Attachment and Anger in an Anxiety-Provoking Situation

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In this study, women were told they would engage in an anxiety-provoking activity. Women then waited with their dating partner for the activity to begin. During this 5-min “stress” period, each couple’s interaction was videotaped unobtrusively. Each couple was then told that the woman would not have to do the stressful activity, and each couple was unobtrusively videotaped again during a 5-min “recovery” period. The behavior of both partners was then coded during both periods. The major results revealed that more-avoidant men displayed greater anger during the stress period, especially if their partners were more anxious or distressed or sought more support from them. More-avoidant women also displayed greater anger, particularly if they were highly anxious or distressed and received little support or encountered anger from their partners. During the recovery period, highly ambivalent women behaved more negatively toward their partners if they had been more anxious in the stress period or had sought more support from their partners. These results are discussed in terms of attachment theory.

Angry coercive behavior, acting in the service of an affectional bond, is not uncommon. It is seen whenever a sexual partner berates the other for being or seeming to be disloyal. It is seen, again, in some families when a member becomes angry whenever his approaches to another member are met by an unresponsive silence. Not only may angry discontented behavior alienate the attachment figure but, within the attached, a shift can occur in the balance of feeling. Instead of strongly rooted affection, there grows a deep-running resentment, held in check only partially by an anxious uncertain affection. (Bowlby, 1973)

In his classic 1973 volume, Bowlby discusses the way in which fear, anxiety, security, and—most relevant to the present research—anger are expressed in intimate relationships. Drawing on this work, the present investigation tested several basic hypotheses concerning the relationship between attachment and anger by examining how dating partners with different attachment orientations behave in a situation designed to elicit support seeking from one partner and support giving from the other.

Attachment and Anger

According to Bowlby (1973, 1979), the association between anger and attachment should be especially strong in adults with insecure relationship histories. Bowlby observed that the childhood experiences of anxious-ambivalent persons often produce “much partially unconscious resentment, which persists into adult life and is expressed usually in a direction away from the parents and towards someone weaker, e.g., a spouse or a child” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138). Similarly, the life experiences of avoidant persons should predispose them to anger: “As in the case of anxious attachment, there is likely to be much resentment, which when elicited, is directed against weaker persons” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138). Consistent with these hypotheses, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) found that insecure infants exhibit more anger toward their caretakers than do secure infants in the home environment. Kobak and Scery (1988) have found that avoidant adults are perceived by their friends as more hostile, and Collins and Read (1990), Simpson (1990), Kobak and Hazan (1991), and Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips (1996) all have reported that adults who are more avoidant and those who are more anxious-ambivalent experience greater negative affect in their romantic relationships. Most recently, Mikulincer (1998) has found that when anger-provoking situations are imagined, highly ambivalent persons report less-constructive goals and more difficulty controlling their anger, whereas highly avoidant persons report less-constructive goals, report greater hostility, and show less awareness of the degree to which they are physiologically aroused. In general, highly ambivalent and highly avoidant persons appear to display more dysfunctional anger (what Bowlby, 1973, called “the anger of despair”) when compared with more secure individuals.

The expression of anger toward attachment figures should be problematic for some people because it may generate anxiety about losing or alienating their attachment figures. According to Bowlby (1973), anger and anxiety tend to co-occur in close relationships for two reasons. First, situational factors that elicit anger (such as the failure of attachment figures to offer sufficient comfort or support in times of need) may increase anxiety by raising questions about a partner’s long-term commitment and availability. Second, once it is expressed, anger should further amplify anxiety, especially in people who worry about possibly driving their attachment figures away. Consequently, anger may not always be expressed directly in relationships; instead, it may be held in check or displaced to other individuals or objects (Bowlby, 1973).

Attachment theory also suggests that the ratio of anger to anxiety in situations that provoke anger should differ depending on...
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an individual’s attachment orientation. More-avoidant individuals yearn to suppress the activation of their attachment systems and struggle against becoming dependent on others to “avoid the pain of being rejected and ... to avoid pressure to become someone else’s caretaker” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138). Situations that might activate avoidant adults’ attachment systems, therefore, should produce frustration and anger, some of which may be directed toward their romantic partners. Moreover, among avoidant adults, the expression of anger should overshadow their comparatively limited concerns about alienating their current attachment figures. Thus, highly avoidant persons would be expected to express anger directly and strongly.

More-ambivalent (or preoccupied) individuals, in contrast, strive to achieve and maintain considerable closeness with their attachment figures, yet they also fear being abandoned by them. Thus, anger in highly ambivalent individuals would be expected to be evoked when attachment figures behave in ways that indicate they are not being attentive or are not psychologically available (such as when they seem insufficiently concerned about the partner’s well-being or provide insufficient care and support). According to Bowlby (1973), however, thoughts about expressing anger also should generate anxiety about the possibility of alienating and eventually losing the attachment figure for these individuals. If they display too much anger too directly in an attempt to reprimand their partner, highly ambivalent individuals run the risk of producing the outcome they fear the most—losing their attachment figures. As a result, anxiety is likely to override anger in many situations, causing anger to be repressed or expressed indirectly once the acute need for comfort and support has passed. Thus, the expression of anger by highly ambivalent persons should be complex because it ought to be driven by multiple and potentially conflicting motives. These countervailing motives could yield several outcomes, including the expression, repression, or displacement of anger, or a pattern behavior in which the expression of anger and bids for comfort and support oscillate across time.

Anger in Situations Calling for Support

A situation of special significance for attachment theory occurs when one partner is distressed by events external to the relationship and the other partner can either provide comfort and support or refrain from doing so. This type of situation has the potential to produce relationship-based anger in both the partner who feels distressed and in need of support as well as the partner who provides or withholds it. According to attachment theory, highly avoidant and highly ambivalent individuals will experience and express anger differently in this situation. If highly avoidant individuals are the distressed partners, they should become angry if their distress might undermine their ability to maintain psychological distance and to calm themselves in an independent, self-reliant manner (Bowlby, 1973). In contrast, highly ambivalent individuals who are distressed should not feel angry because they like to rely on their partners for comfort and support. Although highly ambivalent people might feel angry if their partners do not give them adequate support when it is needed, they might be reluctant to display this anger openly (especially when the source of distress does not come from the partner) for fear of alienating them (Bowlby, 1973).

When their partners are distressed and lean on them for support, highly avoidant individuals would be expected to become angry because they resent being forced into the role of caretaker (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138). Highly ambivalent individuals, in contrast, would be expected to be happy to care for their partners because they want to be psychologically and emotionally close to them. Accordingly, they probably would not display anger. Consistent with these conjectures, Phillips, Simpson, and Rholes (1995) have found that, when compared with highly ambivalent individuals, highly avoidant persons report feeling much less comfortable giving support and feeling much less obliged to provide it, and they denigrate persons who require support, viewing them as “weak” and “immature.”

In the present research, we tested a set of predictions about the relations between attachment orientations and the expression of both anger and more subtle forms of “negativity” displayed by dating partners whose interactions were videotaped both during and after a stressful event. Specifically, the female partner in each relationship was told that she was going to be exposed to an “anxiety-provoking” activity. Her male dating partner, who was going to engage in a different, nonstressful task, waited with her in a private room for the activity to begin. The male partner, therefore, had an opportunity to comfort and support his partner. Each couple’s interaction was videotaped unobtrusively while the couple waited for the woman’s stressful activity (i.e., during the “stress” period). After 5 min, the experimenter re-entered the room and told each couple that the equipment was not working and, thus, the study would have to be discontinued. These instructions were intended to remove the cause of the woman’s distress about the activity. The experimenter then left the room and each couple’s poststress interaction was videotaped during a 5-min “recovery” period. Following the study, independent coders rated the behavior of each partner on theoretically relevant dimensions: the man’s levels of anger and support giving during the stress period; the woman’s levels of anxiety about the impending activity, anger, and support seeking during the stress period; and both partners’ levels of overt anger and more subtle negativity toward one another in the recovery period.

Hypotheses

The major hypotheses (presented below) are organized around (a) each participant’s attachment orientation (based on self-report scores on the avoidance and anxiety-ambivalence attachment dimensions; see Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), (b) the period of interaction (the stress period vs. the recovery period), and (c) each participant’s role in the interaction (the woman’s potentially needing support vs. the man’s being able to give support).

The Stress Period: Avoidance

In general, we expected highly avoidant persons to openly express anger in their relationships, given their history of repeated rejections from past attachment figures (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). Highly avoidant persons are motivated to eschew situations that could activate their attachment systems, particularly those in which they need care from others or others need care from them.
As noted above, highly avoidant persons are

Deeply distrustful of close relationships and terrified of allowing themselves to rely on anyone else, in some cases in order to avoid the pain of being rejected and in others to avoid being subjected to pressure to become someone else’s caretaker. (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138)

Consequently, they try to keep their attachment systems suppressed and deactivated whenever possible. Because anxiety about the impending activity could activate the attachment systems of avoidant women and force them to adopt a role they dislike (requiring comfort and support; see Kobak & Duemmler, 1994), highly avoidant women were expected to experience frustration and anger (see Hypothesis 1, below). Furthermore, given their desire for psychological independence and their minimal concerns about alienating their attachment figures, highly avoidant women were not expected to repress or displace their anger, even if distressed.

Main (1981) has proposed that avoidance is an emotional and behavioral strategy that permits individuals who have experienced rejection to maintain as much physical and emotional proximity to their attachment figures as possible without driving them away. According to this view, highly avoidant people should be willing to accept certain forms of comfort and support when they are distressed, especially if close, physical contact is not involved (see Ainsworth et al., 1978; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). Simpson et al. (1992), in fact, found that even though highly avoidant women were less likely to seek support from their partners, they were more calmed than even secure women were if they received support, perhaps because it was unexpected. In general, we predicted that women who score higher on avoidance would display greater anger during the stress period than women who score lower on avoidance and that this would be particularly true of women who were more distressed while waiting for the stressful activity to begin. If, however, highly avoidant women received more support from their partners, such women might display less anger (see Hypothesis 2a).

We also predicted that the stress period would evoke more anger in highly avoidant men because being asked to provide comfort and support challenges their preferred deactivated and disengaged mode of interacting in close relationships. The realization that their partners need support may cause highly avoidant men to feel pressure to provide it. Avoidant persons, however, do not like themselves to rely on anyone else, in some cases in order to avoid the pain of being rejected and in others to avoid being subjected to pressure to become someone else’s caretaker. (Bowlby, 1979, p. 138)

The Recovery Period: Avoidance

Two kinds of behavior were rated during the recovery period: expressions of negativity toward and disengagement from the partner (designed to assess more subtle signs of animosity) and expressions of overt anger. Once the source of stress is removed (i.e., once the experimenter announces that the stressful activity will not occur), women should no longer feel anxious about the experimental procedures. More important, highly avoidant women should be relieved that they no longer are in an outcome-dependent, support-seeking role. This should allow them to regain control of their negative affect, which is an important goal of avoidant persons (Mikulincer, 1998). Consequently, more avoidant women should display neither anger nor other signs of
negativity toward their partners in the recovery period. Similarly, because more-avoidant men have been extricated from the uncomfortable role of having to offer support once the stressor is removed, they too should exhibit little anger and negativity during the recovery period. In essence, once the expectations for seeking and providing support have been removed, more-avoidant individuals should feel tremendous relief and reestablish control of their affect, both of which are incompatible with anger.

The Recovery Period: Ambivalence

The factors that determine whether negative reactions are expressed or inhibited should change as highly ambivalent women shift from being distressed and in need of support (during the stress period) to no longer being distressed and being able to reflect on what has happened (in the recovery period). Once their anxiety has been alleviated, women no longer need immediate comfort and support from their partners. Moreover, they ought to have the time and opportunity to think about the amount and quality of support their partners just gave them, no longer distracted by distressing thoughts and feelings about the impending activity. Thus, we hypothesized that women who score higher on ambivalence would behave more negatively toward their partner than women who score lower if they felt more distressed (see Hypothesis 3a), received less support from their partners (see Hypothesis 3b), or sought more support from them during the stress period (see Hypothesis 3c). Given that highly ambivalent women worry about engaging in actions that might alienate their partners and destabilize their relationships, however, they may refrain from displaying more overt anger in the recovery period. These effects, therefore, could be confined to the amount of subtle negativity and disengagement that highly ambivalent women display toward their partners. Because men who score higher on ambivalence are quite comfortable providing support, they should have no reason to behave negatively during the recovery period.¹

Reactions to Partners' Anger

Another major objective of the study was to examine how men and women react to anger expressed to them by their partners. Partners in unhappy relationships often engage in escalating cycles of verbal, emotional, and sometimes physical abuse. In recent studies, researchers have found that some highly avoidant and highly ambivalent men engage in abusive behavior toward their romantic partners (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Roberts & Noller, 1998). Severe abuse is usually the culmination of a lengthy process that begins when partners become enmeshed in vicious cycles of verbal and emotional attacks followed by counterattacks (Roberts & Noller, 1998). Considering that approximately one-third of all young couples report some form of physical abuse at some point in their relationship (see Magdol et al., 1997), understanding the origins of this process is important. Therefore, we also examined how highly avoidant and highly ambivalent individuals reacted to anger from their partners.

We hypothesized that the amount of anger displayed by partners would be reciprocated in both the stress and the recovery periods (see Hypothesis 4). We also hypothesized that anger would be reciprocated more strongly in both periods by more-avoidant individuals, particularly if they were highly distressed (see Hypothesis 5). As discussed above, highly avoidant people have experienced repeated rejections, threats of abandonment, and direct expressions of hostility from past attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). As a result, they should be predisposed to retaliate with anger if their current attachment figures direct anger toward them. Highly ambivalent individuals have experienced inconsistent care and support from previous attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973), and they should feel angry when their partners direct anger toward them (cf. Ainsworth et al., 1978). However, because highly ambivalent individuals also worry about losing or alienating their partners, they may refrain from reciprocating strong anger. Although it is difficult to predict how they might behave, we conjectured that highly ambivalent people would be less likely to reciprocate anger in our experimental paradigm.

In summary, we had two sets of predictions concerning the level of anger displayed by women and men in the stress period:

Hypothesis 1: Women who score higher on avoidance should display greater anger during the stress period than women who score lower on avoidance. This should be particularly true of women who were more distressed while waiting for the stressful task to begin (Hypothesis 1a). However, if more-avoidant women received more support from their partners, we speculated that they would exhibit less anger (Hypothesis 1b).

Hypothesis 2: Men who score higher on avoidance should exhibit greater anger than men who score lower on avoidance. However, because they should resent being placed in a supportive role, anger in more-avoidant men should be more pronounced if their partners were more distressed during the stress period (Hypothesis 2a) or sought more comfort and support from them (Hypothesis 2b).

We had one set of predictions regarding the behavior of women in the recovery period:

Hypothesis 3: During the recovery period, women who score higher on ambivalence should behave more negatively toward their partners than women who score lower on ambivalence if they felt more distressed during the stress period (Hypothesis 3a), received less support from their partners during the stress period (Hypothesis 3b), or sought more support from them (Hypothesis 3c).

Finally, we had two predictions concerning the reciprocation of anger in the stress and recovery periods:

Hypothesis 4: The amount of anger displayed by partners should be reciprocated in both periods.

Hypothesis 5: Anger should be reciprocated more strongly in both periods by more-avoidant men and women, especially if the female partner is highly distressed.

Method

Participants

Eighty-three dating couples (83 men and 83 women) participated in the study. At least one partner was enrolled in Introductory Psychology at...
Texas A&M University. Mean ages of men and women were 19.5 years and 18.9 years, respectively. To guarantee that participants were involved in established relationships, couples were required to have been dating for at least 3 months. The mean length of dating relationships was 17.9 months.

**Procedures**

The study was conducted in three phases. In Phase 1, partners answered questionnaires that inquired about their attachment orientation (the 13-item Adult Attachment Questionnaire [AAQ]; see Simpson et al., 1992; Simpson et al., 1996) and their current relationship (Rubin’s [1970] Love Scale and Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto’s [1989] Relationship Closeness Inventory). The AAQ, which is based on sentences from Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) three vignettes, assesses two stable and highly reliable attachment dimensions: avoidance and ambivalence–anxiety (see Brennan et al., 1998, Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Simpson et al., 1996, for psychometric information about these two dimensions). We refer to the second dimension as ambivalence (instead of anxiety) because ambivalence captures the vacillating emotional and behavioral tendencies that usually characterize highly anxious or preoccupied individuals. According to Griffin and Bartholomew (1994), the avoidance dimension primarily assesses the degree to which individuals have negative views of others and avoid or withdraw from closeness and intimacy in relationships. The ambivalence–anxiety dimension assesses the degree to which individuals hold negative views about themselves as relationship partners and are preoccupied about abandonment, loss, and their partner’s level of commitment to them. These two dimensions lie at 45° angles from each of Bartholomew’s four attachment style prototypes (see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Thus, according to Bartholomew, prototypically secure individuals should score low on both dimensions, indicating that they have positive views of both themselves and their relationship partners. Given the numerous advantages of using multiple item, continuously distributed scales to measure the avoidance and ambivalence–anxiety dimensions (which are now widely used and recommended in adult attachment research; see Brennan et al., 1998, Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), the two AAQ dimensions were our measures of attachment orientations.

In Phase 2, couples were unobtrusively videotaped after the woman had been told she was going to experience an anxiety-provoking activity. Specifically, once the female member of each couple completed the survey, she was led to a waiting room where the stress-induction procedure took place. The experimenter first pretended to take the woman’s pulse in order to accentuate the stressful nature of the impending activity. The experimenter then said

In the next few minutes, you are going to be exposed to a situation and set of experimental procedures that arouse considerable anxiety and distress in most people. Due to the nature of these procedures, I cannot tell you any more at the moment. Of course, I’ll answer any questions or concerns you have after the experiment is over.

The purpose of this statement was to arouse anxiety without disclosing the nature of the procedures.

The experimenter then took the woman down a hallway to another room. The experimenter opened a heavy metal door, exposing a darkened, windowless room that looked like an isolation chamber containing psychophysiological equipment. The experimenter made sure each woman peered into the room and saw the equipment. The experimenter then said that the equipment was “not fully set up,” after which she led the woman back to the waiting room. The experimenter provided no further information about the nature of the experimental procedures.

The experimenter then escorted the male partner to the waiting room and left the couple alone for 5 min. Nothing was said to the man about the woman’s impending activity. During this 5-min stress period, the couple’s spontaneous interaction was unobtrusively videotaped by a small, inconspicuous videocamera mounted from the ceiling in one corner of the room.

In Phase 3, the experimenter re-entered the room and explained that because of “malfunctioning equipment,” the women’s part of the experiment could not be conducted. Participants were informed, however, that they would receive the credit promised for participation. Each couple was unobtrusively videotaped again for 5 min during this poststress, or recovery, period.

Participants then were debriefed and informed that they had been videotaped. The reasons for the deception were carefully explained, and participants were given an opportunity to erase their tapes if they wanted, although none did.

**Behavioral Ratings: 1992**

Portions of these data relevant to a different set of hypotheses and different dependent measures were reported by Simpson et al. (1992). In 1992, three raters viewed the videotapes and evaluated the behavior of both members of each couple during the stress period. Raters evaluated men and women on global adjectives. For women, two dimensions were assessed: their level of anxiety–fear, and the extent to which they sought comfort and support from their partner. Women were rated on the following adjectives (using Likert-type scales, 1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal/extremely): warm, self-confident, friendly, relaxed, anxious, nice, self-disclosing, humorous, hostile, cold/distant, submissive, dull/boring, critical/negative, fearful, independent, clingy/dependent, comfortable with physical contact, promoting physical contact, paying attention to partner, quarrelsome, and emotionally avoidant. Interrater reliabilities for each adjective were reasonable given only three raters (M = .60; range = .41–.86). Thus, the ratings were aggregated.

A factor analysis of the aggregated adjectives revealed three factors: Warmth–Friendliness, Distress–Anxiety, and Comfort–Support Seeking. The last two factors are most relevant to the present study. Items loading highest on the Distress–Anxiety factor were anxious (.94), not relaxed (.92), and fearful (.86). Items loading highest on the Comfort–Support Seeking factor included clinging (.84), not (overly) independent (.78), comfortable with contact (.67), and promoted contact (.67). We then calculated factor scores for each factor. Higher scores indicated greater Distress–Anxiety and more Comfort–Support Seeking.

Men were rated on the degree to which they offered reassurance and emotional support. Ratings were made on Likert-type scales (1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal/extremely) for the following adjectives: warm, self-confident, emotionally supportive, friendly, competent at calming the partner, relaxed, reassuring, nice, open/accepting, humorous, socially skilled, hostile, cold/distant, dependable, dull/boring, critical/negative, condescending, comfortable with physical contact, promoting physical contact, paying attention to partner, nurturant, quarrelsome, emotionally avoidant, helpful, sympathetic, attentive to partner’s needs, and responsive to partner’s needs. Interrater reliabilities were reasonably good (M = .64; range = .41–.83). Hence, the ratings were aggregated.

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2 Given the limited number of couples available for research, we subjected women to the anxiety-provoking procedures and placed men in the role of potential support givers. We currently are conducting a study in which these roles are reversed. This project is still underway.

3 Simpson et al. (1992) focused on the behavioral reactions of the male and female dating partners only during the stress period. Specifically, the 1992 study focused on how both partners‘ attachment orientations and the female partners’ rated level of anxiety moderated support seeking (in women) and support giving (in men). On the basis of new behavioral ratings and entirely new analyses, the current study focuses on different constructs (anger and negativity), and it reports findings from the 5-min recovery period for the first time.
A factor analysis of the aggregated adjectives revealed two factors: the degree of Reassurance–Emotional Support and Warmth–Friendliness displayed by men. Items loading highest on Reassurance–Emotional Support were reassuring (.86), sympathetic (.82), emotionally supportive (.82), competent at calming the partner (.75), responsive to the partner’s needs (.73), helpful (.73), nurturant (.69), and attentive to the partner’s needs (.65). Because this factor is most relevant to the present study, factor scores were calculated only on the Reassurance–Emotional Support factor. Higher scores indicated greater reassurance–support.

New Behavioral Ratings

New ratings were recently made by different raters. One set of raters first evaluated the level of anger displayed by men and women during the stress period. Another set evaluated both partners during the recovery period, focusing on each individual’s level of subtle negativity and anger directed at his or her partner after the stressor had been removed. Data from the recovery period have never before been reported. These new ratings are the dependent measures in this study.

The Stress Period

Eleven coders rated the amount of anger each individual displayed toward his or her partner during the stress period. Adjectives were rated on Likert-type scales (1 = this attribute is not at all evident [in the person’s actions], 7 = this attribute is clearly evident [in the person’s actions]). Interrater reliabilities were very good for each item (M = .95 across all adjectives; range = .90–.98).

Anger was measured with eight adjectives: angry (at the partner), annoyed (with the partner), touchy, irritable/irritated, frustrated with the partner, grumpy/grouchy, unhappy with the partner, and disagreeable. Raters’ scores on each adjective were aggregated to create a composite index of anger. Higher scores indicated more anger. All eight adjectives loaded on a single factor (Cronbach’s α = .96). Means on this index were 149.16 for women and 142.75 for men. Because this index could range from 88.00 to 616.00, these mean values reflect relatively low levels of overt anger observed in the stress period. The distribution of scores on the anger index, however, was reasonably normal, and there was no floor effect (i.e., partners’ scores on anger were not clustered near the low end of the scale).

The Recovery Period

Ten different coders rated the behavior of both partners during the recovery period on Likert-type scales with the same anchors used for the stress period ratings. Coders were instructed to focus on behaviors directed toward the partner. The degree to which men had positive (vs. negative) interactions with their partner was rated on the following items: seemed interested and engaged in the conversation, was emotionally distant from the partner (reverse-keyed), wanted to talk to the partner, openly expressed feelings to the partner, was in synchrony with the partner, and was relaxed during the conversation. Interrater reliabilities for each item were good (all reliabilities exceeded .77). Thus, raters’ scores were aggregated to create a single index of male interaction style (positive vs. negative). Higher scores indicated greater positivity. All items loaded on a single factor (Cronbach’s α = .95). The mean for this index was 287.37. Values could range from 70.00 to 490.00.

The degree to which men displayed overt anger during the recovery period was assessed with eight items: angry at the partner, irritated/annoyed with the partner, expressed negative feelings toward the partner, argued with the partner, expressed distrust of the partner, derogated the partner, and defended the partner. The sum of raters’ scores on these items is a composite index of male anger during the recovery period. Higher scores indicated more anger. Values could range from .92 to 223.76. Because this index could range from 80.00 to 560.00, this value reflects moderately low levels of anger in men during the recovery period.

The amount of overt anger exhibited by women during the recovery period was indexed by eight items: angry at the partner, upset with the partner, expressed negative feelings toward the partner, argued with the partner, expressed distrust of the partner, derogated the partner, and defended the partner. The sum of raters’ scores on these items is a composite index of female anger during the recovery period. Higher scores indicated more anger. These items loaded on a single factor (Cronbach’s α = .96). The mean for this index was 223.76. Because this range could range from 80.00 to 560.00, this value reflects moderately low levels of anger in women during the recovery period. Although the mean values for overt anger were slightly low for both genders during the recovery period, the distribution of scores was normal and there was no floor effect.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Before analyzing the data, all predictor variables were centered (i.e., for each variable, the mean was subtracted from each person’s score, giving each transformed score a mean of zero; see Aiken & West, 1991). Correlations were then computed between participants’ own avoidance and ambivalence attachment dimension scores as well as the two attachment dimension scores of their partner. These correlations ranged from .10 to -.10, and none...

4 Coders rated slightly different sets of adjectives when evaluating men and women in the stress and recovery periods. Adjective ratings were tailored to the unique roles that men and women assumed in the study (i.e., men as potential support providers, and women as potential support seekers) and the two distinct psychological situations in which interactions occurred (i.e., the stress period, followed by the recovery period). For the recovery period, we used slightly different items to rate the anger of men and women. We did so because the source of anger (stemming from what happened in the stress period) should have been different for the two genders.
Table 1
Correlations Between the Rated Behavioral Variables Within Women and Men

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<th>Recovery period</th>
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Note. Pos versus neg interaction = Interaction style (positive vs. negative).

were significant. Because dating partners' attachment scores were fairly orthogonal and attachment theory makes predictions for individuals rather than for couples, the individual was treated as the unit of analysis in the results presented below.

Correlations among behavioral ratings within each gender are presented in Table 1. For women, the only significant correlation was between anger and positive versus negative interaction style during the recovery period. Greater anger in the recovery period was associated with less positive styles of interaction. For men, the only significant correlation was between anger and support giving during the stress period. Greater anger in the stress period was associated with less support giving.

Table 2 presents correlations between the behavioral ratings of the partners within each dyad. These correlations offer preliminary support for Hypothesis 5, which proposed that the amount of anger displayed by partners would be reciprocated in both the stress and the recovery periods. In particular, the male partners of women who displayed more anger in the stress period tended to display more anger and less support giving in the stress period. If their male partners displayed greater anger in the stress period, women tended to behave less positively toward them in the recovery period. During the recovery period, the level of anger and negativity displayed by one partner was strongly associated with the level of anger and negativity exhibited by the other partner. In addition, women whose male partners were more negative displayed higher levels of anger.

Primary Analyses

The results reported below are structured around the main dependent variable for each set of regression analyses. We first report results for the dependent measures rated in the stress period. We next report the results for the dependent measures rated during the recovery period. All significant main effects and interactions are reported.

5 Although some studies have found that certain combinations of attachment styles are more common than others in couples (e.g., secure—secure pairs are more common than would be expected considering their individual base-rates, whereas avoidant—avoidant pairs are much less common; see Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), nonrandom pairings in dating couples tend to be found mainly when categorical attachment measures are used. When continuously distributed attachment measures are used, partners' scores tend not to be correlated on the avoidance and anxiety—ambivalence dimensions (Brennan et al., 1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Simpson et al., 1996). This was true in the present study.
**The Stress Period**

**Women's anger.** Hypothesis 1 held that women who score higher on avoidance would display more anger during the stress period than women who score lower on avoidance. Moreover, according to Hypothesis 1a, this would be particularly true of highly avoidant women who were more distressed while waiting for the activity to begin. Thus, the first hierarchical regression analysis treated women's anger during the stress period as the dependent variable. The predictor variables (entered in the following order) were (a) women's self-reported scores on the two attachment dimensions (avoidance and ambivalence), (b) women's observer-rated distress-anxiety, (c) men's observer-rated reassurance-support, (d) all two-way interactions between each of these variables, and (e) all possible three-way interactions. Two significant main effects and 1 three-way interaction emerged. Supporting Hypothesis 1, more-avoidant women displayed greater anger than did less-avoidant women, \( \beta = .34, t(81) = 3.14, p < .01 \). In addition, higher levels of support by men were associated with less anger exhibited by their female partners, \( \beta = -.27, t(78) = 2.60, p < .01 \). Providing partial support for Hypothesis 1a, the three-way interaction revealed that the association between avoidance and anger was stronger for women who both experienced more distress-anxiety and received less support from their partners, \( \beta = -.21, t(71) = 2.00, p = .05 \) (see Figure 1).

We tentatively conjectured that, unlike more-avoidant women, more-ambivalent women would not display greater anger toward their partners during the stress period. Indeed, ambivalence was not significantly related to anger either as a main effect or in interaction with any of the other variables (\( r = -.02 \)). Given the power of the study, there is less than a 20% chance of obtaining a nonsignificant result had there been a true (moderate) effect size of .30. In the next analysis, men's observer-rated anger in the stress period replaced the ratings of their reassurance-supportiveness in predicting women's anger. This was done to determine whether women's anger systematically covaried with their partners' anger (see Hypothesis 4), and whether this relationship was moderated by women's attachment orientation and their level of distress-anxiety (see Hypothesis 5). In support of Hypothesis 4, greater anger displayed by men was associated with greater anger in women, \( \beta = .30, t(78) = 2.75, p < .01 \). However, in line with Hypothesis 5, the relationship between women's anger and their male partners' anger was contingent on women's levels of avoidance and distress-anxiety, \( \beta = .37, t(71) = 2.28, p < .05 \). Specifically, a three-way interaction revealed that more-avoidant women displayed more anger than less-avoidant women, but they did so primarily when they both experienced more distress-anxiety and had partners who displayed more anger toward them (see Figure 2). Thus, the greatest anger was seen in highly avoidant women who were very distressed and whose partners were very angry during the stress period. Interestingly, women who scored lower in avoidance and who were highly distressed showed little tendency to reciprocate their partners' anger with anger of their own. Women's level of ambivalence had little relation to the amount of anger they displayed. Thus, more ambivalent women did not respond to their partners' anger with more anger of their own.

**Men's anger.** Hypothesis 2 stated that men who score higher in avoidance generally would exhibit more anger than men who score lower. Furthermore, anger in more avoidant men would be greater if their partners were more distressed (Hypothesis 2a) or sought more comfort and support from them (Hypothesis 2b). To test these predictions, we performed two hierarchical regression analyses in which men's anger during the stress period was the dependent measure. In the first analysis, the predictor variables (entered in the following order) were (a) men's scores on the two attachment dimensions (avoidance and ambivalence), (b) women's rated distress-anxiety, and (c) the interaction terms. A significant main effect and 2 two-way interactions emerged. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the main effect indicated that more-avoidant men displayed greater anger during the stress period than did less-avoidant men, \( \beta = .23, t(81) = 2.08, p < .05 \). In line with Hypothesis 2a, the interactions revealed that the relationship between men's attachment orientation and anger varied significantly depending upon their female partners' level of distress-anxiety. Specifically, more-avoidant men displayed more anger if their partners were more distressed, whereas the opposite was true of less-avoidant men, \( \beta = .22, t(78) = -2.04, p < .05 \) (see Figure 3). An unexpected interaction involving men's ambivalence and women's level of distress also emerged. Highly ambivalent men displayed less anger than did less-ambivalent men if their partners were rated higher in distress-anxiety, \( \beta = -.24, t(77) = 2.17, p < .05 \). Conversely, if their partners scored lower in distress-anxiety, more-ambivalent men displayed more anger. This interaction confirms that, when placed in a support-giving role, more-ambivalent men are not antagonistic toward their partners (see Phillips et al., 1995).

A second analysis of men's anger was conducted in which the ratings of women's support seeking replaced the ratings of their distress-anxiety as a predictor variable. The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether men's anger was moderated by their partners' level of support seeking (as it was by women's level of distress-anxiety). No statistically significant effects were found.

Finally, in a third analysis, women's rated anger in the stress period replaced support seeking and distress-anxiety as a predictor variable. The purpose of this analysis was to test whether men's anger covaried with their female partners' anger (Hypothesis 4) and, more important, whether this relationship was moderated by attachment orientation and women's level of distress-anxiety during the stress period (Hypothesis 5). In accord with Hypothesis 4, this analysis showed that if women displayed higher levels of anger, so did their male partners, \( \beta = .39, t(79) = 3.80, p < .001 \). This trend was moderated only by men's avoidance, \( \beta = .20, t(78) = 1.99, p = .05 \). Specifically, if their female partners displayed greater anger, more-avoidant men also displayed more anger. Among less-avoidant men, in contrast, the tendency to reciprocate anger—although still present—was significantly weaker. No statistically significant effects were found for men's ambivalence.

**The Recovery Period**

The analyses of behavior during the recovery period examined the extent to which men and women displayed subtle negativity and overt anger.

**Women's positivity versus negativity.** Hypothesis 3 proposed that women who score higher on ambivalence would behave more negatively toward their partner than women who score lower if they felt more distressed (Hypothesis 3a), received less support from their partners (Hypothesis 3b), or sought more support from
them during the stress period (Hypothesis 3c). Thus, in the analysis to test Hypothesis 3a, the dependent measure was women’s positive versus negative interaction style, and the predictor variables (entered in the following order) were (a) women’s two attachment dimensions, (b) women’s level of distress in the stress period, and (c) all two-way interactions. A significant two-way interaction emerged between ambivalence and distress, $\beta = -0.29$, $t(77) = 2.60$, $p < .02$. Corroborating Hypothesis 3a, it indicated that highly ambivalent women interacted with their partners more negatively if they were more distressed during the stress period but interacted more positively if they were less distressed (see Figure 4).
In the second analysis (which tested Hypothesis 3b), the predictor variables were (a) women's two attachment dimensions, (b) the level of support provided by their male partners, and (c) all two-way interactions. No significant effects emerged in this analysis. In the third analysis (which tested Hypothesis 3c), the predictor variables were (a) women's two attachment dimensions, (b) women's level of support seeking, and (c) all two-way interactions. A significant interaction emerged between ambivalent attachment and support seeking, $\beta = -0.23$, $t(77) = 1.98$, $p = .05$ (see Figure 5). Supporting Hypothesis 3c, highly ambivalent women who sought more support during the stress period interacted more negatively with their partners during the recovery period than did less-ambivalent women. Conversely, among women who sought less support, more-ambivalent women interacted more positively than did less ambivalent women.

We next conducted an exploratory analysis to determine whether women's distress, men's support giving, and women's attachment ambivalence jointly moderated women's positive versus negative interaction style. This analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction, $\beta = .29$, $t(71) = 2.07$, $p < .05$, which showed that the difference between more- and less-ambivalent women who experienced higher levels of distress was more pronounced if highly ambivalent women received less support from their partners during the stress period. In other words, highly ambivalent women who were more upset interacted very negatively with their partners if they received less support from them.
Following this, we performed a second exploratory analysis in which men’s anger in the stress period replaced their supportiveness as a predictor. The purpose of this analysis was to test whether men’s anger in the stress period predicted women’s interaction style or whether it moderated the relationship between women’s attachment orientation and women’s interaction style. The predictor variables in this analysis were (a) women’s avoidance and ambivalence scores, (b) men’s rated anger, and (c) the two-way interactions. This analysis revealed that women interacted less positively during the recovery period if their male partners had...
displayed more anger during the stress period, $\beta = -0.26, t(79) = 2.23, p < .05$. No other statistically significant effects were found.

Finally, we conducted a third exploratory analysis to discern how women interacted with their partners during the recovery period as a function of their partner’s attachment orientation. Did women behave differently in the recovery period, not only in response to their partner’s behavior in the stress period but also contingent on his attachment orientation? The predictor variables in this analysis were (a) men’s avoidance and ambivalence scores, (b) men’s rated supportiveness and rated anger (in the stress period), and (c) the two-way interactions. Women with more-avoidant partners interacted less positively with them during the recovery period, $\beta = -0.44, t(81) = 4.32, p < .001$. An interaction between supportiveness and avoidance also emerged, $\beta = 0.23, t(77) = 2.11, p < .05$. It indicated that the tendency of women to interact less positively with more-avoidant men was stronger if they were less supportive during the stress period.

**Men’s positivity versus negativity.** We did not anticipate that highly avoidant or highly ambivalent men would interact more negatively during the recovery period. The results basically confirmed our expectations. In the first regression analysis involving men’s interaction style, ratings of men on the positive versus negative interaction index were the dependent measure. The predictor variables included (a) men’s avoidance and ambivalence scores, (b) their female partner’s level of distress—anxiety in the stress period, and (c) the two-way interactions. No statistically significant results emerged.

Next, women’s level of support seeking during the stress period replaced their level of distress—anxiety as a predictor variable. This analysis revealed a lone significant interaction between men’s avoidance and women’s level of support seeking, $\beta = -0.28, t(78) = 2.41, p < .05$. In particular, highly avoidant men interacted less positively with their partners if their partners sought more support from them in the stress period, whereas less-avoidant men interacted more positively (see Figure 6).

**Women’s overt anger.** Although we predicted that under certain circumstances, highly ambivalent women would behave more negatively toward their partners than less-ambivalent women during the recovery period (see Hypothesis 3), we were less certain about whether they would display greater overt anger. In our experimental situation, subtle negativity should allow disgruntled women to reprimand their partners without driving them away. Overt anger, on the other hand, could alienate the partner and destabilize the relationship—outcomes that highly ambivalent women should dread. To test this conjecture, we conducted analyses in which women’s overt anger in the recovery period was the dependent measure. These analyses indicated that women’s anger was not systematically related to their attachment orientations.

**Men’s overt anger.** We did not anticipate that highly avoidant or highly ambivalent men would exhibit higher levels of anger in the recovery period. The results basically confirmed our expectations. Analyses in which men’s avoidance and ambivalence, women’s rated anxiety—distress and support seeking, and all two-way interactions were entered as predictor variables indicated that men’s anger was largely unrelated to both their own and their partner’s attachment orientations. The only significant effect found was an unexpected interaction between men’s ambivalence and women’s distress, $\beta = -0.24, t(77) = 2.16, p < .05$. It revealed that highly ambivalent men showed exceptionally low levels of
anger during the recovery period if their partners had been highly distressed in the stress period. This suggests that anger may be inhibited in highly ambivalent men when their partners are upset, perhaps because highly ambivalent men feel better when they can offer support to their partners.\(^6\)

**Summary of Major Hypotheses and Results**

In summary, we tested five major hypotheses, most of which were supported. The first set focused on the stress period. Corroborating Hypothesis 1, more-avoidant women displayed greater anger during the stress period than did less-avoidant women. Moreover, in line with Hypothesis 1a, this was particularly true of highly avoidant women who were more distressed and received less support from their partners during the stress period. This finding suggests that, at some level, highly avoidant women may yearn for care and support from their partners. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, more-avoidant men exhibited greater anger than less-avoidant men did in the stress period. Moreover, as predicted in Hypothesis 2a, highly avoidant men displayed more anger if their partners were more distressed. However, contrary to Hypothesis 2b, they did not display more anger if their partners sought higher levels of support.

The second set of hypotheses involved the recovery period. Supporting Hypothesis 3a and 3c, more-ambivalent women, compared with less-ambivalent women, behaved more negatively toward their partners in the recovery period if they were more distressed during the stress period or if they sought more support from their partners. Although more-ambivalent women did not behave more negatively if they received less support from their partners (contrary to Hypothesis 3b), a three-way interaction revealed that highly ambivalent women were most negative when they were distressed and received less support.

The last set of hypotheses dealt with the reciprocation of anger. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the level of anger displayed by partners was reciprocated in the stress period. Supporting Hypothesis 4, the level of anger displayed by partners was reciprocated in the stress period.

\(^6\) We conducted additional analyses to determine whether any of the significant interactions might have been produced by curvilinear relations between the independent variables and the dependent variables (see Ganzach, 1997). No significant curvilinear effects were found. The effects reported above might have been influenced by the attachment orientation of each individual’s dating partner. To test this possibility, we conducted another series of analyses in which the attachment scores of each participant’s dating partner (instead of his or her own attachment scores) were entered as predictors in all of the regression equations predicting each participant’s score on each dependent measure. No significant effects emerged. In a second series of analyses, we partialed out variance associated with each participant’s partner’s score on both attachment dimensions, replicating all of the regressions reported above. All of the significant findings remained significant when partners’ attachment scores were statistically controlled. Thus, the attachment orientation of each participant’s dating partner had little if any impact on the results. In a third series of analyses, we tested for interactions between the male and female partner’s attachment scores. No significant interactions emerged. Finally, the interaction terms involving the two attachment dimensions (i.e., the Avoidance X Ambivalence interactions for men and women) did not significantly predict any of the dependent measures once the main effect variance of avoidance and ambivalence was partialed out. These findings suggest that Bartholomew’s (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) two attachment axes—view of self versus view of others—explain most of the variance in the dependent measures; the axes that lie at 45° angles do not enhance predictive power.
thesis 5, anger was reciprocated more strongly by more-avoidant men and women, particularly if the female partner was highly distressed in the stress period.

Discussion

Two different psychological situations were investigated in this study. During the stress period, the attachment systems of women should have been directly activated by the impending, anxiety-provoking activity (Kobak & Duemmeler, 1994); the attachment systems of men, however, should have been activated indirectly through their partners' distress and bids for care and support. During the recovery period, the stressor and the need to seek or give support were removed. Thus, the recovery period gave both partners—especially women—an opportunity to evaluate their relationships in light of how their partners behaved during the stress period. In general, the results revealed that more-avoidant persons expressed greater overt anger in the stress period, whereas more-ambivalent persons expressed more subtle signs of negative affect in the recovery period. The stress period should have been particularly difficult for avoidant persons to deal with because it accentuated emotional dependence and caregiving, issues that are central to the internal conflicts experienced by highly avoidant individuals (Bowlby, 1973). The recovery period, in contrast, was more relevant for highly ambivalent persons because their deep-seated worries and suspicions about attachment figures lead them to be hypervigilant about their partners' true feelings and commitment (see Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Simpson et al., 1999). The opportunity to reflect on their partners and relationships, therefore, should have been very important to highly ambivalent individuals.

The Stress Period

Avoidant Persons

As Bowlby (1979) stated in the passage quoted earlier, highly avoidant persons distrust relationships because they fear being rejected if they seek comfort from others, and they dislike being forced into caregiving roles. During the stress period, highly avoidant women should have felt the need to be comforted. Yet they also were expected to maintain their psychological and emotional independence, and they may have anticipated rejection. Highly avoidant men should have perceived the situation as one pressuring them to become a caregiver. Consequently, both avoidant women and avoidant men should have found the stress period to be psychologically taxing. In response to these challenges, more-avoidant men should have reacted with anger, particularly if their dating partners were emotionally distressed or turned to them for comfort and support. Highly avoidant women also should have exhibited greater anger, especially if the stressor made them feel upset and in need of comfort. The expression of anger and hostility in situations involving distress and care should curtail the seeking, giving, and receiving of support quickly and completely (Bowlby, 1973). Thus, anger should be an effective means of regaining emotional control in interpersonal situations for highly avoidant people.

These predictions were largely confirmed. Supporting Hypothesis 1, highly avoidant women displayed higher levels of anger during the stress period. Furthermore, consistent with Hypothesis 5a, highly avoidant women displayed more anger if they were more distressed. However, they also exhibited more anger if they received less support from their partners and were highly anxious-distrusted during the stress period. In line with Main's (1981) view of avoidance, the fact that highly avoidant women were angrier if they received less support suggests that, at some level, they want support even though they fear they might not get it. Moreover, they behave in ways that make it more difficult for their partners to provide support (see Simpson et al., 1992). These results are reminiscent of the behavior of avoidant children, who fear precisely what they want most—comfort and support from their attachment figures (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, highly avoidant men also displayed greater anger in the stress period. Corroborating Hypothesis 2a, highly avoidant men displayed more anger if their partners were more distressed about the impending activity. However, contrary to Hypothesis 2b, the level of anger displayed by highly avoidant men was not moderated by their partners' level of support seeking during the stress period. This suggests that avoidant men may be more capable of deflecting or handling their partners' support-seeking behaviors than their anxiety and distress. A partner's emotional distress may be more difficult to manage or contain than are bids for support, which might be more easily and quickly suppressed with simple, perfunctory remarks (e.g., "It will be okay"). Emotional distress that requires caregiving is likely to be very arousing and aversive to avoidant men. The negative responses of avoidant men to their dating partners' distress in the present study parallels the reactions of avoidant mothers to their distressed infants (see Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Rudolph, & Grossmann, 1988). These responses also are consistent with research showing that avoidant persons are rated by acquaintances as being more hostile than other people (Kobak & Seery, 1988) and that couples with at least one avoidant partner display more anger in conflict resolution discussions (Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Simpson et al., 1996).

A key issue raised by these results concerns how anger affects the close relationships of avoidant persons. Highly avoidant people have more problem-ridden and unhappy relationships than do more secure (i.e., less avoidant) persons. Their relationships, for example, contain more frequent negative affect (Simpson, 1990) and less trust, commitment, satisfaction, and interdependence (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). Simpson and Rholes (1994) suggest that these negative outcomes may be partially determined by how partners respond to each other when one or both need support. More specifically, the times when partners need support the most might constitute critical moments in the development of a relationship. If partners meet each other's needs, the relationship is likely to be strengthened, and trust, satisfaction, and commitment are likely to be enhanced. Conversely, if partners are not supportive, the relationship may be weakened. Because anger should prevent partners from meeting each other's needs, anger that is expressed in response to a partner's anxiety or distress should have particularly powerful, deleterious effects on the quality, happiness, and stability of relationships involving avoidant persons.

Higher levels of anger also were observed in avoidant persons in response to their partners' level of anger. In support of Hypothesis 5, highly avoidant men whose partners were angry, as well as highly avoidant women who were both upset about the stressor and
with an angry partner, displayed the highest levels of anger. Such patterns of behavior not only may have a damaging impact on relationship quality, they also may play an important role in setting the stage for emotional or even physical abuse. Several studies have shown that couples in relationships in which physical violence occurs exhibit higher levels of verbal aggression and negative affect, including anger, hostility, and contempt during conflictual encounters (Burman, Margolin, & John, 1993; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Margolin, Burman, & John, 1989; Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1988; Murphy & O’Leary, 1989; O’Leary & Vivian, 1990; Vivian & O’Leary, 1987). Moreover, recent studies of abusive men (Dutton et al., 1994; Roberts & Noller, 1998) have found that abuse is more common in men who are insecurely attached (but also see Pistolet & Tarrant, 1993). The fact that we could detect anger in a brief laboratory setting with couples who had dated for an average of 18 months suggests that, over time, a cyclical process of attack and counterattack could gradually draw couples with avoidant members into abusive interactions. Although much remains to be learned, the present findings suggest how attachment orientations—particularly avoidance—might play a role in the instigation of abusive behavior.

An examination of Figures 1 and 2 reveals that greater anger and less support by men has similar effects on the level of anger observed in women during the stress period. This is not surprising given the negative correlation between support giving and anger during the stress period witnessed in men. A closer comparison of these figures, however, reveals that less-avoidant women displayed dramatically less anger when they were highly distressed and their male partners were more angry. This finding suggests that less-avoidant women may inhibit the reciprocation of anger when they are upset and have partners who are agitated. This reaction may prevent, or at least dampen, the cycle of escalating negative affect.

Ambivalent Persons

Few effects emerged during the stress period for ambivalent persons. This is consistent with the notion that ambivalent persons desire and are comfortable with emotional support and were not affected by the impending stressful activity in the same way that avoidant persons were. One unanticipated finding involving anger, however, emerged for men. If their partners were more distressed in the stress period, highly ambivalent men displayed comparatively less anger. This finding reveals how differently highly ambivalent and highly avoidant men respond to their partners’ distress. Their partners’ distress actually may have inhibited the expression of anger in ambivalent men. Above all else, ambivalent people are motivated to avert relationship loss or abandonment. Consequently, they must learn when it is safe to vent negative feelings without driving their partners away. It should be safer to express anger in situations where partners are not overly distressed and upset. Expressing strong anger when partners are highly distressed could instigate what ambivalent persons fear the most—losing their partner and relationship. This effect also surfaced in the recovery period; once again, highly ambivalent men showed unusually low levels of overt anger if their partners had been highly anxious and upset in the stress period.

The Recovery Period

Research on stress has typically focused either on the stressful experience itself or on how chronic or traumatic stress affects long-term psychological adjustment. Simpson and Rholes (1994) suggested that the period after stressful events subside may be critical for relationships because partners can reassess their relationship in light of how well they have responded to each other’s needs. To our knowledge, the present study is the first to address this issue.

Ambivalent Persons

According to Hypotheses 3a–3c, highly ambivalent women should have responded less positively to their partners during the recovery period, depending on how distressed they were, how much support they received, or how much support they sought in the stress period. Supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3e, more-ambivalent women who were more distressed in the stress period and who sought more support interacted more negatively toward their partner in the recovery period. Furthermore, a three-way interaction indicated that highly ambivalent women who were more distressed interacted most negatively if they received less support from their partners. This suggests that highly ambivalent women are quite sensitive to the interplay between support seeking and support giving, particularly when they are upset. This acute sensitivity might partially explain why highly ambivalent women experience more negative affect in their relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990) and why their perceptions of their partners and relationships vacillate greatly over time (Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996).

Avoidant Persons

As expected, men’s and women’s avoidance was unrelated to their style of interaction during the recovery period. However, men’s avoidance was associated with the manner in which women interacted with them. Regardless of their own attachment orientation, women interacted more negatively if their male partners were more avoidant. This is not surprising in light of the fact that highly avoidant men displayed more anger in the stress period. This finding, however, cannot be completely attributed to the angry or unsupportive actions of avoidant men because these effects remained significant even when anger and supportiveness were partialled out. Although it was not one of our hypotheses, this finding reinforces just how difficult it is to interact with highly avoidant men. The source of difficulty involves more than merely their high levels of anger and lack of supportiveness. We suspect that it may reside in the deeper, negative aspects of their internal working models, which entail strong distrust, cynicism, and lack of empathy for others (see Rholes, Simpson, & Grich Stevens, 1998).

Overt Anger in the Recovery Period

Only one finding emerged for attachment orientation and overt anger in the recovery period. As discussed earlier, highly ambivalent men displayed very little anger if their partners had been highly anxious—upset in the stress period. This is consistent with the calm behavior they also displayed in the stress period. These actions may reflect the considerable reluctance of highly ambiva-
 lent men to express negative affect when their partners are dis-

tressed, most likely for fear of alienating or losing them (Bowlby,

1973).

Secure Individuals

The two-dimensional model of attachment used in this study

assesses the two major dimensions—view of others (avoidance)

and view of self (anxiety–ambivalence) —known to underlie vir-

tually all self-report adult attachment measures (see Brennan et al.,

1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994, for reviews). In light of this,

how can the behavior of securely attached individuals be under-

stood? The AAQ (Simpson et al., 1996) avoidance dimension is

composed of sentences from the secure and avoidant attachment

paragraphs originally developed by Hazan and Shaver (1987).

Thus, people who score higher on the continuously distributed

avoidance dimension tend to classify themselves as avoidant when

deciding which of the three Hazan and Shaver paragraphs best

characterizes them, whereas people who score lower on the avoid-

ance dimension usually classify themselves as secure. One way to

interpret the behavior of highly secure individuals, therefore, is to

view them as behaving in the opposite manner of highly avoidant

individuals. According to this interpretation, for example, more-

secure women displayed relatively less anger in the stress period,

and they were much less likely to reciprocate anger in response to

their partners’ anger. Similarly, more-secure men exhibited less

anger in the stress period, they displayed less anger if their partners

were distressed, and they were less likely to reciprocate anger. In

other words, more-secure individuals were less agitated, more

accommodating, and more benevolent in how they responded to

their partners in this study, particularly when compared with

highly avoidant individuals.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) have proposed that proto-
typically secure individuals should have positive views of both

themselves and others and should score low on both the avoidance

and the anxiety–ambivalence dimensions. As noted above, we

conducted analyses to test for interactions involving participants’

avoidance and ambivalence attachment dimension scores. How-

ever, we found no evidence that the interaction terms (i.e., scoring

low on both dimensions) accounted for variance in the dependent

measures above and beyond that explained by each dimension as

a main effect.

Avoidance and anxiety–ambivalence are orthogonal dimensions

(Brennan et al., 1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), and they do

not correspond to categorically distinct attachment styles. Though

the most secure individuals should score low on both dimensions,

such persons do not necessarily represent a distinct, typological
category. Moreover, relations between the two attachment dimen-
sions and various dependent measures should depend on whether

the measures have more to do with individuals’ views of others,

views of themselves, or a combination of the two. Because the

avoidance dimension primarily assesses how individuals view

others, avoidance should account for more variance in studies (and

dependent measures) that focus on interactions with significant

others, how one is treated by others, and how others are perceived.

Conversely, given that the anxiety–ambivalence dimension mainly

assesses how individuals view themselves, it should explain more

variance in studies and measures that involve self-relevant issues

(see Simpson et al., 1996). In studies where both other and self

issues are salient, interaction effects involving avoidance and

ambivalence might predict dependent measures above and beyond

the main effects. Interaction effects, however, might be relatively

rare.

Functional Versus Dysfunctional Anger

Bowlby (1973) claimed that anger plays a pivotal role in attach-

ment relationships. He drew a distinction between functional anger

(the anger of hope) and dysfunctional anger (the anger of despair).

It is difficult to determine from a short, single interaction which

form of anger an individual might be displaying. To understand

whether anger directed at a romantic partner is motivated by the

desire to correct, maintain, and improve the relationship (func-
tional anger) or whether it is motivated by malice or the desire for

revenge (dysfunctional anger), one must know a lot about the

situation, each interaction partner’s history and current motives,

the history of the relationship, and the couple’s perceptions of the

relationship’s future. One thing, however, is clear: Anger directed

at a partner who is distressed by circumstances beyond his or her

control and seeks support is likely to be dysfunctional. In the

present study, highly avoidant men reacted this way in the stress

period. Such behavior is dysfunctional because it is likely to

alienate the partner and exacerbate other problems in the

relationship.

Caveats and Conclusions

Some caveats should be considered when interpreting these

results. First, all of the findings are correlational. Therefore, no

causal conclusions can be reached about the relations between

attachment orientations and the dependent measures. Although our

theoretical perspective implies that an individual’s attachment

orientation may cause anger in certain anxiety-provoking situa-
tions, different patterns of relations might exist. For example, if

intense anger persists over time, its expression could produce

lasting changes in an individual’s working models. Alternatively,

strong anger might attenuate the amount of support an individual

seeks or gives, independent of his or her specific attachment

orientation. Second, even though the average couple dated for 18

months, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to marriages

or other long-term romantic relationships. Third, we did not ex-

perimentally manipulate threat in this study because if some part-

ners had been assigned to a no-threat condition, they could have

displayed little if any anxiety, anger, support seeking, or support

giving—the variables that were central to this research. This would

have left us with a single threat condition similar to the anxiety-

provoking situation we created.

The title of Bowlby’s landmark 1973 volume is Attachment and

Loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger. The inclusion of the

word anger in the title makes it clear that this topic is central to

attachment theory. Some of the earliest and most important em-

pirical work on attachment focused on the origins, expression, and

regulation of anger in young children (see Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Aside from one recent study examining anger in imagined or

recalled situations (Mikulincer, 1998) and a few social interaction

studies focusing on conflict management (e.g., Kobak & Hazan,

1991; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993;

Simpson et al., 1996), relatively little adult attachment research has
focused on anger. This does not signify, however, that the link between attachment and anger is unimportant in adult relationships. Ineffective regulation of anger can swiftly undercut the well-being, happiness, and stability of any close relationship, and anger displayed in situations requiring care and support may be particularly destructive.

References


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