy is “managed” in relationship-threatening versus nonthreatening contexts. The model contends that, contrary to conventional wisdom, greater understanding of a relationship partner’s thoughts and feelings is not always a good thing. Although greater empathic accuracy tends to be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and stability in situations that pose little or no threat to relationships (e.g., Kahn, 1970; Noller, 1980; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991), it tends to be negatively correlated with satisfaction and stability in relationship-threatening situations (e.g., Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; for a review, see Ickes & Simpson, 1997, pp. 223–224).

Ickes and Simpson (1997) propose that there are “danger zones” in most close relationships, areas in which painful insights or
revelations about a partner’s private thoughts and feelings might occur (e.g., positive feelings about old flames or provocative thoughts about attractive people). Accordingly, partners in close relationships often learn to identify and steer away from such danger-zone topics to avoid damaging their own self-esteem, their esteem for their partner, or the relationship itself. Occasionally, however, partners find themselves in situations in which their first line of defense—avoiding or evading danger-zone issues—is not an option.

In these relationship-threatening situations, the empathic accuracy model predicts that each partner’s second line of defense should be motivated inaccuracy, a conscious or unconscious failure to accurately infer the specific content of their partner’s potentially harmful thoughts and feelings. When partners display motivated inaccuracy (effectively turning a blind eye to what the other is thinking and feeling), relational satisfaction and stability should be—and apparently are—maintained even in highly threatening situations (see Simpson et al., 1995). However, if partners accurately infer each other’s thoughts and feelings in these relationship-threatening situations, they may wind up wiser but sadder, learning just how threatening their partner’s thoughts and feelings really are but paying a high price in terms of greater distress, relational instability, and dissatisfaction.1

How should highly anxious-ambivalent individuals react in relationship-threatening situations? Should they display little empathic accuracy and experience little personal and relational distress, or should they display increased empathic accuracy followed by greater personal and relational distress?Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) empathic accuracy model does not specifically address these questions. However, converging predictions can be derived from both attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994) and Holmes and Rempel’s (1989) appraisal model of trust in relationships (see also Holmes, 1991).

The Attachment Theory Perspective

Because they have received inconsistent or unpredictable care and support from past attachment figures (see Cassidy & Berlin, 1994, for a review), highly anxious-ambivalent (or preoccupied) individuals “have no confidence that [attachment figures] will ever be truly available and dependable. Through their eyes the world is seen as comfortless and unpredictable” (Bowlby, 1973, p. 208). Consequently, such persons develop negative working models about themselves as relationship partners, viewing themselves as unworthy of love and affection. However, because they have not experienced consistently strong rejection from attachment figures, highly anxious-ambivalent people harbor positive (hopeful) yet guarded and apprehensive working models about whether significant others are likely to be available and emotionally supportive (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although many factors can activate the attachment system in highly anxious-ambivalent persons, the strongest activators tend to be situations “that shake a person’s confidence that his attachment figures will be available to him when desired” (Bowlby, 1973, p. 213).

According to Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Cassidy and Berlin (1994, p. 972), highly anxious-ambivalent individuals are likely to do three things in response to chronic uncertainty about the availability of their attachment figures. First, they should display heightened, easily activated attachment behavior (e.g., showing signs of greater distress), particularly in situations that raise the possibility of losing their attachment figure. Second, they should closely monitor their attachment figure in these situations, especially if the knowledge gained could be used to keep the attachment figure closer and more psychologically available in the future. Third, as a result of their heightened distress and closer monitoring, anxious-ambivalent individuals should find it more difficult to engage in and pursue other major life tasks.

Empirical research supports these claims. Highly anxious-ambivalent adults display greater relationship-centered distress and anxiety (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kobak & Scere, 1988), especially in situations that portend eventual relationship loss or abandonment (the prospect of death: Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990; the fear of harm because of possible missile attacks: Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993; trying to resolve a major relationship-based problem with a dating partner: Simpson et al., 1996). In addition, highly anxious-ambivalent adults typically “direct attention toward distress and attachment figures in a hypervigilant manner” (Kobak & Scere, 1988, p. 142), and they are “hypervigilant to sources of distress” (Mikulincer et al., 1993, p. 824). According to attachment theory and research, therefore, individuals who are more anxious-ambivalent should display greater empathic accuracy (i.e., greater attention and sensitivity to their partner’s potentially threatening thoughts and feelings) as well as greater personal and relational distress, particularly in situations that threaten the stability and permanence of their relationships (see also Main, 1990).

Consider a scenario in which dating partners evaluate the attractiveness of opposite-sex persons in each other’s presence. This type of relationship-threatening situation (or situations similar to it) are likely to be encountered, at least occasionally, during the early stages of relationship development in most cultures. When confronted with this type of situation, highly anxious-ambivalent individuals are likely to (a) display heightened empathic accuracy (i.e., they should infer the content of their dating partners’ thoughts and feelings more accurately than less anxious-ambivalent individuals do), (b) feel more threatened, and (c) report more distressed thoughts and feelings. Because their partners are likely to be harboring thoughts or feelings that could threaten the relationship (e.g., thoughts or feelings about the physical attractiveness or sexual appeal of other people as potential dating partners), individuals who are more anxious-ambivalent should also (d) report at

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1 Theory and past research indicate that greater attention to one’s partner should be and is associated with greater empathic accuracy. Colvin, Vogt, and Ickes (1997) compared five theoretical perspectives on accuracy in interpersonal judgment. They found that all five perspectives (see Funder, 1995; Kariol, 1990; Kenny, 1994; Smith, 1977; Stinson & Ickes, 1992) are based on the assumption that accuracy depends in part on perceivers’ attention to and awareness of the actual behaviors displayed by target persons. In line with this assumption, Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, and Garcia (1990) found that empathic accuracy in mixed-sex dyads is significantly correlated with the degree to which perceivers look at their partners (behavioral attentiveness) and the percentage of partner-relevant thoughts and feelings they report (cognitive attentiveness). Similarly, Gesn (1997) has found that perceivers’ ratings of their attention to and interest in an empathic accuracy task are significantly correlated with their level of performance on the task.
least temporary declines in the perceived closeness of their relationships following such relationship-threatening interactions (see Simpson et al., 1996, for indirect support for this prediction).

Finally, if highly anxious-ambivalent individuals respond to relationship-threatening situations by reading their partner’s potentially threatening thoughts and feelings more accurately, their relationships might be more susceptible to dissolution. This prediction is predicated on the notion that highly anxious-ambivalent individuals are particularly attentive to negative information about the status of their relationships (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), and negative information has a much stronger impact on relationship dissolution processes than does positive information (see Gottman, 1994). Relationship dissolution, of course, should not be precipitated by a single, relationship-threatening interaction. Rather, it should be a cumulative, dispositionally driven outcome of the many relationship-threatening situations that highly anxious-ambivalent individuals encounter and respond to in the emotionally reactive and destabilizing manner we have described.

The Appraisal Model of Trust: Parallels With Attachment Theory

Trust is one component of attachment security (Bowlby, 1982, p. 340). Research has shown that the degree to which individuals trust their relationship partners is systematically related to different adult attachment styles. In general, more securely attached individuals are more likely to trust their partners than are highly anxious-ambivalent individuals, who in turn are more trusting than highly avoidant individuals (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In other words, securely attached people tend to be “high trusting” individuals, anxious-ambivalent people tend to be more uncertain in their level of trust, and avoidant people tend to be “low trusting.” Given these parallel associations, it is worth noting that Holmes and Rempel’s (1989) appraisal model of relational trust (see also Holmes, 1991) makes predictions that are generally consistent with those of attachment theory. Jones, Couch, and Scott (1997) have summarized the appraisal model’s general predictions as follows:

High trusting individuals do not judge single events as having much weight in determining the outcome or quality of a relationship. Positive events are viewed as confirming the trust that has been given, and single negative events are not seen as a threat to the relationship. . . . Individuals uncertain about trusting . . . are motivated to reduce uncertainty. These individuals actively assess their partner’s motives. . . . Positive behaviors are readily viewed as relevant to greater matters of loving or caring. Negative behaviors are also perceived as very important, relating to the overall appraisal of the relationship. Risk is greatest at this level of trust because a single negative event has heightened implications for the continuation of the relationship. . . . Low-trust partners are likely to approach their relationship with a relatively closed mind, which is very similar to the strategy of high-trust [partners]. . . . They are suspicious of positive behaviors and proceed cautiously. On the other hand, negative behaviors are likely to reinforce the lack of trust that previously existed. (p. 474)

According to the trust appraisal model, individuals who are uncertain about trusting others (i.e., those with an anxious-ambivalent attachment orientation) should react to relationship-threatening situations by (a) actively trying to assess their partner’s motives, and (b) drawing strong conclusions about the overall status of their relationship from a single negative event. If highly anxious-ambivalent individuals focus on the negative implications of relationship-threatening situations, the consequences of accurately inferring their partner’s thoughts and feelings should be more deleterious to their relationships than to those of less anxious-ambivalent individuals. Hence, attachment theory and the appraisal model of trust converge in predicting that individuals who are more anxious-ambivalent should be more attentive and emotionally reactive to their partner’s behavior in relationship-threatening situations. These responses should occur regardless of whether the partner’s behavior takes the form of overt actions or covert thoughts and feelings (Ickes & Simpson, 1997).

In summary, our major predictions—derived from both attachment theory and the appraisal model of trust—center on how highly anxious-ambivalent individuals are likely to think, feel, and behave in a relationship-threatening context. We focus on anxious-ambivalent individuals (rather than on secure or avoidant individuals) because the hypervigilance and preoccupation that is prototypic of highly anxious-ambivalent people should be most strongly evoked by relationship-threatening situations that raise the prospect of relationship loss or abandonment (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Because highly anxious-ambivalent individuals should perceive relationship threat in situations that most people would find nonthreatening (Bowlby, 1973), effects for anxious-ambivalence should emerge across both levels of situational threat (higher vs. lower) manipulated in our experimental paradigm. Thus, no significant interactions between anxious-ambivalent attachment and level of situational threat were anticipated.

Predictions

We predicted that highly anxious-ambivalent individuals should
1. display greater empathic accuracy than less anxious-ambivalent individuals in a relationship-threatening situation (H1),
2. feel more threatened and report more distressed thoughts and feelings in such a situation (H2),
3. report a temporary decline in the perceived closeness of their relationship following the relationship-threatening interaction (H3), and
4. have relationships that are more likely to terminate within 4 months (H4).

Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) model posits that low empathic accuracy can serve as a buffer against negative relationship outcomes when relationships are threatened. If highly anxious-ambivalent individuals accentuate the negative implications of a single, isolated relationship-threatening event, whereas less anxious-ambivalent individuals overlook or downplay these events (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), the consequences of accurately inferring their partner’s thoughts and feelings should be more negative for highly anxious-ambivalent individuals. This reasoning suggests a fifth prediction:

5. Individuals who are highly anxious-ambivalent about their relationship and who display heightened empathic accuracy in a relationship-threatening situation should be particularly susceptible to decreases in perceived closeness (in the short-term) and to relationship dissolution (in the long-term). In other words, the association between empathic accuracy and either changes in closeness or relationship dissolution should be moderated by in-
Overview of the Present Study

The present study is based on extensive new analyses of self-report and coder-rated measures that either were not available or were not analyzed in a study previously reported by Simpson et al. (1995). In the Simpson et al. study, 82 heterosexual dating couples rated the physical and sexual attractiveness of alternative dating partners who were ostensibly participants in a local “dating pool.” Each couple was randomly assigned to view and rate a set of either highly attractive or less attractive alternative partners. The rating task was designed to create a relationship-threatening situation for all of the couples in the study, but the degree of threat was expected to be somewhat greater for couples who rated highly attractive alternative partners. Slides depicting opposite-sex target persons were rated aloud (on 10-point scales measuring physical attractiveness and sexual appeal) by the appropriate (male or female) dating partner. Following the verbal ratings for each slide, both partners discussed what they liked or disliked about each target person. Each couple’s interaction during this rating-and-discussion task was unobtrusively videotaped.

Both partners then viewed a copy of the videotape in separate rooms, indicating the times during the interaction when they had specific thoughts or feelings and writing down the content in sentence form. Following this thought and feeling assessment, each partner was then asked to infer (as accurately as possible) what the other partner was thinking or feeling at each point during the interaction when the other partner reported having a specific thought or feeling. The partners’ levels of empathic accuracy were then calculated using procedures developed by Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, and Garcia (1990). Four months later, the couples were contacted by telephone to determine whether they were still dating.

In a previous article, Simpson et al. (1995) reported that empathic accuracy was most impaired in couples who (a) had closer relationships but (b) questioned the long-term stability of their relationships and (c) evaluated highly attractive opposite-sex persons as potential dating partners. The current study differs from the 1995 investigation in four significant ways. First, the 1995 study tested an entirely different set of predictions about the personal and situational factors that were associated with reduced empathic accuracy (i.e., motivated inaccuracy) in a relationship-threatening situation. In contrast, the present study sought to determine whether highly anxious-ambivalent individuals counter this general trend and display increased empathic accuracy in the same relationship-threatening situation. Second, in the present study, we test five new predictions derived from attachment theory, the appraisal model of trust, and Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) model of empathic accuracy. None of these predictions was proposed or tested in the 1995 study. Third, guided by these new predictions derived from attachment theory, the appraisal model, and Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) model of empathic accuracy, we coded several new behavioral measures from the videotapes and incorporated them into the original data set for the present analyses. We also constructed new content measures of each participant’s thoughts and feelings during the experimental task. Fourth, in contrast to the 1995 study, the data analyses in the current investigation treat the individual rather than the couple as the primary unit of analysis. To our knowledge, the present study is the first to link attachment theory to empathic accuracy and the attachment-relevant behaviors that individuals display when their relationships are threatened by alternative partners.

Method

Participants

Eighty-two heterosexual dating couples (82 women and 82 men) participated in a study of “attraction and relationships.” At least one member of each couple was enrolled in an introductory psychology class at Texas A&M University. The mean age of the men and women was 19.4 years and 18.5 years, respectively. The mean length of the relationships was 16.5 months.

Procedure

Phase 1. The male and female members of each couple first completed a large battery of self-report questionnaires in separate rooms. The participants were assured that their partner would not be allowed to see any of their answers, and they were instructed to answer all questions as accurately and honestly as possible. Partners first indicated how long they had dated each other and whether they were dating each other exclusively. They then completed the Collins and Read (1990) adult attachment scale, and Aron, Aron, and Smollan’s (1997) single-item measure of perceived closeness (the Inclusion of Other in the Self [IOS] Scale). For evidence concerning the reliability and validity of the Collins’ and Read scale, see Collins and Read (1990) and Griffin and Bartholomew (1994a, 1994b); for evidence about the reliability and validity of the IOS Scale, see Aron et al. (1992). The perceived closeness measure was administered both immediately prior to and following the laboratory task to assess pre- to posttask changes in each partner’s perception of the closeness of their relationship.

For purposes described elsewhere (Simpson et al., 1995), the participants also completed five measures that assessed the perceived quality of their relationship: the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), the love scale (Rubin, 1970), the satisfaction index (Simpson, 1987), the commitment scale (Rusbult, 1980), and the investment scale (Rusbult, 1980). Principal-axis factor analyses, conducted separately on men and women, revealed that all five measures loaded highly on a single factor for both sexes. Thus, we transformed each measure into a common metric (using z scores) and aggregated the five measures to form a single composite index of global relationship quality. Participants also completed the Trust Scale (Rempel, Hoimes, & Zanna, 1985) and an item that assessed which partner—the man or the woman—was the more dependent partner in each relationship. Specifically, this item asked “Who is more dependent on the relationship?” Participants answered this item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (I am more . . .) to 7 (My partner is more . . .).

The Collins and Read (1990) adult attachment scale is composed of 18 items answered on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me). Most of the items come from sentences contained in Haran and Shaver’s (1987) three attachment vignettes. The Collins and Read scale was originally designed to assess three attachment themes: comfort with closeness, dependency, and anxiety. Recent psychometric work by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994a, 1994b), however, has revealed that two stable factors underlie the three categories. These factors correspond very closely with Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) view of self versus view of others dimensions. A principal-axis factor analysis followed by
varimax rotation confirmed that these two dimensions underlie the Collins and Read scale. 2

The first dimension (on which the closeness and dependency subscales load highly) has been labeled avoidance (see Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). It measures the extent to which individuals have positive versus negative views of significant others. People with higher scores on this dimension are comfortable with closeness and are willing to depend on others. These individuals tend to classify themselves as securely attached on the original Hazan and Shaver (1987) measure. In contrast, people with lower scores on this first dimension withdraw from closeness and eschew dependency in relationships. These individuals typically classify themselves as avoidantly attached on the Hazan and Shaver measure. Similar to previous research (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b), the internal consistency of the items that form this dimension was good for both the men (α = .73) and the women (α = .79) in the present sample.

The second dimension (on which the anxiety subscale loads highly) has been labeled anxiety (see Brennan et al., 1998). It reflects the extent to which people have positive versus negative views of themselves in close relationships. People who score higher on this dimension have conflicted and ambivalent thoughts and feelings about their value as relationship partners, and they are uncertain about whether others can be counted on in times of need. People who score lower on this dimension have high and sometimes inflated views of their self-worth (see Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b, for more information on this two-dimensional factor structure). Previous research with large samples indicates that this dimension is internally consistent (typical alphas range from .70 to .75: see Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b). In our smaller sample, the internal consistency of the second dimension was slightly lower (α = .60 for each sex). The anxiety and avoidance dimensions served as our measures of attachment orientation.

Phase 2. Once both partners had completed the questionnaires, they were reunited and led to an experimental room containing a table, a slide projector, two chairs, and a viewing screen. They sat side by side in the chairs, which were situated about 18 in. (45.72 cm) apart and faced a front-projected viewing screen. The experimenter then read the following instructions:

The next phase of this study involves rating photographs of individuals who have agreed to take part in a dating study. We already have several personality measures from our volunteers, but we need ratings of their physical attractiveness and sexual appeal. We are asking dating couples to make these ratings because you, in effect, are experts on dating. Due to the delicate nature of arranging dates, we want to be as confident of our matches as possible. Later this semester, we may ask you to conduct interviews with our dating study volunteers. In the event you are asked, we would arrange for you to privately interview one of your two most highly rated individuals.

The experimenter emphasized that it was crucial for both partners to provide honest, accurate ratings of each stimulus person. The couple then viewed 12 slides depicting 6 male and 6 female undergraduates. Couples randomly assigned to the higher threat condition saw 12 individuals who were highly attractive. In reality, these individuals were college-age professional models. Couples randomly assigned to the milder threat condition saw 12 individuals who were somewhat less attractive. The pictures of these individuals were taken from a college yearbook at a different university. 3

Within each condition, the order of viewing (male partners rating slides of women first vs. female partners rating slides of men first) was counterbalanced. Because the order in which the ratings were made did not affect the results, the rating order variable will not be discussed further.

Both partners rated all opposite-sex persons on their physical attractiveness and sexual appeal. When the slide depicting each stimulus person appeared on the screen, the experimenter asked the opposite-sex dating partner, “How physically attractive do you find this person to be as a potential dating partner?” and “How sexually appealing do you find this person to be as a potential dating partner?” Both questions were answered on 10-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). After each partner stated his or her ratings out loud, both partners were given an opportunity to discuss what they liked or disliked about each person for approximately 30 s. Their interaction was covertly videotaped by a concealed camera mounted in the corner of the room. Following the study, we aggregated the 12 ratings (6 physical attractiveness ratings plus 6 sexual appeal ratings) made by each dating partner to create a global index of the stimulus persons’ rated physical attractiveness and sexual appeal. This global attractiveness index was highly reliable, with Cronbach’s alphas of .96 and .95 for the male and female dating partners, respectively.

When the rating task was finished, the participants completed a three-item manipulation check measure that assessed how threatened they felt during the rating task. Specifically, using 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely), participants indicated the degree to which they felt threatened, jealous, and upset while their partners did the rating task. Responses were aggregated into a composite manipulation check measure of perceived threat. Cronbach’s α = .90. The correlation between partners on this measure (i.e., the within-dyad correlation) was .25, p < .05. Each partner then completed the Aron et al. (1992) perceived closeness measure a second time to assess changes in perceptions of closeness to his or her dating partner. The correlation between the partners’ Time 2 closeness scores after their Time 1 closeness scores were partialed out was −.11, ns.

All couples then were informed that they had been videotaped during the rating task. The experimenter explained that they were not told about the videotaping before the study because such knowledge might have led them to interact in an unnatural or an atypical manner. Following this explanation, both partners were asked to individually sign written consent forms (in each other’s presence) for their videotapes to be released for research purposes. It was made clear that if either partner did not want the tape used for any reason, it would be erased immediately. No couple decided to have their tape erased. Participants were then informed that the individuals they rated were not involved in a local dating pool, and that neither partner would meet the person they rated most highly. They also were reassured that their partners would not be allowed to see any of their answers to either the questionnaires or the thought and feeling assessments they would be asked to complete in the next phase of the study (Phase 3). We gave participants this debriefing information so they could focus their attention on, and provide more accurate data for, the Phase 3 thought–feeling tasks.

Phase 3. In Phase 3, the participants were led to separate rooms that each contained a VCR and a color monitor. In their respective rooms they each viewed a separate copy of the videotape of the rating-and-discussion session they had just completed. Following procedures used in previous empathic accuracy studies (e.g., Stinson & Ickes, 1992), participants were instructed to provide an accurate, honest, and complete account of all the thoughts and feelings they had during the rating-and-discussion task. In addition, they were guaranteed that their partners would not see their actual

2 Factor analyses revealed that for men, one item from the anxiety subscale did not load highly on either dimension. Thus, we dropped this item prior to constructing the two attachment dimensions for men.

3 The slides of the stimulus persons were taken from open, public records (either magazine ads or yearbooks from a college located more than 1,000 miles away). Participants were told nothing about the stimulus persons except that they were involved in a local dating pool. During debriefing, of course, participants were informed that the stimulus persons were not in a dating pool. Although obtaining permission from the stimulus persons to use their pictures would have been preferable, it was impractical. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to track down the names and current addresses of individuals who attended a college several years ago, particularly a college located so far away.
thought and feeling entries. These procedures were designed to increase the likelihood that the thoughts and feelings reported were accurate and candid.

The participants independently viewed the tape of their rating-and-discussion session twice. During the first viewing, both partners were asked to watch the videotape and to stop it when they remembered having had a specific thought or feeling at that moment in the interaction. Following a procedure developed by Ickes et al. (1990), participants were instructed to (a) write down each thought or feeling on a standardized form, (b) indicate the number of minutes and seconds into the interaction when each thought or feeling occurred (using a timer displayed on the VCR); (c) specify whether each entry was a thought or a feeling, and (d) indicate whether each entry was positive, neutral, or negative in its emotional tone. The participants were reminded once again that their partners would not be shown any of their responses. The experimenter stayed in each room long enough to confirm that each partner followed the procedure correctly, at which point she left. The men recorded a mean of 12.7 thought and feeling entries (range = 5–30), and the women recorded a mean of 11.8 entries (range = 2–28).

After finishing the thought and feeling reporting task, both partners were given a second set of thought and feeling forms containing only the times during which their partner reported having had specific thoughts or feelings (without revealing what those thoughts and feelings were). During the second viewing of the videotape, both partners were instructed to (a) write down what they thought their partner had been thinking or feeling at each of the times specified, (b) indicate whether each inferred entry was a thought or a feeling, and (c) rate or judge its emotional tone.

After they had completed this thought and feeling inference task, both partners were thanked for their participation, after which they were fully and very carefully debriefed. The debriefing sessions lasted about 30 min, on average, and were specially designed to compensate for any personal or relational distress the dating partners may have experienced. The participants were reminded that the individuals they rated were not part of a dating pool, and that the study actually concerned their cognitive and behavioral reactions when they and their partner evaluated opposite-sex persons as potential dating partners. The reason for the unobtrusive videotaping was more fully explained, and it was reiterated that the videotapes would be viewed only by trained research assistants. No couple was allowed to leave the debriefing session until the experimenter was convinced that both partners felt good about participating in the study and understood why various procedures had been used.

Phase 4. Approximately 4 months later, we attempted to contact all participants by telephone. Both members of 79 dyads (96% of the original sample) were successfully reached. Participants answered a brief telephone survey concerning their current dating status. In particular, they were asked “When you participated in the study last fall, you were dating a person (blind to all variables) then rated the frequency with which participants (blind to all variables) then viewed the videotape of each couple’s interaction. They rated the degree to which (a) each female partner appeared to be distressed when her male partner was rating slides of men. Using 759

Guided by attachment theory, ratings of the thought and feeling content of each male partner appeared to be distressed when his female partner was rating slides of men. Using 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely), coders rated the behavior of the participants on seven dimensions: the extent to which each participant appeared (a) emotionally stressed, (b) uncomfortable, (c) annoyed, (d) threatened, (e) awkward, (f) upset, and (g) jealous when his or her partner was rating the stimulus persons. Interrater reliabilities for each item were good (individual item reliabilities ranged from .74 to .83). Principal-axis factor analyses conducted separately on men and women revealed that all seven items loaded on a single factor for both sexes. Thus, they were aggregated into a behavioral distress index (Cronbach’s α = .98 for each sex). The correlation between partners on this measure was .63, p < .001.

Partner checking measure. Another set of three independent coders (blind to all variables) then viewed the videotape of each couple’s interaction. They rated the degree to which (a) each female partner appeared to be distressed when her male partner was rating slides of men. Using 759

Thought and feeling measures. A different set of five coders (blind to all variables) then read the thoughts and feelings listed by each partner (but remained blind to his or her dating partner’s thoughts and feelings) when the dating partner had been rating the opposite-sex stimulus persons.
were made on eight dimensions: (a) evidence of distress or discomfort, (b) lack of self-confidence, (c) derogation of the stimulus persons, (d) perceptions of being “better than” the stimulus persons, (e) comparisons of the self to the stimulus persons, (f) focus on the partner and relationship, (g) the experience of threat or jealousy, and (h) the experience of distrust of the partner. Each dimension was rated on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely, a great deal).

Interrater reliabilities for each item were good (individual item reliabilities ranged from .71 to .89). Principal-axis factor analyses conducted separately on the thought and feeling content ratings of men and women revealed that Items a, b, e, g, and h loaded highly on one factor within each sex. These items were aggregated to create an index of distressing low self-confidence thoughts and feelings (Cronbach’s α = .87 for each sex). Higher scores on this index indicated greater distress and less self-confidence. The interpartner correlation for this measure was .31, p < .01. The three items that did not load on this factor were retained as single-item measures.

Finally, coders counted the number of times each partner failed to list an inference for a specific thought or feeling reported by their partner (i.e., when participants did not report a requested inference on the thought or feeling protocol or reported “I don’t know”). Because the experimenter confirmed that each participant fully understood and could do the inference task before he or she completed it, failed inferences should indicate that participants either (a) had no idea what their partner was thinking or feeling at that point in the interaction or (b) did not want to make an inference about what their partner was thinking or feeling. For each participant, the number of failed inferences was divided by the total number of thoughts and feelings reported by his or her partner, resulting in an index of the proportion of failed inferences. The interpartner correlation for this measure was .34, p < .01.

Results

We first calculated correlations for the two attachment dimensions to determine whether statistical dependency existed within the dyads. In line with previous research (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; Simpson et al., 1996), the avoidance and anxiety attachment dimensions were not correlated within either men (r = —.03, ns) or women (r = .00, ns). Moreover, the partners’ scores on both attachment dimensions were not correlated (average interpartner correlation = .31). Women’s scores were derived for individuals rather than for couples, the individual attachment dimensions were not correlated within either men (r = —.03, ns) or women (r = .00, ns). In addition, participants’ attachment scores never interacted significantly with their partners’ attachment scores in any of the analyses reported below. Following the recommendations of Kenny (1988) and Kenny and La Voie (1985), and given that our predictions were derived for individuals rather than for couples, the individual was treated as the unit of analysis. All variables were centered before the analyses were conducted (Aiken & West, 1991). All significant and all marginally significant effects that emerged for both sexes are reported below.

Correlations between the two attachment dimensions and the Trust Scale (Rempel et al., 1985) confirmed relations found in previous research (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995). Within each sex, higher scores on the anxiety attachment dimension (i.e., greater anxious-ambivalent attachment) were associated with less trust (r = —.26 for men and —.31 for women, both ps < .05), whereas lower scores on the avoidance dimension (i.e., greater security) were associated with more trust (r = .26 for men and .27 for women, both ps < .05).

When we conducted the tests of our predictions (reported below), we partialed the participants’ scores on the Trust Scale from their scores on both attachment dimensions. We performed these analyses to determine whether the attachment dimensions explained variance in the dependent measures above and beyond that accounted for by relational trust. If, as we suspect, the anxiety attachment dimension is primarily responsible for the hypothesized effects, these effects should generally remain significant even when participants’ scores on relational trust are statistically controlled. In additional analyses, we also partialed out scores on the global relationship quality index to discount the possibility that the quality of the partners’ dating relationships accounted for any attachment effects.

Manipulation Checks

The first set of analyses checked on the effectiveness of the threat manipulation. As expected, men from couples who evaluated attractive alternative dating partners reported more threat on the perceived threat index (M = 8.09) than did men from couples who evaluated less attractive alternatives (M = 5.43), t(80) = 2.28, p < .03. Similarly, women from couples who evaluated attractive alternative dating partners reported more threat (M = 7.31) than did women from couples who evaluated less attractive alternatives (M = 4.75), t(80) = 2.44, p < .02. As expected, across both conditions, highly anxious-ambivalent men experienced more perceived threat than did less anxious-ambivalent men, β = 28, t(80) = 2.63, p < .02, and anxious-ambivalence did not interact with the experimental condition to which men were assigned. Highly anxious-ambivalent women also tended to report more perceived threat across both experimental conditions, β = .20, t(80) = 1.82, p < .08. Anxious-ambivalence did not interact with the experimental condition for women.

We then examined participants’ aggregated ratings of the physical attractiveness and sexual appeal of the six stimulus persons whom they evaluated in the slide rating task. Male partners who viewed more attractive women rated them higher (M = 6.47) than did men who viewed less attractive women (M = 3.01), t(79) = 3.91, p < .0001. Similarly, female partners who evaluated more attractive men rated them higher (M = 6.28) than did women who evaluated less attractive men (M = 3.07), t(79) = 12.65, p < .0001. Thus, the threat manipulation was successful for both sexes.4

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4 Because lower empathic accuracy could result from distortions in the mean ratings of stimulus persons provided by certain people (such as highly anxious-ambivalent people, who might be motivated to rate attractive stimulus persons as less physically and sexually appealing), we conducted another series of analyses on the global attractiveness index. Specifically, we tested whether the attractiveness ratings made by people with different attachment dimension scores varied within either the higher threat or the milder threat experimental conditions. Treating men’s and women’s ratings on the global attractiveness index as the dependent variable, we conducted two regression analyses (one for each sex) in which experimental condition (coded 2 if participants were assigned to the higher threat condition and 1 if they were assigned to the milder threat condition) was entered in Step 1, both attachment dimensions were entered as a block in Step 2, and the two Threat × Attachment interactions were entered in Step 3. No significant main effects or interactions were found for either sex. Any differential empathic accuracy exhibited by people with different attachment orientations, therefore, does not stem from systematic distortions in the ratings of the stimulus persons.
Gender Differences in the Manipulation Check and Dependent Measures

Before testing our primary predictions, we conducted matched-pairs \( t \) tests to test for sex differences in both the manipulation check measures and the dependent measures. The results revealed that men and women differed significantly on four indexes: behavioral distress, distressing thoughts and feelings, empathic accuracy, and differential dependence.

On the behavioral distress index, women were rated as being more visibly distressed during the rating task than were their male partners, matched-pairs \( t(80) = -2.19, p < .04 \). However, on the distressing thoughts and feelings index, men reported thoughts and feelings that expressed greater distress and less self-confidence than did women, matched-pairs \( t(80) = 3.92, p < .001 \). Although men and women did not differ in their mean level of empathic accuracy, the men were significantly more accurate than the women in the higher threat condition, matched-pairs \( t(80) = 2.19, p < .04 \). Conversely, women were significantly more accurate than men in the milder threat condition, matched-pairs \( t(80) = -2.17, p < .04 \). On the differential dependence index, men indicated that they were the less dependent partner in their relationship; agreeing with them, women indicated that they were the more dependent partner, matched-pairs \( t(80) = 2.89, p < .005 \).

Tests of Predictions for the Anxiety Attachment Dimension

To test our major predictions, we conducted two types of hierarchical regression analyses on each dependent measure. In the first set of analyses, predictions were tested within each sex using standard regression procedures, and the variance associated with the individuals' grouping into particular dyads (dating couples) was not considered. In the second set of analyses, the same predictions were tested for all participants (men and women) combined, after first partialing out the effect of dyad membership.

This procedure requires specifying that the covariate—the arbitrarily assigned identification codes for the various dyads—be treated as a class (i.e., categorical) variable. The resulting dyad-adjusted regression analysis enabled us to determine if the effect of our predictor (e.g., anxious-ambivalent attachment) generalized across both the male and the female participants, after controlling for the fact that they were grouped into particular dyads. If the main effect of a predictor variable is significant, but the predictor by gender interaction is not, there is evidence for the cross-gender generality of an effect.

Unless otherwise noted, the first set of analyses (i.e., the within-sex regressions) had the same format. Specifically, the threat condition to which couples were randomly assigned (coded dichotomously) was entered in Step 1, the two attachment dimensions were entered as a block in Step 2, and the two Threat × Attachment interaction terms were entered in Step 3. The second set of analyses (i.e., the cross-sex, dyad-adjusted regressions) were identical to the first set except that (a) couple identification code (treated as a class variable) was partialled out prior to Step 1 and (b) all interaction terms involving gender also were tested. Because both the threat condition to which the couples were assigned and their dating status at the 4-month follow-up are between-dyad (as opposed to within-dyad) variables, we could not use the dyad-adjusted regression analyses to test for effects involving either of these variables. The reason is that the dyad-adjusted analyses partial out all of the variance at the between-dyad level before testing the remaining individual-difference-level effects.

Empathic accuracy. The first prediction (H1) was that individuals who are more anxious-ambivalent should display greater empathic accuracy than less anxious-ambivalent individuals during the relationship-threatening rating-and-discussion task. To test this prediction, we treated the empathic accuracy index as the dependent variable. Although no significant effects emerged for men, two main effects were found for women. Women in the higher threat condition were significantly less accurate (\( M = 7.78 \)) than women in the milder threat condition (\( M = 16.66 \)), \( \beta = -.41, t(76) = -3.92, p < .001 \). However, countering this trend, women who scored higher on the anxiety attachment dimension (i.e., more anxious-ambivalent women) displayed significantly greater empathic accuracy across both the milder threat and the higher threat conditions, \( \beta = .26, t(76) = 2.51, p < .02 \). In addition, when the dyad-adjusted regression analysis was conducted on the data for all participants (men and women) combined, a significant main effect emerged for the anxiety attachment dimension, \( F(1, 73) = 5.44, p < .03 \), which was not qualified by gender, \( F < 1, n.s. \).

To determine whether this effect might be attributable to confounding factors (see Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967), we conducted additional regression analyses in which the following three measures were partialled out prior to performing the standard hierarchical regressions: (a) coders’ ratings of the amount of stress and tension evident in the female partners’ thoughts and feelings, (b) coders’ ratings of the ease with which the male partners’ thoughts and feelings could be inferred from their behavior during the interaction, and (c) the female partners’ self-reported level of trust. When each of these variables were partialled out, highly anxious-ambivalent women still exhibited greater empathic accuracy than did less anxious-ambivalent women, all \( \beta_5 > .18 \), all \( ts > 1.81 \), all \( ps < .08 \).

In summary, consistent with our first prediction, the greater empathic accuracy of highly anxious-ambivalent individuals appears to be driven by their strong, dispositionally based need to accurately infer their partners’ thoughts and feelings in this relationship-threatening situation. The fact that this effect was somewhat weaker for highly anxious-ambivalent men than for highly anxious-ambivalent women must be interpreted in the context of significant interaction effects (reported below). As we shall see, these interaction effects reveal that greater empathic...
accuracy is associated with greater relational instability for both highly anxious–ambivalent men and highly anxious–ambivalent women.

Perceived threat–distressing thoughts and feelings. The second prediction (H2) was that during the relationship-threatening task, highly anxious–ambivalent individuals should (a) feel more threatened and (b) experience more distressing thoughts and feelings than their less anxious–ambivalent counterparts. When the perceived threat index was the dependent variable, two main effects emerged for men. As reported earlier, men in the higher threat condition felt more threatened than did men in the milder threat condition, $\beta = .25$, $t(76) = 2.28$, $p < .03$. Furthermore, men who scored higher on the anxiety dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent men) felt more threatened than did less anxious–ambivalent men, $\beta = .28$, $t(76) = 2.61$, $p < .02$. When men’s scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, both main effects remained significant, $\beta$s = .27 and .24, $t$s = 2.51 and 2.17, $p$s < .05, respectively.

As reported earlier, women in the higher threat condition also perceived more threat than did women in the milder threat condition, $\beta = .26$, $t(76) = 2.44$, $p < .02$. Moreover, highly anxious–ambivalent women felt more threatened than less anxious–ambivalent women, although this effect was only marginally significant, $\beta = .20$, $t(76) = 1.81$, $p < .08$. In addition, one significant interaction emerged, indicating that women who scored lower on the avoidance dimension (i.e., more securely attached women) reported greater perceived threat, but only if they were in the higher threat condition, $t(76) = 3.35$, $p < .005$. Similar to the men’s results, when the women’s scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, all effects remained either significant or marginally significant: for the threat main effect, $\beta = .26$, $t(76) = 2.40$, $p < .05$; for the attachment anxiety main effect, $\beta = .21$, $t(76) = 1.81$, $p < .08$; for the interaction, $t(76) = 3.32$, $p < .002$. Moreover, the dyad-adjusted regression analysis again revealed a significant main effect for the anxiety attachment dimension in the data for all participants (men and women) combined, $F(1, 76) = 8.35$, $p < .005$, which was not further qualified by gender, $F < 1$, ns.

The distressing thoughts and feelings index served as the dependent variable in the next set of analyses. For men, one significant and one marginally significant main effect emerged. Men in the higher threat condition reported thoughts and feelings that were rated as expressing greater distress and less self-confidence ($M = 106.16$) than those reported by the men in the milder threat condition ($M = 83.64$), $\beta = .33$, $t(76) = 3.01$, $p < .005$. Moreover, men who scored higher on the anxiety attachment dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent men) reported more distressing and less self-confident thoughts and feelings than did less anxious–ambivalent men, $\beta = .19$, $t(76) = 1.71$, $p < .10$, although this finding was only marginally significant.

For women, two main effects emerged. As with the men, women in the higher threat condition reported thoughts and feelings that were rated as expressing greater distress and less self-confidence ($M = 106.51$) relative to women in the milder threat condition ($M = 74.93$), $\beta = .48$, $t = 4.76$, $p < .0001$. Moreover, women who scored higher on the anxiety attachment dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent women) reported more distressing and less self-confident thoughts and feelings than did less anxious–ambivalent women, $\beta = .23$, $t(76) = 2.25$, $p < .03$. This effect remained marginally significant when the women’s scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, $\beta = .19$, $t(76) = 1.77$, $p < .09$. When the dyad-adjusted regression analysis was performed on all participants (men and women) combined, a marginally significant main effect emerged for the anxiety attachment dimension, $F(1, 68) = 3.65$, $p < .07$, which was not qualified by gender, $F < 1$, ns.

In summary, consistent with our second prediction, highly anxious–ambivalent men and women experienced greater threat and distress than their less anxious–ambivalent counterparts in response to the relationship-threatening task, and these effects were not attributable to individual differences in relational trust.

Changes in perceived closeness. The third prediction (H3) was that individuals who were more anxious–ambivalent should report temporary declines in the perceived closeness of their relationships after the relationship-threatening interaction. To test this prediction, we partialed out each partner’s preexperiment scores on Aron et al.’s (1992) perceived closeness measure (the IOS Scale) before conducting our standard three-step regression analyses. Partners’ postexperiment scores on the IOS Scale served as the dependent variable. This partialing procedure is preferable to using raw difference scores to estimate change because difference scores often have low reliabilities, and they can confound actual change with the mean level of initial pretest scores (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983). For men, no main effects were found; however, a significant Attachment Anxiety X Threat interaction emerged, $t(76) = 2.20$, $p < .04$. Specifically, men who scored higher on the anxiety dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent men) and who were assigned to the higher threat condition reported small yet significant declines in perceived closeness. This interaction remained significant when the men’s scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, $t(76) = 2.06$, $p < .05$.

For women, a single main effect emerged. Women who scored higher on the anxiety dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent women) reported larger decrements in perceived closeness than did their less anxious–ambivalent counterparts, $\beta = -.10$, $t(76) = -3.19$, $p < .004$. This effect also remained significant when the women’s scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, $t(76) = 3.10$, $p < .005$. However, when the dyad-adjusted regression analysis was conducted on all participants (men and women) combined, a nonsignificant trend for attachment anxiety was found, $F(1, 70) = 2.15$, $ns$. This pattern of data indicates that the significant decrease in perceived closeness occurred for highly anxious–ambivalent women in both the milder threat and the higher threat conditions, but it emerged for highly anxious–ambivalent men in the higher threat condition only.

It is important to emphasize that, although statistically significant, these drops in perceived closeness were small in magnitude and occurred for only some of the participants. In the full sample, the men’s average score on perceived closeness was 5.40 prior to the interaction task and 5.39 following the interaction; in the full sample of women, the corresponding mean scores were 5.22 and 5.26. Regarding the main effect for attachment anxiety, women who scored above the median on the anxiety dimension (i.e., more anxious–ambivalent women) experienced a decline from 5.16 (preinteraction) to 5.08 (postinteraction), reflecting an effect size (Cohen’s $d$) of approximately 0.15. Conversely, women who scored below the median on the anxiety dimension experienced a slight increase in perceived closeness from 5.27 (preinter-
Anxious—Ambivalent Attachment by Empathic Accuracy Interactions

The major goal of the present study was to test the hypothesized links between anxious—ambivalent attachment, empathic accuracy in a relationship-threatening situation, and subsequent relationship instability. Ickes and Simpson's (1997) model posits that low empathic accuracy can serve as a buffer against negative relationship outcomes when relationships are threatened. If highly anxious—ambivalent individuals tend to accentuate the negative implications of a single, isolated relationship-threatening event, whereas less anxious—ambivalent individuals tend to overlook or downplay such events (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), the consequences of accurately inferring their partners' thoughts and feelings should be more negative for highly anxious—ambivalent individuals. Specifically, if individuals are highly anxious—ambivalent and they display heightened empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening contexts, they should be particularly susceptible to either decreases in perceived closeness (in the short-term) or relationship dissolution (in the long-term). This reasoning suggests that the association between empathic accuracy and either changes in closeness or relationship dissolution should be moderated by individuals' level of attachment anxiety in relationship-threatening situations.

To examine this possibility, we conducted four analyses testing for moderation effects (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). The first set of regression analyses (conducted separately on women and men) treated each participant's postinteraction perceived closeness score on the IOS Scale as the dependent variable. Within each sex, each participant's experimental condition, preinteraction score on perceived closeness, anxiety dimension score, avoidance dimension score, and empathic accuracy score were entered as a block in Step 1. The interaction term involving anxiety and empathic accuracy was entered in Step 2. A significant interaction did not emerge for the men, but one was found for the women, t(75) = 3.42, p < .01. It indicated that women who scored higher on the anxiety attachment dimension and who displayed greater empathic accuracy reported feeling less close to their partner immediately after the rating-and-discussion task, whereas women who scored lower on anxiety and were more empathically accurate reported feeling slightly closer to their partner. Thus, for women, the effect of empathic accuracy on changes in perceived closeness was moderated by their standing on the anxiety attachment dimension. When the dyad-adjusted analysis was conducted for all participants (men and women combined), the Anxiety × Empathic Accuracy interaction was significant, F(1, 70) = 4.68, p < .04, and it was not qualified by gender, F < 1. ns (see Figure 1).

The second set of regression analyses (also conducted separately on women and men) treated the dichotomously coded relationship stability measure as the dependent variable. Within each sex, each participant's experimental condition, anxiety dimension score, avoidance dimension score, and empathic accuracy score were entered as a block in Step 1. The interaction term involving each participant's anxiety and empathic accuracy score was then entered in Step 2. A significant interaction did not emerge for women; relationship instability was predicted almost exclusively by women's scores on the anxiety attachment dimension. For men, however, a significant interaction was found, t(75) = 2.19, p < .04. Men who scored higher on the anxiety dimension and who displayed greater empathic accuracy were more likely to have had relationships that ended during the 4-month period, whereas men who scored lower on anxiety and who displayed greater empathic accuracy were less likely to have experienced relationship dissolution (see Figure 2). Thus, the effect of empathic accuracy on relationship stability for men was moderated by their standing on the anxiety attachment dimension. A dyad-adjusted regression analysis could not be applied to the stability data because there was no within-dyad variance in the dependent variable (dating status); all variance was between-dyads.
Effects for the Avoidance Attachment Dimension

Although our predictions focused on the anxiety attachment dimension, we also analyzed and report the results for the avoidance attachment dimension. We do so because the findings support and extend what Bowlby (1973) claimed and others have found regarding the defensive, withdrawn orientation of highly avoidant individuals in distressing situations (see Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998, for a review). Individuals who score higher on the avoidance dimension typically classify themselves as avoidant on the Hazan and Shaver (1987) attachment paragraphs, whereas those who score lower usually classify themselves as secure. The pattern of effects reported below reveals the different behavioral, cognitive, and emotional strategies that highly avoidant individuals used to distance themselves from this relationship-threatening situation. However, highly avoidant men and women responded differently on the various measures involving withdrawal tendencies. Because the dyad-adjusted analyses did not yield significant avoidant attachment effects for these measures that generalized across the male and female dating partners, the results of the dyad-adjusted regressions are not reported in this section.

Partner checking. According to attachment theory, more secure individuals should offer situationally appropriate signs of concern, support, or reassurance to their partners during stressful tasks (see Simpson et al., 1992), perhaps by checking to see how their partners are coping. When the behavioral checking measure was treated as the dependent variable, a main effect for the avoidance dimension was found for the women but not for the men. Specifically, women who scored lower on the avoidance dimension (i.e., more securely attached women) checked more frequently to see if their partner was feeling distressed during the rating-and-discussion task, whereas women who scored higher (i.e., more avoidant women) checked less frequently, $\beta = .28, t(75) = 2.58, p < .02$. This effect remained significant when the women's scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, $\beta = .27, t(75) = 2.47, p < .02$.6

Detachment from the partner–interaction. Attachment theory further suggests that more avoidant individuals should display more evidence of being detached from their partners during stressful interactions (see Bowlby, 1973; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Fraley et al., 1998). According to Cassidy and Kobak (1987), detachment could be manifested either behaviorally (e.g., by appearing less distressed, by checking on the partner less often) or cognitively (e.g., by failing to make inferences about the content of the partner's thoughts and feelings). A number of these detachment effects were found.

When the coder-rated behavioral distress index was the dependent measure, two main effects emerged for men. Men in the higher threat condition appeared more distressed ($M = 231.91$) than did men in the milder threat condition ($M = 188.14$), $\beta = .46, t(75) = 4.60, p < .0001$. Furthermore, men who scored higher on the avoidance dimension (i.e., more avoidantly attached men) were rated as appearing less distressed than men who scored lower on it (i.e., more secure men), $\beta = .22, t(75) = 2.29, p < .03$. When the men's scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, the main effect for avoidance remained significant, $\beta = .28, t(75)$

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6A main effect for the threat condition also was found for men, $\beta = .26, t(76) = 2.25, p < .03$. Specifically, men checked their partners' reactions more often in the higher threat condition ($M = 3.05$ checks during the slide rating task) than in the milder threat condition ($M = 2.16$ checks).
empathic accuracy may be more of a curse than a blessing, because partners' thoughts and feelings. When highly anxious-ambivalent there are circumstances in which greater understanding (i.e., in-

When the partner checking index served as the dependent measure, no main effect was found for men on the avoidance dimension. However, as reported above, more avoidant women checked less frequently than did more secure women to see if their partner was feeling distressed during the rating task, $\beta = .28, t(76) = 2.58, p < .02$.

In the next set of analyses, the single-item coder-rated measure of the degree to which participants' thoughts and feelings focused on their partner or relationship during the rating task was the dependent measure. Men who scored higher on the avoidance dimension (i.e., more avoidant men) had thoughts and feelings that focused less on their partners and relationships when their partners were rating other men as compared with less avoidant (i.e., more secure) men, $\beta = .22, t(76) = 1.99, p = .05$. When the men's scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, this effect did not change, $\beta = .22, t(75) = 1.99, p = .05$.

Finally, when the proportion of failed inferences was the dependent measure, no effects were found for men. However, one significant and one marginally significant main effect emerged for women. Specifically, women who scored higher on the avoidance dimension (i.e., more avoidant women) had more failed (i.e., blank or "I don’t know") inferences than did less avoidant (i.e., more secure) women, $\beta = .26, t(76) = 2.41, p < .02$. In addition, women who scored higher on the anxiety dimension (i.e., more anxious-ambivalent women) had a smaller proportion of failed inferences than did less anxious-ambivalent women. $\beta = .19, t(76) = 1.75, p < .09$, although this finding was only marginally significant. The main effect for the avoidance dimension remained significant when women's scores on the Trust Scale were partialed out, $\beta = .25, t(75) = 2.18, p < .04$.

In summary, the data for the avoidance attachment dimension were consistent with tenets of attachment theory. More avoidant men expressed their detachment during the rating-and-discussion task by appearing less distressed and by reporting fewer partner-focused thoughts and feelings. More avoidant women, in contrast, expressed their detachment by checking their partners' reactions less often and by failing to make inferences about what their partners were thinking or feeling. Once again, none of these effects was attributable to variance associated with the participants' trust scores.7

Discussion

Conventional wisdom suggests that greater understanding is a sovereign remedy for the various ills that plague close relationships. This belief is naive. As the present findings demonstrate, there are circumstances in which greater understanding (i.e., increased empathic accuracy) is associated with reduced feelings of closeness and with greater relationship instability. In relationship-threatening situations, anxious-ambivalent individuals appear to be particularly vulnerable to the negative implications of their partners' thoughts and feelings. When highly anxious-ambivalent individuals try to read their partners in such situations, heightened empathic accuracy may be more of a curse than a blessing, because it increases their feelings of threat and distress, reduces their feelings of closeness, and may increase the likelihood that their relationships will eventually dissolve.

Summary of the Major Findings

Integrating ideas from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), the theory of relational trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), and our own model of empathic accuracy (Ickes & Simpson, 1997), we tested five predictions about how people with more anxious-ambivalent attachment orientations react when their relationships are threatened by alternative dating partners. Consistent with the first prediction (H1), men and women who were more anxious-ambivalent were especially accurate (i.e., more hypervigilant) when they inferred their partners' thoughts and feelings during the relationship-threatening task. In addition, interaction effects (discussed below) revealed that highly anxious-ambivalent men and women experienced greater relational instability when they more accurately read their partners' thoughts and feelings. Consistent with the second prediction (H2), more anxious-ambivalent men and women reported feeling greater threat and distress during the rating-and-discussion task. Specifically, they felt more threatened during the task, and their thoughts and feelings were rated by coders as revealing greater discomfort and less confidence in themselves, their partners, and their relationships.

Consistent with our third and fourth predictions (H3 and H4), when more anxious-ambivalent individuals accurately inferred their partners' thoughts and feelings in the relationship-threatening situation, they were more likely to experience relational instability, and their relationships were more likely to have ended by the 4-month follow-up. Finally, consistent with our fifth prediction (H5), significant Attachment Anxiety $\times$ Empathic Accuracy interactions indicated that more anxious-ambivalent individuals who displayed greater empathic accuracy reported slight, but significant, declines in perceived closeness to their partners after their interactions. In addition, more anxious-ambivalent men who displayed greater empathic accuracy reported higher breakup rates at the 4-month follow-up. The accumulation of inferences that their partners find opposite-sex persons attractive may, over time, erode men's relational commitment sooner than women's commitment. Although this interpretation is speculative, it is consistent with research showing that men are highly sensitive to early signs of potential infidelity (Bryson, 1991; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982).

The interactions reported in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that accurately inferring partners' thoughts and feelings during the relationship-threatening task had negative relational consequences for anxious-ambivalent individuals but positive consequences for those who were less anxious-ambivalent. People who score lower on the anxiety attachment dimension tend to have positive views of potential infidelity.

7 For each of the analyses reported above, we also partialed out participants' scores on the global relationship quality index. We performed these analyses to determine whether the attachment dimensions explained variance in the dependent measures above and beyond what accounted for by relationship quality per se. When relationship quality was statistically controlled, all of the significant effects for the attachment dimensions remained either significant or marginally significant. Thus, the effects reported above are not due to differences in the quality of the relationships of men and women with different scores on the two attachment dimensions.
themselves as relationship partners, and they are usually classified as either secure or dismissive-avoidant on categorical attachment measures (see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The interaction results suggest that less anxious-ambivalent individuals either avoid thinking about the negative implications of their partners’ thoughts and feelings in relationship-threatening situations (perhaps in the case of dismissive–avoidant people) or simply discount any potential negative implications (perhaps in the case of secure people). Simpson and Rholes (1994) have proposed that individuals who score low on the anxiety dimension—especially more secure individuals, who also have positive views of romantic partners—may use negative events as opportunities to strengthen commitment to their relationships. Recently, Simpson et al. (1996) have found that less anxious-ambivalent individuals report feeling closer to their partners after trying to resolve a major, relationship-based conflict with them. This constructive behavior contrasts sharply with that of highly anxious-ambivalent individuals in the present study, whose accuracy regarding their partners’ potentially harmful thoughts and feelings led them immediately to draw negative inferences about the state of their relationship.

Additional findings for the avoidance dimension revealed that less avoidant (i.e., more securely attached) women checked to see how their partners were coping more often during the rating task than did highly avoidant women. Men and women who were more avoidant expressed their detachment behaviorally, but in somewhat different ways. Avoidant men displayed fewer overt signs of distress than did less avoidant (i.e., more secure) men, and they reported fewer partner-focused thoughts and feelings during the relationship-threatening task. More avoidant women were less likely to check on their partners’ reactions during the task, and they more often refrained from inferring the content of their partners’ thoughts and feelings. All of these behaviors appear to serve the same functional goal—to minimize involvement in stressful situations that, if not managed, could activate the attachment system (Bartholomew, 1990; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989).

Qualifications Based on Sex or Level of Situational Threat?

In general, the findings were highly consistent with the predictions derived from all three theoretical perspectives. One might ask, however, whether any sex-based qualifications are warranted. The simple answer is no. Not a single significant Attachment Dimension × Sex interaction was found for any of the dependent measures in either type of regression analysis (either the within-sex regressions or the cross-sex, dyad-adjusted regressions).

As with sex, the level of situational (manipulated) threat also did not qualify the effects of the anxious-ambivalent attachment dimension. For nearly all of the dependent measures, the effects of situational threat and anxious-ambivalence were additive, with the highest scores seen in highly anxious-ambivalent individuals in the higher threat condition and the lowest scores seen in less anxious-ambivalent individuals in the milder threat condition. Only one significant interaction emerged, revealing that highly anxious-ambivalent men in the higher threat condition reported particularly large declines in perceived closeness following the experimental task.

As a rule, interactions should not have been found given that both of our experimental conditions involved a threat to couples’ relationships. In particular, we contrasted a highly relationship-threatening condition (rating very attractive opposite-sex people as potential dating partners) with an at least mildly relationship-threatening one (rating less attractive opposite-sex people as potential dating partners). According to attachment theory (see Bowlby, 1969, 1973, Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), interaction effects should have emerged clearly only if a highly threatening condition was contrasted with a totally nonthreatening one (or, better yet, a relationship-reassuring condition). Even our milder threat condition should have evoked a substantial level of perceived threat in highly anxious-ambivalent people, who are preoccupied with issues of relationship loss and abandonment. And, indeed, participants in the milder threat condition who scored above the median on anxious-ambivalence reported almost as much perceived threat ($M = 5.87$) as did those in the higher threat condition who scored below the median on anxious-ambivalence ($M = 6.47$). These data suggest that in order to document instances in which the effects of anxious-ambivalent attachment are moderated by situational threat, researchers must contrast completely nonthreatening situations (or relationship-reassuring situations) with relationship-threatening ones.

Ethical Considerations

It also is important to address the ethical implications of this research. By subjecting dating partners to a laboratory task that presented some degree of situational threat to their relationships, did we do any lasting harm to these relationships that would not have occurred otherwise? At least three lines of evidence suggest that the experimental task did not augment the expected rate of relationship dissolution. First, couples who rated more attractive persons (those in the higher threat condition) were not more likely to break up compared with couples who rated less attractive persons (those in the milder threat condition, $t < 1$). Second, although women who were more anxious-ambivalent reported a statistically significant decline in perceived closeness immediately after the rating-and-discussion task, it was objectively small (approximately .10 units on the 7-point IOS Scale) and probably transient. Third, and most important, the breakup rate in this study (23%) was actually lower than those of previous dating studies involving no experimental manipulations. For example, the breakup rate was 42% over 3 months in a study reported by Simpson (1987), and it was 33% over 6 months in a study by Attridge, Berscheid, and Simpson (1995). The breakup rate for the most susceptible individuals in the present study—women who scored above the median on both attachment anxiety and empathic accuracy—was 32%, slightly lower than what is normally found in dating couples over comparable periods of time in studies with no experimental interventions.

We believe that our relatively low breakup rate was attributable to the very careful and thorough debriefings we conducted. These debriefings, which typically lasted 30 min per couple, were carefully developed and pilot tested to ensure that both partners would feel good about themselves, their partner, and their relationship before leaving the laboratory. In each debriefing session, we emphasized that each partner’s response to the experimental task was “normal,” that feeling some degree of distress was the typical response in this situation, and that exposure to the experimental procedures was necessary to help researchers better understand how relationships are maintained when they are confronted with external threats.
Although the breakup-rate data offer tangible evidence that harmful, long-term effects did not occur in this study, researchers must still decide whether the short-term distress caused by experimental interventions is justified given the importance of the problems being investigated. Different researchers may arrive at different conclusions. Our own assessment is that we optimized the trade-off between two important goals: (a) studying the effects of a temporary relationship threat in a manner that was as naturalistic and externally valid as possible and (b) minimizing the stress and discomfort experienced by the participants in our study. Having spent considerable time discussing the study with each couple during the debriefing sessions, we are confident that our debriefing procedures alleviated most if not all of the short-term distress that our experimental task may have induced.

Implications for Theory and Application

Why do highly anxious–ambivalent individuals have such turbulent and unstable relationships? The results of our study provide some tentative answers to this question, answers that may have important theoretical and real-world implications.

Implications for attachment theory. The present findings have important implications for attachment theory. The empathic accuracy findings confirm that highly anxious–ambivalent individuals are, in fact, more hypervigilant when they deal with relationship-threatening situations (for indirect evidence relevant to this prediction, see Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer et al., 1993). Related findings also reveal how attachment anxiety interacts with empathic accuracy to destabilize the relationships of highly anxious–ambivalent individuals. Heightened empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening situations leads highly anxious–ambivalent men and women to feel less close to their romantic partners, and it forecasts relationship dissolution in highly anxious–ambivalent men. Although attachment theorists (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994) have speculated about the proximate psychological processes that should destabilize the relationships of anxious–ambivalent individuals, this is the first study to demonstrate the operation of one significant process: the destabilizing impact of accurately reading a partner’s thoughts and feelings in a relationship-threatening context.

An important question for future attachment research is, Why do highly anxious–ambivalent people tend to base their current perceptions of their partners and relationships on a single, negative relationship event rather than viewing such events within the broader, long-term context of their relationships? Bowlby (1973) and Main (1991) have conjectured that highly anxious–ambivalent individuals have two sets of internal working models. The primary set, developed during childhood, contains a constellation of negative thoughts, feelings, memories, and expectations about how one will be treated by others. The secondary set, which develops during adolescence and adulthood, contains more positive components that reflect how one ideally hopes to be treated by others; this secondary set allows highly anxious–ambivalent people to experience at least moderate levels of relationship trust.

According to Bowlby, both sets of working models remain largely disconnected and isolated from each other. In nonstressful situations, the secondary set should guide how highly anxious–ambivalent people think, feel, and behave. When distressing situations are encountered (such as our rating-and-discussion task), the primary set should be activated, producing temporarily negative and disenfranchised views of the current partner and relationship. A contrasting view, proposed by Mikulincer (1995), posits that highly anxious–ambivalent people have only one set of interrelated, highly conflicted thoughts, feelings, memories, and expectations. According to this view, rapid, situationally induced changes in perceptions of the partner and relationship should be governed by which component of an individual’s working model is salient at a given point in time. Future research must determine which structure—the dual structure of working models or the unitary structure—best accounts for the relatively rapid, situation-specific perceptual changes often experienced by highly anxious–ambivalent people.

Implications for the theory of relational trust. Regarding the link between attachment theory and relational trust, the present findings reveal that the anxiety attachment dimension usually remained a significant predictor of the dependent measures when relational trust was statistically controlled. These findings suggest that the relationships of highly anxious–ambivalent individuals are volatile because of the inherent emotional volatility of these individuals (Tidwell et al., 1996), not just because they view their partners as untrustworthy. In the present study, only one of the many attachment effects was appreciably attenuated when trust was controlled: For women, trust may be more important than anxious attachment in affecting eventual relationship dissolution.

Implications for Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) empathic accuracy model. The present findings also suggest an important qualification to Ickes and Simpson’s (1997) empathic accuracy model. Specifically, the predicted negative association between empathic accuracy and relational stability in relationship-threatening situations appears to hold true only for highly anxious–ambivalent individuals. This qualification suggests that Ickes and Simpson’s model would benefit from greater conceptual integration with attachment theory. In particular, the model should be revised to acknowledge that different attachment orientations may dispose individuals to react differently when inferring their partner’s thoughts and feelings in relationship-threatening contexts. Whereas highly anxious–ambivalent partners may suffer from a hypervigilant need to closely monitor their partner’s thoughts and feelings, less anxious–ambivalent partners may not. Moreover, highly avoidant partners may simply avoid making relationship-threatening inferences about their partner’s thoughts and feelings.

Applied implications. Finally, the present findings may have important implications for how therapy should be conducted with couples in which at least one partner is highly anxious–ambivalent. Although enhancing empathic accuracy with respect to relationship-threatening issues might be good for most couples in therapy, training highly anxious–ambivalent people to become more accurate about such issues may do more harm than good in the early stages of therapy. Because highly anxious–ambivalent individuals tend to have immediate, negative reactions about the relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings that might be harbored by their romantic partners, forcing them to confront such thoughts and feelings before they learn how to deal with them effectively could be a major therapeutic mistake. Instead of strengthening the couple’s relationship, such interventions could backfire and cause the relationship to become even more volatile and unstable. A better strategy might be to first train these couples to develop greater empathic accuracy with respect to benign, nonthreatening issues, and then gradually encourage them to
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