Attachment and the Management of Empathic Accuracy
in Relationship Threatening Situations

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Abstract

In two studies, we tested how attachment orientations are related to empathic accuracy (i.e., the accuracy with which one infers a partner’s private thoughts and feelings) during attachment-relevant discussions. In Study 1, married couples were videotaped while discussing a severe or less severe relationship issue that involved intimacy or jealousy. In Study 2, dating couples were videotaped while trying to resolving a relationship conflict in their relationship. Consistent with the Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 2001), highly avoidant individuals were less empathically accurate in both studies. Highly anxious individuals were more empathically accurate when they discussed intimacy issues that posed a potential threat to their relationship (in Study 1), and when they were rated as more distressed while discussing a relationship conflict (in Study 2). These findings are discussed in terms of how highly anxious and avoidant people differentially “manage” empathic accuracy to regulate affect and facilitate their interpersonal goals.

Keywords: Attachment, Empathic Accuracy, Social Interaction
Attachment and the Management of Empathic Accuracy in Relationship Threatening Situations

“To understand all is to forgive all.”

French proverb

“To understand all is to forgive nothing.”

English epigram

As these contrasting views suggest, insight into what a partner is thinking or feeling can cut both ways. In some contexts, knowing more may strengthen the ties that bind partners together. However, in other contexts, knowing more may threaten or even destroy relationships. For example, in relationship-threatening situations that cannot be avoided, some people may be motivated to ignore, disregard, or misinterpret the damaging thoughts or feelings that their partners could be harboring, not wanting to become entangled in the issues implied by those negative thoughts and feelings. Other people, however, may want to “get inside the head” of their partners, even if the knowledge gained might be hurtful or could destabilize the relationship. Who are these people, and how do they “manage” empathic accuracy enroute to protecting—or failing to protect—their relationships from potential threats?

Though it is a topic of considerable theorizing and speculation (see Ickes & Simpson, 1997; 2001; Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003), little empirical research has examined how people manage empathic accuracy, especially during relationship-threatening interactions. Blending principles of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and the revised Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 2001), we derived
and tested a set of predictions that address how individuals who have different attachment orientations differentially “manage” empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening contexts.

*Attachment Theory and Working Models*

Beginning early in life, individuals start to develop working models of the self and others based on interactions with significant others. Over time, these models affect the way in which individuals think, feel, and behave in subsequent close relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Beliefs and expectations are central components of working models, which involve “if/then” propositions regarding what attachment figures are likely to do in certain contexts (e.g., *if* I feel vulnerable, *then* I can count on my partner for comfort and support). Working models also contain rules distilled from experiences with past attachment figures that guide behavior with respect to current attachment figures. For example, working models affect information processing by influencing which aspects of a romantic partner’s behavior are attend to or ignored, the inferences or judgments that are made about a partner’s behavior, and which actions by a partner are or are not remembered (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2004). Variations in working models give rise to individual differences in attachment styles or orientations.

Two dimensions underlie individual differences in adult romantic attachment orientations (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). *Avoidance* reflects the degree to which people are uncomfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy. Highly avoidant individuals tend to be less invested in their relationships, claim to value relationships less, and strive to maintain psychological and emotional independence from their partners (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1994).
Anxiety reflects the degree to which individuals worry and ruminate about being rejected or abandoned by their partners. Highly anxious individuals are chronically concerned that their partners might leave them, do not love them, or are unwilling or unable to help them cope with distressing situations.

One of the primary functions served by attachment orientations is the regulation of negative affect (Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Simpson, 1990). According to Kobak and Sceery (1988), secure individuals directly acknowledge distress when they experience it and turn to attachment figures for comfort and support. Highly avoidant individuals divert attention away from the source of distress, do not acknowledge distress, and use self-reliant tactics to control and reduce negative affect. Highly anxious people direct their attention toward the source of distress and focus on it, particularly when they believe that attachment figures may be unresponsive to their needs. Consequently, highly anxious people have difficulty reducing and containing negative affect when it arises. Given these tendencies, highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals cope with stressful events less effectively than do less avoidant and less anxious (i.e., more secure) persons (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) have developed a process model that specifies the conditions under which the attachment system should be activated in adults who have different attachment orientations. Because highly anxious individuals want to avoid losing their partners/relationships, they tend to use tactics associated with a hyperactivating strategy (e.g., ruminating about worst-case scenarios, exaggerating potentially threatening cues, being vigilant to signs that partners might eventually leave them), especially when a potential threat to the relationship is detected. One such tactic
may be *motivated empathic accuracy* with respect to what the partner is thinking and feeling during relationship-threatenng interactions. In other words, one manifestation of hypervigilance should be enhanced empathic accuracy in relationship-threating situations. Preliminary evidence for this phenomenon was first reported by Simpson, Ickes, and Grich (1999), who found that highly anxious women were more empathically accurate than less anxious women when each woman tried to infer her romantic partner’s thoughts and feelings as he rated and discussed a set of attractive women with her. This motivated empathic accuracy effect, however, has never been documented in men, and it has not been investigated in discussions that center on important relationship issues (e.g., intimacy, jealousy, conflict), many of which involve problems that are *internal to* (rather than external to) the relationship.

When highly avoidant individuals detect potential threats to their independence in relationships, they strive to keep their attachment systems deactivated. Contrary to anxious individuals, highly avoidant individuals attempt to inhibit and control their emotions using deactivating tactics such as ignoring, dismissing, or withdrawing from threats, and/or suppressing threat-related thoughts. One of the most efficient ways to limit, control, and curtail information that could activate the attachment system is to simply “stay out of the partner’s head” (i.e., exhibit empathic inaccuracy when partners might be having threatening/distressing thoughts and feelings). This suggests that highly avoidant individuals should use “frontline” strategies designed to ward off activation of their attachment systems from the very outset when possible. No research to date has examined whether highly avoidant people are less empathically accurate during actual relationship discussions.
Empathic Accuracy and Attachment Orientations

Empathic accuracy is a double-edged sword in that it often helps, but sometimes hurts, relationships. Past research indicates that while greater empathic accuracy is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability in situations that pose little or no threat to relationships, it is linked with less satisfaction and more instability in relationship-threatening situations (see Ickes & Simpson, 1997; 2001).

According to the revised Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 2001), almost all relationships have "danger zone" areas, domains in which painful insights or revelations about a partner’s private thoughts and feelings might occur (e.g., the partner’s negative thoughts about the self, the partner’s attraction to available alternative partners). The nature of these danger zones should depend on how individuals have been treated in prior relationships (i.e., their attachment history) along with what has transpired in their current relationship. According to the model, these “danger zone” areas are not necessarily threatening, but they may become threatening if partners delve into them too deeply.

Highly anxious and avoidant people should respond to these danger zones using the approach (anxiety) and avoidance tendencies described above. Highly anxious people desire greater closeness and felt security with their partners and, therefore, they should remain “engaged” when they encounter danger-zone areas with their partners. Once a danger-zone area is perceived as potentially relationship-threatening, they should become relatively more empathically accurate. If a situation is perceived as less relationship-threatening or non-threatening, they should be relatively less empathically accurate.
In contrast, highly avoidant people should be less empathically accurate in situations where potential danger-zone situations might be encountered, adopting the frontline strategy of simply “staying out” of their partners’ heads entirely (see Ickes & Simpson, 2001). In these situations, highly avoidant individuals should strive to maintain psychological and emotional distance between themselves and their partners to prevent their attachment systems from being activated. As a result, they should not focus on their partner’s thoughts and feelings from the outset, even if they don’t feel threatened.

This hypothesis is bolstered by recent findings. Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, and Friedman (2007) gave highly avoidant people an opportunity to gain new information about their romantic partners’ private thoughts and feelings, thoughts about the future of their relationship, or preferences for mundane things such as movies and music. Even in this non-threatening situation, highly avoidant people did not want to learn additional private information about their partners. This represents indirect evidence of the use of the “frontline” strategy of staying out of their partner’s heads. Highly avoidant people also said they knew less about their partners and placed less value on knowing more about them in the future. Together, these findings suggest that highly avoidant people should be less inclined to read their partners thoughts and feelings accurately, particularly in relationship-threatening discussions.

To investigate how highly anxious and avoidant individuals manage empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening contexts, we conducted two studies. The studies differed in type of romantic relationship (married and dating), types of attachment-relevant discussion (jealousy or intimacy and conflict), and the methods used to create and assess distress (experimental manipulations and observer-ratings). Study 1
investigated married couples that engaged in a severe or less severe relationship jealousy or intimacy discussion. Study 2 investigated dating couples that engaged in a relationship conflict-resolution discussion.

**Study 1**

In Study 1, married couples participated in a videotaped problem resolution task. Each couple was asked to identify and try to resolve either a major or a minor problem in their relationship that centered on an intimacy or jealousy issue. After each discussion, each partner completed an empathic accuracy task followed by post-discussion measures. We predicted that more avoidant individuals would exhibit lower levels of empathic accuracy than less avoidant people, regardless of the severity (major/minor) of the topic that was discussed. In contrast, more anxious individuals should display hypervigilance (i.e., greater empathic accuracy), particularly if they discussed a major (more severe) relationship issue.

The discussion topics (intimacy vs. jealousy) were chosen because they are primary sources of concern and represent potential danger zones (Ickes & Simpson, 2001), particularly for insecurely attached people. We expected that highly anxious individuals would display higher levels of empathic accuracy when discussing a more severe intimacy topic, given that such issues are likely to be more common in relationships, whereas jealousy issues might vary in terms of their relevance to certain relationships. Conversely, intimacy and jealousy both have the potential to activate the attachment systems of highly avoidant people, leading them to use “frontline” strategies regardless of which issue is discussed.
Method

Participants

Prospective couples responded to fliers and advertisements placed in a local newspaper in a Southwestern city. To participate, couples must have been married for at least one year but no more than 15 years. Those who agreed to participate \((N = 96)\) couples) were scheduled for a laboratory session. One couple declined to release their videotaped interaction for coding. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 95 couples. The average length of marriage was 5.79 years. The average age of husbands and wives was 32.70 and 31.50 years, respectively. Seventy percent of the participants classified themselves as Caucasian, 22% as Hispanic, and 8% as African-American. Couples were paid $50 for participating.

Design and Procedure

Each couple was randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (Type of Problem: Jealousy vs. Intimacy) X 2 (Severity of Problem: More vs. Less) between-dyads design. Upon arriving at the lab, each couple was told about the study, after which each partner read and signed a consent form. Each partner was informed that s/he could discontinue participation at any time for any reason without loss of promised compensation. Spouses were then led to separate rooms to ensure that they could not communicate while completing the pre-interaction questionnaires.

Embedded in the pre-interaction questionnaires was the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson et al., 1996). The AAQ is a well-validated 17-item measure that assesses thoughts and feelings about romantic partners in general on two dimensions: avoidance and anxiety. The 8-item Avoidance subscale contains items such
as “I don’t like people getting too close to me” and “I’m nervous whenever anyone gets too close.” The 9-item Anxiety subscale includes items such as “I often want to merge completely with others, and this desire sometimes scares them away” and “I’m confident others would never hurt me by suddenly ending our relationship” (reverse-scored). Items were answered on Likert-type scales anchored 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach alphas for women and men were .76 and .76 respectively for the Avoidance subscale, and .81 and .71 respectively for the Anxiety subscale.

Once both partners had completed the pre-interaction questionnaires, they were led to a room where their problem discussion took place. Each spouse was asked to list (independently) up to 4 topic-relevant (jealousy or intimacy) major or minor problems, depending on the experimental condition to which each couple was assigned. After both spouses created their separate lists, each spouse examined his/her partner’s list, and the couple jointly agreed on which issue to discuss. Each couple was left alone to discuss the issue, and the partners were videotaped using a split-screen camera system. Each couple stated the problem they had agreed to discuss at the beginning of the discussion so the primary issue(s) would be clear to the raters. Seven minutes into the discussion, each couple was notified by intercom that they needed to conclude it. Immediately after the discussion, each participant rated how stressful the discussion was on three 7-point Likert-type scales. Each spouse was then escorted to a separate room, where s/he completed the thought/feeling reporting task and the empathic inference task privately (with neither the partner nor the experimenter present).
Thought/Feeling Reporting and Empathic Accuracy Assessment

Following standard empathic accuracy assessment procedures (Ickes, 1997, 2001), each spouse assumed two roles. When in the role of the target partner, each spouse provided a set of actual thought/feeling entries (i.e., the specific thoughts or feelings the spouse recalled having at specific points during the videotaped interaction), which his/her partner subsequently tried to infer. When in the role of the perceiving partner, each spouse tried to infer the specific thoughts and feelings reported by his/her partner.

Specifically, each participant viewed a separate copy of the videotaped discussion and was instructed to report as accurately as possible each specific thought or feeling that s/he distinctly remembered having had during the discussion. When the videotape reached a point when the participant remembered having had a particular thought or feeling, s/he was told to pause the tape. Then, using a standardized answer sheet, the participant recorded: (a) the time when the thought or feeling occurred (the running time of the discussion at that moment, which was displayed on the tape); (b) whether it was a thought or a feeling; and (c) what the specific content of the thought or feeling was (reported as precisely as possible in 1-2 sentences). The average number of thoughts/feelings listed husbands and wives were similar and did not differ significantly (husbands’ M = 7.04, SD = 4.25; wives’ M = 6.50, SD = 3.72, ns)

After completing this first task, each participant was given a list of the specific times or “stop points” when his/her spouse (the target partner) reported having had a specific thought or feeling. The participant (now in the role of the perceiver) watched the videotaped discussion a second time, stopping the tape each time his/her spouse had
reported having had a specific thought or feeling. At each stop point, the participant made
a written inference (in 1-2 sentences) about what his/her spouse had been thinking or
feeling at that point during the discussion. Each participant then completed a brief post-
interaction questionnaire, after which the spouses were reunited, debriefed, and
compensated.

Coding of Empathic Accuracy and Behavioral Measures

Empathic accuracy coding. The empathic accuracy data were coded by five
trained raters who worked independently. Raters assessed each perceiving partner’s
dependently empathic accuracy by comparing the actual thoughts/feelings reported by each participant
with the corresponding inferred thoughts/feelings reported by his/her spouse.
Specifically, for each thought/feeling inference made by the perceiver, raters assigned a
value of “0” if the content of the inferred thought/feeling was different from the actual
thought/feeling, a “1” if the inferred content was similar to (but not the same as) the
actual content, and a “2” if the inferred content was essentially the same as the actual
content. Raters coded the empathic accuracy of the husband and wife in each relationship
in a random order (i.e., half the raters coded husbands first, then the wives, or vice versa).
The mean reliability of this measure (the within-subject average calculated across all
raters) was .72.

For each perceiver, the empathic accuracy ratings for all of the thought/feeling
inferences were aggregated, and the aggregates across the 5 raters were then averaged to
create an empathic accuracy score. This score was then adjusted for the total number of
thought/feeling inferences made by each perceiver to create an empathic accuracy index
that could range from 0 (total inaccuracy) to 100 (perfect accuracy). The average scores
for the husbands and the wives were virtually identical (26.01 and 26.03, respectively, ns). This mean level of empathic accuracy is similar to what has been found in previous studies of young married couples (e.g., Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002).

**Ease of inference coding.** Some individuals might be more empathically accurate because their partners are more “readable” (i.e., their partners may say or do things during the discussion that make the partner’s thoughts or feelings more transparent). Because we wanted to control for non-motivational sources of variation in empathic accuracy, we next gave the five raters lists of each participant’s actual thought/feeling entries along with the corresponding “stop points” in the discussion. The raters then watched each couple’s interaction, stopped the videotape at each listed stop point, and rated the extent to which the target partner’s verbal or nonverbal behavior expressed what s/he was thinking/feeling at each point, given the target’s written thought/feeling at each moment. The raters coded the husband and wife in each relationship in a random order on 7-point scales anchored 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *extremely*. These ratings were then aggregated to create an observer-rated ease-of-inference index (mean within-subject reliability across all raters was .87). This index was treated as a covariate to statistically control for partner “readability” in the analyses reported below.²

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. The means for anxious and avoidant attachment and the ease-of-inference index are normed to the 7-point rating scales used to assess each dimension. The empathic accuracy index could range from 0 (total inaccuracy in inferring the content of the partner’s thoughts and feelings) to 100 (perfect
accuracy). According to the raters, it was easier to infer the thoughts and feelings from the behavior of men than it was from women. No other gender differences emerged. Correlations among the variables are shown in Table 2.

*Manipulation check*

To test the effectiveness of our primary manipulated variable (being assigned to discuss a major vs. a minor relationship problem), we examined the amount of stress reported by each participant during the discussion. As expected, individuals assigned to discuss more severe problems reported more distress ($M = 15.43$) than did those assigned to discuss less severe problems ($M = 12.34$), $t(188) = 2.81$, $p < .01$.

*The APIM Analyses*

Because husbands’ and wives’ scores correlated significantly for several variables (indicating some degree of statistical interdependence), we analyzed the data using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). The APIM permits one to estimate the degree to which dyad members’ responses or behaviors are associated with factors attributable to the actor (i.e., the individual providing the response/behavior) and to the actor’s partner. Accordingly, the APIM estimates both *actor effects* (the effect that an individual’s predictor variable score has on his/her own outcome score) and *partner effects* (the effect that an individual’s *partner’s* predictor variable score has on the actor’s outcome score). Because APIM analyses model the statistical interdependence that exists between partners in relationships, they provide separate, statistically independent tests of actor and partner paths. Specifically, the effects of the actor’s independent variable score on the actor’s dependent measure control for the partner’s independent variable score, and the effects of the partner’s independent variable
score on the actor’s dependent measure control for the actor’s independent variable score. With this approach, the dyad is the unit of analysis, and actor and partner effects are tested with the proper degrees of freedom.

Tests of Predictions

The APIM analyses were conducted using the PROC MIXED program in SAS 9.0. Actor effects are reported as regression coefficients, all of the independent variables are standardized, and the primary dependent variable (empathic accuracy) is unstandardized. All predictor variables were centered on the grand sample mean (Aiken & West, 1991). The dependent variable in each analysis was each actor’s empathic accuracy score. The predictor variables were the actor and partner scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance, problem topic (jealousy vs. intimacy), and problem severity (major vs. minor). We also entered the two-way interactions between each attachment score (for both actors and partners) and problem topic and problem severity, the two-way interaction between problem topic and problem severity, and all theoretically relevant three-way interactions. Actor gender and actor ease of partner readability were entered as covariates. Gender did not significantly interact with any of the predictor variables, meaning that none of the effects reported below are qualified by gender differences. Additionally, there were no attachment anxiety by attachment avoidance interactions for either actors or partners. All statistically significant findings are reported below.

First, as predicted, a significant main effect for attachment avoidance indicated that highly avoidant individuals were less empathically accurate than their less avoidant (more secure) counterparts, $b = - .33$, $t(141) = - 2.26$, $p < .03$. This finding is consistent with Rholes et al. (2007) and shows that highly avoidant people are less likely to “get
into the heads” of their romantic partners during potentially relationship-threaten

ing interactions. There was no interaction between attachment avoidance and problem

severity, $b = .02, t(140) = 0.12, ns$.

Second, a three-way interaction between problem topic, actor attachment anxiety,

and problem severity emerged, $b = -0.31, t(147) = -2.35, p < .02$ (see Figure 1). Among

spouses who discussed intimacy issues, highly anxious individuals (actors) displayed

greater empathic accuracy when the problem was severe. Less anxious individuals

(actors) displayed the opposite pattern. When the intimacy problem was severe (i.e., more

likely to threaten the relationship), less anxious individuals were less accurate compared
to when it was less severe. Among spouses who discussed jealousy topics, no similar

interaction between anxiety and problem severity was found.

Finally, all of these effects remained statistically significant (all $ps < .05$) when

the actor’s ease of partner readability ratings were partialed. This result is important

because it indicates that our findings were not due to the degree to which participants

expressed what they were thinking and feeling during their discussion.

**Discussion**

Study 1 revealed two anticipated effects. Highly avoidant individuals were less

empathically accurate in general than were less avoidant (more secure) individuals. This

outcome is consistent with prior research indicating that highly avoidant people tend to

use deactivating tactics in situations when their attachment systems potentially could be

activated (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligian, 1992). It is also

consistent with evidence showing that highly avoidant people encode and remember

fewer concrete facts and details than less avoidant persons do when listening to personal
stories of painful emotions in response to interpersonal loss (Fraley, Garner, & Shaver, 2000). Our finding is novel because it is the first to document that highly avoidant people may in fact protect themselves by not “getting into the heads” of their partners during attachment-relevant discussions. We also found no interactions involving avoidance, which supports the hypotheses that highly avoidant people use “frontline” deactivating strategies regardless of problem severity.

Highly anxious individuals were more empathically accurate primarily when discussing more severe intimacy problems. This finding is consistent with their hypervigilant orientation to dealing with relationship dangers. This tendency is likely to be problematic because it exposes highly anxious persons to the very thoughts and feelings of their partners that they fear the most. It may also raise doubts about their partner’s commitment to the relationship, which is perhaps the greatest fear of highly anxious people short of actual relationship dissolution. The findings for less anxious people were exactly the opposite. To protect themselves and/or their relationships from potentially harmful information, the empathic accuracy of less anxious (more secure) people decreases when severe intimacy related problems are discussed. As a result, these individuals are likely to be shielded from negative thoughts and feelings of partners that could be relationship-threatening.

No interaction was found between anxiety and topic severity with respect to jealousy discussion topics. There are several possible explanations for this null finding. One possible explanation is that, for many relationships, jealousy is not as serious a danger-zone issue as intimacy often is. If so, jealousy may be a less relevant source of threat for many partners, whereas intimacy is likely to be a more central and prominent
one. In addition, the discussion of intimacy issues should almost always raise concerns among highly anxious people that their partners are not sufficiently committed to them or the relationship.

It is important to note that the Study 1 effects remained statistically significant even when we controlled for the degree to which each partner’s behavior was “readable” from his/her actions during the discussion. This precludes the possibility that highly avoidant individuals were less empathically accurate simply because they had partners who were more difficult to read. It also discounts the possibility that highly anxious persons displayed greater empathic accuracy when discussing more severe intimacy issues because their partner’s thoughts and feelings were easier to decipher. Moreover, the APIM analyses permit us to conclude that these empathic accuracy effects are indeed actor-driven and are not a function of the partner’s attachment orientation. Considered together, these findings, along with many others in our program of research (see Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Ickes, Simpson, & Oriña, 2005), point to a motivational interpretation of the management of empathic accuracy. That is, by controlling for partner readability and partner attachment orientations, we weaken alternative explanations that the management of empathic accuracy is an artifact of factors exogenous to the perceiver.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was designed to replicate, clarify, and extend the findings of Study 1. If the effects found in Study 1 are robust, they should also emerge when a different type of romantic relationship (long-term dating relationships), attachment-relevant interaction (conflict resolution), and method of measuring distress (observer ratings of how distressed each partner appeared during the discussions) are studied. In Study 1, we
manipulated topic severity by asking couples to discuss an intimacy or jealousy topic that posed either a major or a minor problem in their relationship. However, it was not possible to ensure that every couple maintained their assigned level of problem severity throughout the entire discussion. Accordingly, we used a more direct and sensitive measure of discussion severity in Study 2; we had trained observers code each participant’s level of distress during the videotaped discussion with his/her dating partner. Moreover, to further generalize the findings beyond the methods used in Study 1, we had partners discuss an unresolved conflict in their relationship.

Specifically, we asked long-term dating couples in Study 2 to identify and try to resolve a current conflict in their relationship. Immediately following each videotaped discussion, each partner completed the empathic accuracy privately. Similar to Study 1, we predicted that highly avoidant individuals would be less empathically accurate during the conflict resolution task. We also predicted that highly anxious individuals would display relatively greater empathic accuracy if they were rated as more distressed during their conflict discussions, but lower empathic accuracy if they appeared less distressed.

If our predicted effects are robust, they should remain significant after statistically controlling for several alternative constructs that could account for the links between the two insecure attachment orientations and empathic accuracy levels. Thus, we also tested the potential influences of each participant’s neuroticism, relationship satisfaction, and relationship length. Highly neurotic individuals might, for instance, be more empathically accurate, especially when they feel threatened (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Given that attachment anxiety correlates moderately with neuroticism (about .30; Brennan & Shaver, 1995), this possibility needs to be ruled out. In addition, individuals who are more
insecurely attached tend to have relationships that are shorter-lived (J. Feeney, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) and less satisfying (J. Feeney, 2008; Simpson, 1990). It is also conceivable that individuals who are more satisfied with their relationships or who have dated their partners for longer periods of time might display heightened empathic accuracy when distressed, given that such people may have more to lose if their relationships ended (e.g., Rusbult, 1980).

Method

Participants

Ninety-six dating couples, at least one member of whom was enrolled in an introductory psychology class at a large Southwestern university, participated in the study. To participate, couples had to have been dating for at least three months to ensure they had a relatively stable and enduring relationship. Mean relationship length was 1.48 years (SD = 1.30 years). The mean age of the men and women was 19.53 and 18.80 years, respectively. One or both partners received credit toward an introductory psychology course.

Procedure

Questionnaire and Conflict Resolution Discussion Task

The procedures for Study 2 mirrored those of Study 1. After arriving at the lab, couple members were led to different rooms to complete a large survey. Embedded in the survey were three scales: Goldberg’s (1990) 20-item measure of neuroticism (Cronbach alphas = .81 for men and .87 for women), the Relationship Satisfaction Scale (Hendrick, 1988; alphas = .74 for men and .70 for women), and the Adult Attachment Questionnaire
(AAQ; Simpson et al., 1996; avoidance alphas = .78 for men and .76 for women; anxiety alphas = .79 for men and .83 for women).

Once both partners completed the survey, they were escorted to a room where their conflict discussion took place. To ensure that a wide range of problems were discussed, half the couples were randomly assigned to discuss a major relationship-based conflict, and half were randomly assigned to discuss a more minor (but still problematic) relationship-based conflict. Each partner then listed up to 4 relationship-based major or minor conflicts. Once both partners had created their lists, each partner examined his/her partner’s list, and both partners jointly agreed on which issue to discuss. The partners were then left alone to discuss the issue, and were videotaped using a split-screen camera system. Each couple stated the problem they had agreed to discuss at the start of the discussion so the main point of contention would be clear to the raters. After 7 minutes had elapsed, each couple was notified by intercom that they needed to conclude their discussion. Immediately after the videotaping, the partners were led to separate rooms, where they independently completed the thought/feeling reporting task and the empathic inference task.

Thought/Feeling Reporting and Empathic Accuracy Assessment

The procedure for the thought/feeling reporting and the empathic inference task were identical to those reported in Study 1. Men listed a mean of 9.47 thoughts/feelings in their discussions (SD = 5.30), and women listed a mean of 11.34 thoughts/feelings (SD = 4.79). There was no gender difference.

Coding of Empathic Accuracy and Behavioral Measures
**Empathic accuracy coding.** The empathic accuracy coding procedure was identical to that reported in Study 1. The mean reliability of this measure (i.e., the within-subject average calculated across all raters) was .75. Empathic accuracy ratings were aggregated in the same manner as reported in Study 1. The average scores for men and women did not differ significantly (20.29 and 22.24, respectively, *ns*).

**Ease of inference coding.** Sets of two independent raters evaluated how difficult it was to infer each participant’s written thoughts and feelings based upon his/her videotaped interaction behavior. These procedures were identical to those reported in Study 1. Interrater reliabilities were reasonably high (the average intraclass correlation coefficient was .52 for ratings of male participants and .51 for female participants). The ease-of-inference ratings made by each rater were averaged for each participant. This index was then used as a covariate to control for the partner’s degree of “readability.”

**Stress/anxiety coding.** Discussion behaviors were coded by five trained raters, all of whom worked independently. Raters evaluated each participant’s behavior using nine-point scales (anchored 1 = not at all; 9 = extremely) on the following dimensions: stressed, anxious, upset, calm (reverse-scored), and relaxed (reverse-scored). Ratings were reliable across the raters (mean $\alpha = .63$), so they were averaged across raters to form a measure of each item. A principal-axis factor analysis followed by varimax rotation revealed that all five measures loaded on one factor within each gender. Because the summed ratings for the five items were internally consistent (Cronbach $\alpha = .90$ for men and $\alpha = .89$ for women), they were aggregated to form an observer-rated index of stress/anxiety, with higher scores indicating greater stress/anxiety.

**Results**
Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics for Study 2. Women and men displayed low-to-moderate levels of empathic accuracy, similar to previous conflict resolution studies of empathic accuracy (e.g., Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Simpson et al., 2003). Participants were rated as displaying low-to-moderate levels of stress/anxiety, and participants’ thoughts and feelings were rated as moderately difficult to infer based on what they said/did during their discussions. Matched-pairs t-tests revealed one marginally significant gender difference. Similar to Study 1, men’s thoughts and feelings were rated as slightly more “readable” than women’s. Zero-order correlations among the Study 2 variables are shown in Table 4.

APIM Analyses and Tests of Predictions

Because the partners’ scores were significantly correlated for some of the variables, we analyzed the data using the APIM (Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). Similar to Study 1, actor effects are reported as regression coefficients, all of the independent variables are standardized, and the primary dependent variable (empathic accuracy) is unstandardized. All predictor variables were centered on the grand sample mean (Aiken & West, 1991).

The APIM analyses were conducted using the PROC MIXED program in SAS 9.0. The dependent measure was each actor’s empathic accuracy score. The ease-of-inference index was entered as a covariate to control for differences in the extent to which each partner’s thoughts and feelings were conveyed by what s/he said or did during the conflict discussion. The predictor variables were the actor and partner scores on the two attachment anxiety and avoidance, the actor’s observer-rated stress/anxiety
index, actor gender, and the condition to which each couple was assigned (major or more minor conflict). All two-way and theoretically relevant three-way interactions were also entered. No significant three-way interactions emerged, so they are not discussed further. Because all of the interactions involving gender were non-significant, none of the effects reported below are qualified by gender differences (similar to Study 1).

Two significant effects emerged. First, as predicted, a significant main effect for avoidance indicated that highly avoidant individuals were less empathically accurate than their less avoidant counterparts, \( b = -0.44, t(104) = -2.82, p < .01 \). This replicates the same effect in Study 1, and it is consistent with previous findings showing that highly avoidant people use deactivating strategies in potentially threatening situations (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). It also provides further evidence that highly avoidant people do, in fact, limit the monitoring of their partners’ thoughts and feelings in attachment-relevant conflict situations.

Second, as depicted in Figure 2, the hypothesized interaction between actor’s attachment anxiety and observer-ratings of actor’s stress/anxiety also emerged, \( b = 0.24, t(113) = 2.76, p < .01 \). More anxiously attached individuals displayed greater empathic accuracy if they were rated as more stressed/anxious during their discussions, but lower empathic accuracy if their stress/anxiety was lower. Thus, similar to Study 1, highly anxious individuals displayed greater empathic accuracy when they were more distressed compared to when they were less distressed. These results are consistent with the premise that highly anxious individuals become hypervigilant with respect to what their partners are thinking and feeling in situations where partners are likely to be harboring relationship-threatening thoughts or feelings.
Discriminant Validity Analyses

Both of the predicted effects reported above remained statistically significant when the “readability” of partners’ thoughts and feelings (i.e., the ease-of-inference index) was partialed (both $p < .05$). Once again, this rules out the possibility that highly anxious individuals are more empathically accurate when distressed because their partners’ thoughts and feelings were somehow conveyed in their discussions, or that highly avoidant individuals are less empathically accurate in general because their partners’ thoughts and feelings were more difficult to infer from their partner’s actions.

To provide additional evidence for the discriminant validity of these effects, we also controlled for three potential confounds: relationship length, relationship satisfaction, and neuroticism. When each of these potential confounds was partialed, the effects reported above remained statistically significant (all $p < .05$).

Finally, we re-conducted the analyses to determine whether the effects remained significant when the proportion (the percentage) of negative-to-total thoughts and feelings reported by each actor’s partner was statistically controlled. More insecurely attached people, for example, may have partners who reported a higher percentage of negative thoughts/feelings relative to total thoughts/feelings during the conflict discussion task, which could have impacted the empathic accuracy findings. All of the effects reported above, however, remained significant when the proportion of negative-to-total partner thoughts/feelings was statistically controlled (both $p < .05$). In summary, these results suggests that, after ruling out a number of alternative explanations, a motivational account of the attachment effects remains tenable.

General Discussion
The overarching goal of this research was to investigate how individuals who have different attachment orientations “manage” empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening situations involving their romantic partners. In two social interaction studies, we examined patterns of empathic accuracy associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance in different attachment-relevant interactions (intimacy and jealousy problem discussions and conflict resolution) that involved different types of relationships (marital and dating) and different methods of measuring distress (experimentally manipulated and assessed by trained observers). Study 1 investigated patterns of empathic accuracy among married couples who discussed a relationship problem related to intimacy or jealousy. Study 2 investigated patterns of empathic accuracy among long-term dating couples that discussed an unresolved conflict in their relationship. For both studies, we hypothesized that highly avoidant individuals would display lower levels of empathic accuracy than less avoidant people. This hypothesis was supported in both studies. Indeed, in many cases, the level of empathic accuracy exhibited by highly avoidant persons was at or just above zero, representing total inaccuracy. We also hypothesized that highly anxious people would display “hypervigilance” (i.e., higher levels of empathic accuracy than less anxious people) when the issues being discussed were potentially more threatening. This hypothesis was confirmed for highly anxious individuals who discussed more severe relationship-relevant problems that centered on intimacy (in Study 1) and who discussed relationship conflicts that generated greater observer-rated personal distress (in Study 2).

Our confidence that these effects are likely to be the result of motivational tendencies of highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals is bolstered by the fact that the results of Study 2 hold after the effects of participants’ neuroticism, relationship
satisfaction, and relationship length are partialed out. Thus, the relation between attachment anxiety and greater empathic accuracy when individuals are more distressed is not attributable to the variance that attachment anxiety shares with neuroticism. It is also not because highly anxious individuals have relationships that differ in length or satisfaction compared to other people.

These findings clarify the conditions that generate both empathic accuracy and inaccuracy in romantic relationships when individuals who have different attachment orientations discuss difficult, potentially relationship-threatening topics. When interpreting the results, a few key points must be kept in mind. First, in Study 1, the experimentally manipulated variable of relationship problem severity generated increases in empathic accuracy only among those people who, according to attachment theory, should display hypervigilance—highly anxious people. Second, the experimental instructions in both studies were designed to decrease the likelihood that empathic inaccuracy may have resulted from individuals' censoring or failing to report their own actual thoughts and feelings or the thoughts and feelings inferred from what their partners were thinking and feeling during the discussions. In both studies, each partner was explicitly instructed to be as accurate as possible, and all participants reported during debriefing that they followed these instructions. This suggests that the low levels of empathic accuracy exhibited by highly avoidant persons were not attributable to a failure to do the empathic accuracy task properly. Moreover, the patterns of empathic accuracy we found are not the result of anxious individuals’ partners conveying their thoughts and feelings more clearly, or the result of avoidant individuals’ partners’
thoughts and feelings being more difficult to infer. In both studies, the effects remained significant even after controlling for partner readability.

The current findings contribute to our understanding of attachment and empathic accuracy in two major ways. First, with respect to highly anxious people, both studies provide the first evidence of hypervigilance in terms of “getting into the partner’s head” (i.e., heightened empathic accuracy) during relationship-relevant discussions with romantic partners. These results confirm the extent and pervasiveness of hypervigilant tendencies in highly anxious people, which even extend to the monitoring of what their partners are actually thinking and feeling during relationship-threatening discussions.

Second, both studies provide the first evidence that highly avoidant people display lower levels of empathic accuracy in general during relationship-relevant discussions. No prior studies, including the one by Simpson et al. (1999), have documented that highly avoidant people display almost complete inaccuracy as a “default” strategy during attachment-relevant interactions with their romantic partners.

The Findings in Relation to the Empathic Accuracy Model

The revised Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 2001) specifies when certain behavioral or cognitive tactics should be used to protect and maintain relationships, particularly when partners must deal with actual or impending relationship threats. According to the model, if individuals are uncertain about whether their partners are harboring relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings, the easiest and most direct “default” tactic should be to limit exposure to (or awareness of) information that could clarify the true nature of their partner’s threatening thoughts or feelings.
In relationship-threatening contexts when individuals feel threatened but evidence of what their partners are thinking or feeling is ambiguous, individuals should rely on tactics that decrease empathic accuracy (that is, they should display motivated inaccuracy: Ickes et al., 2005; Simpson, Ickes, & Oriña, 2001). Empathic inaccuracy can be accomplished in several ways, including: (a) not listening to, selectively listening to, or distorting the interpretation of what one’s partner is saying during an interaction; (b) ignoring, selectively attending to, or distorting the interpretation of nonverbal cues that might clarify what one’s partner is really thinking or feeling; (c) shifting one’s attention (or the partner’s attention) to irrelevant or distracting topics/issues; or (d) refusing to think about what is actually happening during an interaction.

The revised Empathic Accuracy Model places special emphasis on the moderating role of individual differences, particularly attachment orientations. With regard to relationship maintenance maneuvers, securely attached people (i.e., those who score lower on anxiety and/or avoidance) and perhaps those who are more committed to their partners/relationships may utilize perceptual or cognitive tactics to maintain positive impressions of their partners and relationships, especially when their partners might be harboring deleterious or relationship-damaging thoughts and feelings. Highly avoidant individuals, on the other hand, should attempt to limit their exposure to “clarifying” information in these situations. One of the easiest and most effective ways of doing so is to simply “tune out” information that could prove to be threatening or selectively encode only its less threatening features (see also Fraley et al., 2000). Highly anxious individuals should latch onto potentially threatening information in these situations in a hypervigilant manner, displaying motivated accuracy. When doing so, they should be more likely than highly
avoidant people to make benevolent partner or relationship attributions. However, they should be less successful than their secure counterparts at making benevolent inferences, given the more guarded and distrusting nature of their working models.

In sum, the revised Empathic Accuracy Model proposes that relationships ought to be happier and more stable when partners display motivated inaccuracy in select situations (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). Not all people, however, are equally able or willing to use this tactic. As revealed in these studies, motivated inaccuracy is less likely to be witnessed in highly anxious individuals, who are driven to know what their partners are thinking and feeling, especially in relationship-threatening contexts. Over time, relationships may benefit the most from a situationally-sensitive mix of controlled confrontation and discreet circumvention regarding what one’s partner is actually thinking and feeling. Highly secure individuals should be best at managing this situational mix, knowing when to “turn on” and “turn off” the monitoring of their partners.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The present research melds two major models, the Revised Empathic Accuracy Model and Attachment Theory, both of which have important implications for how different people should “manage” empathic accuracy in relationship-threatening contexts. In addition, the different research designs of the two studies and the consistent results that each study generated increases our confidence in the stability and replicability of these effects. The hypothesized findings emerged in two different samples of romantic couples (married and dating partners) that engaged in different types of attachment-relevant discussions (intimacy/jealousy problems and conflict resolution) in which distress was
experimentally manipulated or rated by trained observers. Several confounds that could
have affected the results (e.g., the “readability” of each partner, each partner’s level of
neuroticism, relationship length, and relationship satisfaction) were statistically controlled,
lending greater confidence in our interpretations. In addition, both studies examined free-
flowing interactions in a relatively controlled, quasi-experimental manner using a
sophisticated method for evaluating empathic accuracy. Finally, the APIM allowed us to
estimate and test actor and partner effects more precisely and more accurately.

Despite these strengths, the current research has some limitations. For example,
the correlational nature of the studies precludes causal conclusions. The various
methodological controls used in each study, however, bolster the argument that the
observed patterns of empathic accuracy were most likely motivationally driven at least in
part, and were not due to other factors or to a lack of effort by certain participants.
Participants were instructed to be as accurate as possible when inferring their partners’
thoughts and feelings, and we controlled for the readability of each partner when
conducting the analyses.

While both studies suggest that people who score higher in attachment anxiety
and avoidance are differentially motivated to manage their empathic accuracy in
relationship-threatening situations, we do not know whether these motivational
mechanisms are conscious or unconscious in nature. We also do not know how these
patterns of empathic accuracy are associated with long-term relationship outcomes.
Although increased or decreased empathic accuracy might serve the current needs of
highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals, future research needs to examine the
influence of empathic accuracy on long-term satisfaction and relationship stability.
Indeed, knowing more might strengthen the ties that bind, but it could also introduce information ensuring that those ties will eventually be broken.
References


Footnotes

1. Empathic accuracy decreases with increasing marriage length (Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997), perhaps because couples in long-standing relationships become complacent or are overly familiar with each other. Instead of accurately inferring their partners’ thoughts and feelings in each given situation, individuals in long-term marriages may assume they know what their partners are thinking and feeling in a given interaction based largely upon prior interactions. Accordingly, we limited the length of marriages to 15 years to ensure that participants would be fully engaged in the interactions and be as empathically accurate as possible.

2. To confirm that participants experienced some relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings during their discussions, raters also coded the degree to which each thought/feeling reported by each participant contained evidence of threat on a scale where 1 = low threat and 7 = high threat. The mean scores were 2.53 (SD = 1.10) for men and 2.34 (SD = 1.02) for women. There was no gender difference.
Table 1 (Study 1)

*Descriptive Statistics*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men:</th>
<th>Women:</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Matched–Pairs t-tests</th>
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<td><strong>Empathic Accuracy</strong></td>
<td>26.01 (15.59)</td>
<td>26.03 (14.98)</td>
<td>.02 (18.00)</td>
<td>t = .21, ns</td>
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<td><strong>Attachment Avoidance</strong></td>
<td>27.89 (8.82)</td>
<td>24.11 (8.43)</td>
<td>3.78 (12.18)</td>
<td>t = 3.03, p &lt; .01</td>
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<td><strong>Attachment Anxiety</strong></td>
<td>25.14 (9.06)</td>
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<td><strong>Ease-of-Inference</strong></td>
<td>3.94 (1.00)</td>
<td>3.57 (.93)</td>
<td>.37 (1.19)</td>
<td>t = 3.02, p &lt; .01</td>
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*Note:* N = 95 women and 95 men. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below each mean.
Table 2 (Study 1)

*Correlations Among the Variables*

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*Note:* N = 95 women and 95 men. All correlations are two-tailed. Higher scores indicate higher values on each variable.

A = Actor empathic accuracy; B = Actor avoidance; C = Actor anxiety; D = Actor ease-of-inference (observer-rated); E = Partner empathic accuracy; F = Partner avoidance; G = Partner anxiety; H = Partner ease-of-inference (observer-rated).

* p < .05    ** p < .01
Table 3 (Study 2)

Descriptive Statistics

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<th>Men:</th>
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<td>Empathic Accuracy</td>
<td>20.22 (13.58)</td>
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<td>Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<td>4.06 (1.23)</td>
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<td>$t = -1.85, p = .068$</td>
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Note: N = 95 women and 95 men. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below each mean.
Table 4 (Study 2)

*Correlations Among the Variables*

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*Note:* N = 95 women and 95 men. All correlations are two-tailed. Higher scores indicate higher values on each variable.

A = Male empathic accuracy; B = Male avoidance; C = Male anxiety; D = Male stress/anxiety (observer-rated); E = Male ease-of-inference (observer-rated); F = Female empathic accuracy; G = Female avoidance; H = Female anxiety; I = Female stress/anxiety (observer-rated); J = Female ease-of-inference (observer-rated).

* *p < .05  ** *p < .01
**Figure Captions**

*Figure 1.* The interaction of actors’ attachment anxiety, type of problem, and severity of problem predicting actors’ degree of empathic accuracy. The top figure is for couples that discussed intimacy issues; the bottom figure is for those that discussed jealousy issues. Values are plotted for individuals scoring 1 standard deviation above and 1 standard deviation below the mean for each predictor variable. Lo AAnx = low actor anxiety; Hi AAnx = high actor anxiety; Lo sev = low problem severity; Hi sev = high problem severity.

*Figure 2.* The interaction of actors’ attachment anxiety and observer-rated stress/anxiety predicting actors’ degree of empathic accuracy. Values are plotted for individuals scoring 1 standard deviation above and 1 standard deviation below the mean for each predictor variable. Lo Anx = low actor anxiety; Hi Anx = high actor anxiety; Lo Stress = low observer-rated stress; Hi Stress = high observer-rated stress.
Figure 1

Intimacy

![Intimacy Graph](image)

Jealousy

![Jealousy Graph](image)
Figure 2

![Graph showing the relationship between stress levels and empathic accuracy.](image-url)