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The Thin Line Between Reality and Imagination: Attachment Orientations and the Effects of Relationship Threats on Sexual Fantasies

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The authors examined the effects of relationship threats on sexual fantasies. In two studies, participants described a sexual fantasy following an imagination task and reported their attachment orientations. In Study 1, participants imagined relationship or nonrelationship threat scenes. Results indicated that relationship threat led to fantasies that involved interpersonal distance and hostility themes. Furthermore, following relational threat, women and more anxiously attached individuals were most likely to use relationship-maintaining strategies in their fantasies. More anxiously attached individuals were also particularly likely to represent themselves as alienated. In Study 2, participants imagined sexual or emotional threat scenes. The findings showed that sexual threat elicited self-enhancement, whereas emotional threat led to fantasies involving both self-enhancement and attachment-related themes. Emotional threat was also most likely to induce negative views of others in more avoidant women. Implications for understanding the underlying functions of sexual fantasies within the context of romantic relationships are discussed.

Keywords: attachment; gender differences; relationship threat; romantic relationships; sexual fantasy

Relationship threats (e.g., prospective separation, insecurity regarding the love of one's partner, mate poaching) have been shown to automatically activate the attachment system (e.g., Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver,

2002). Thus, when faced with relationship threats people tend to seek the proximity of attachment figures (e.g., relationship partners) that may provide comfort and protection (Bowlby, 1969/1982). In cases in which actual proximity seeking is inhibited, relationship threats may instead activate thoughts and fantasies about proximity to attachment figures (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2002). These thoughts and fantasies may include sexual themes that serve attachment-related needs, such as achieving emotional intimacy, approval, and reassurance of partner love and availability, as well as elicitation of caregiving behaviors (e.g., Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004).

Indeed, in survey studies, Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2003, 2004) found that perceived relationship threat was associated with enhanced sexual motivation that might be reflected in preoccupation with sexual fantasies about one's partner (Davis et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the elicitation of sexual motivation seems to be dependent on an individual's attachment orientation reflecting the specific interpersonal goals associated with variations on attachment dimensions. In line with this view, Davis et al.'s (2003, 2004) studies indicated that attachment

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orientations moderated the link between relationship threat and sexual expressions. However, these studies focused on sexual behavior and fantasizing in general and did not examine the content of sexual fantasies. Moreover, the correlational and retrospective nature of these studies precludes drawing any conclusions about the causal link between relationship threats and sexual fantasies. In the current studies, we conducted an experimental investigation of relationship threats and their impact on the content of the fantasies. Furthermore, we examined whether individual differences in attachment orientations moderated the threat–fantasy linkage.

Attachment and Relationship Threats

According to Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973) attachment theory, the attachment behavioral system is an evolved system that increases the individual's survival chances and future reproductive success by aiming at maintaining proximity to significant others. Bowlby (1988) assumed that although the activation of the attachment system is most crucial to one's survival during the vulnerable period of infancy, this system is active throughout the entire life span. Hence, whenever the relationship with the attachment figure is threatened, the attachment system is automatically activated. Adult attachment research has provided support for Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973) arguments about the normative activation of the attachment system under stress conditions, including attachment-related stressful events (i.e., relationship threat). For example, Fraley and Shaver (1998) found that dating and married couples who were separating at an airport exhibited more proximity-seeking behaviors than couples who were not separating. Research has also shown that threat conditions lead to activation of the attachment system at the cognitive level, manifested in heightened accessibility of proximity themes and representation of specific attachment figures (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2002).

Beyond the normative activation of the attachment system under threat conditions, reactions to threatening events may be affected by the quality of interactions with attachment figures in times of need. When significant others are available and responsive to one's proximity-seeking attempts, a sense of attachment security is attained. The individual then develops positive expectations about others' availability that encourage him or her to effectively use proximity seeking as a distress regulation strategy when facing threats. However, when significant others are not physically or emotionally available in times of need, the individual may suffer from heightened distress, along with serious insecurities and doubts about close relationships. In such cases, the individual may adopt one of two alternative defensive strategies for

dealing with these insecurities. These secondary attachment strategies involve either hyperactivation ("fight" responses characterizing anxious attachment) or deactivation ("flight" reaction characterizing avoidant attachment) of the attachment system. The main goal of *hyperactivating strategies*, manifested in heightened desire for closeness and security, is to get an attachment figure to provide desired support and relief from stress. *Deactivating strategies*, on the other hand, serve the goal of distance, self-reliance, and control in close relationships and may therefore be expressed in inhibited proximity-seeking behaviors in threatening circumstances (Main, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007).

Past research has consistently shown that individual differences in attachment orientations contribute to reactions to threats. In line with their history of positive attachment experiences, securely attached individuals react to threat with support seeking (e.g., Davis et al., 2003; Fraley & Shaver, 1998). In contrast, more avoidant individuals have been found to suppress threat-related thoughts, avoid support seeking, and emphasize a sense of self-reliance when facing threats (see reviews by Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). Although these defensive strategies may help maintain a façade of self-assurance under mild threat conditions (e.g., jealousy-provoking experiences; Guerrero, 1998), they may fail to restore emotional equanimity when confronting highly demanding threatening circumstances. For example, highly avoidant individuals who were in the midst of divorce proceedings appraised the divorce as more threatening than secure individuals and reported higher distress, similar to that of highly anxious individuals (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997). Subsequent research, which used cognitive techniques that did not involve conscious deliberation about proximity seeking, revealed that more avoidant individuals evinced relatively low accessibility of attachment worries in threat contexts, but they did show high cognitive accessibility of these worries when cognitive load was added (Mikulincer et al., 2000). These findings suggest that more avoidant individuals may react to threats with preconscious activation of attachment-related themes that may not be directly translated into corresponding behaviors.

Highly anxious individuals' hyperactivating strategies may be manifested in hypervigilance to threat cues (e.g., signs of partner's rejection) and exaggeration of partner unavailability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). This hypervigilance is expressed cognitively in heightened accessibility to proximity themes and worries, regardless of the "objective" level of threat (Mikulincer et al., 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2002). Highly anxious individuals are therefore particularly likely to experience jealousy and express it through engaging in relationship-maintaining

(e.g., doing special things for one's partner) and surveillance behaviors (e.g., Guerrero, 1998). These destructive behaviors may be amplified under objectively threatening circumstances. Past research has indicated that compared to less anxious individuals, anxiously attached individuals are less likely to accept relationship termination and are more likely to be preoccupied with the lost partner and to rely on wishful thinking when coping with relationship breakup (e.g., BirnbauM et al., 1997; Davis et al., 2003). Given that more anxious individuals tend to use sex to serve their attachment needs (e.g., BirnbauM, 2007a; BirnbauM, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Davis et al., 2004), it is hardly surprising that they are especially likely to experience enhanced sexual motivation and frequent sexual fantasizing when faced with relational threats (Davis et al., 2003, 2004).

The Current Research

As discussed previously, recent studies have examined the cognitive manifestations of relational threats, as well as person and situation variables that affect these manifestations. To the extent that the desire for sex, a prominent route for proximity seeking, is fueled by relationship threat (e.g., Davis et al., 2004; White & Mullen, 1989), these cognitive manifestations may take a sexualized form, such as sexual fantasizing (e.g., Davis et al., 2003). However, little attention has been paid to the content of sexual fantasies, a unique and potentially revealing aspect of sexuality that may provide a window through which to view desires, goals, and preferences that may not always be acted on. Although the sexual fantasies literature has not directly addressed the role of fantasies in coping with relationship threats, some indirect support for their possible role comes from studies of distressed relationships. For example, Davidson and Hoffman (1986) found that women in distressed marriages were more likely to fantasize than happily married women. In addition, both sexual satisfaction and global marital functioning are negatively associated with fantasizing about extradyadic sex (Trudel, 2002). These fantasies may either compensate for relationship burnout and sexual boredom or merely reflect past or current sexual experiences (e.g., Hicks & Leitenberg, 2001).

The potential importance of sexual fantasies in handling threats is also corroborated by more general research indicating that mental imagery may be one of the common sustaining strategies employed by people to handle emotionally distressing events (e.g., Harder et al., 1984; Zelin et al., 1983). Sustaining fantasies may create an alternative "reality" (e.g., experiencing one's own attractiveness, being in a powerful position, having

someone whom one can be very close to) that may counter the original stress-provoking event, reduce related distress, and restore self-esteem (e.g., Zelin et al., 1983). These fantasies are typically consistent with both self-reported daydreams (i.e., fantasies experienced during less stressful circumstances) and behavioral coping style. For example, people who tend to rely on fantasies of love and closeness in times of need are also particularly likely to experience sexual daydreaming and to actually seek out sexual or loving comfort (e.g., Greenwald & Harder, 1995, 2003).

These studies illustrated the type of fantasies people use in time of stress to sustain themselves, but did not examine whether and how specific threats affect certain fantasy preferences. Furthermore, questions remain as to whether and how personal and interpersonal goals elicited by threat are uniquely reflected in sexual fantasies. For example, do perceived relational threats enhance "investment" in the object of fantasies or do they facilitate pursuing self-gratification? What might differentiate individuals who experience fantasies involving intimacy themes following relational threat from those who distance themselves from the objects of their fantasies? An understanding of how these goals and behavioral intentions are manifested in the content of sexual fantasies may not only shed light on the multifaceted reactions to threats but may also elucidate psychological mechanisms regulating the cognitive expressions of sexuality in romantic relationships. These crucial questions underscore the need for a coherent theoretical framework capable of explaining the functional significance of sexual fantasies in threat contexts.

The present research adopted an attachment-theoretic perspective and examined whether and how attachment-related strategies and goals were reflected in the content of sexual fantasies following relational threats. Highly anxious individuals' tendency to rely heavily on the sexual route to fulfill attachment needs is particularly pronounced under conditions that activate the attachment system (e.g., relational and nonrelational threats; Davis et al., 2003, 2004). Accordingly, we predicted that the manipulation of threat would enhance the fantasmatic expression of attachment-relevant sexual motivations (e.g., achieving intimacy, pleasing or appeasing one's partner to avoid rejection), primarily among more anxiously attached individuals. Given that more anxious individuals also become demanding and aggressive under relationship-threatening events (e.g., Guerrero, 1998), we expected them to adopt a similar hostile stance in their fantasies. Conversely, as discussed previously, more avoidant individuals adopt distancing strategies when confronted with relational threats (e.g., Davis et al., 2003). This pattern may be particularly marked in the

realm of sexual fantasies because of highly avoidant individuals' tendency to use sex to maximize distance even in the most intimate interactions (e.g., Birnbaum et al., 2006). We therefore hypothesized that the manipulation of relationship threat would induce the expression of alienation in sexual fantasies, particularly among more avoidant individuals. At the same time, however, preconscious activation of attachment-related themes elicited by relational threat may be channeled into highly avoidant individuals' somewhat protected world of fantasies in a way that is hard to predict.

We also explored whether and how gender interacted with attachment orientations and threats on sexual fantasies. Women's self-construal is more relationship oriented than men's, whereas men are more self-oriented (see Cross & Madson, 1997, for a review). Women are therefore more likely to be distressed from the relational implications of threats and to respond to relationship threats with relationship-maintaining behaviors. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to respond to similar threats from a more individualistic perspective (e.g., use compensatory self-enhancement; Berman & Frazier, 2005; Gagné & Lydon, 2003; Lydon, 1999), although it is debated whether men and women differ in emotional responses to different types of threats (e.g., distress over sexual vs. emotional infidelity; see Harris, 2003, 2005; Sagarin, 2005, for reviews). These gender differences may be particularly pronounced in sexual fantasies, given that women are also more likely than men to emphasize interpersonal factors in the fantasy realm (see review by Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). No further predictions were made about the possible moderating role of gender because the attachment literature generally shows few interactive effects of gender and attachment orientations on reactions to threats.

Two studies examined the effects of relationship threat on the content of sexual fantasies and the possible role of attachment orientations in moderating these effects. In both studies, participants described in narrative form a sexual fantasy following an imagination task. In Study 1, participants imagined relationship threat or nonrelationship threat scenes. The relationship threat scene involved partner's infidelity, which might pose a threat to both sexual and romantic exclusivity of one's relationship. These distinct aspects of relationship threat may elicit different emotional responses in the betrayed partner, depending on the personal and interpersonal goals they challenge (e.g., Berman & Frazier, 2005; Sabini & Green, 2004). It is therefore important to determine whether these different aspects of relationship threat also have distinctive fantasmatic expressions. To address this question, in Study 2, participants imagined sexual or emotional threat scenes. The main and interactive effects of gender were examined in both studies.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we examined the effects of threats on the content of sexual fantasies and the possible role of attachment orientations in moderating these effects. Participants imagined a relationship threat (partner's infidelity), a nonrelationship threat (failure in an exam), or a nonthreatening scene (partner going to the grocery store) and then described in narrative form a sexual fantasy and reported their attachment orientations.

Method

Participants. The sample consisted of 87 Israeli participants (45 women and 42 men ranging from 23 to 37 years of age, $Mdn = 28$) who volunteered for the study without compensation. All participants were recruited from universities, colleges, community centers, and sport clubs in the central area of Israel. Of the participants, 50.4% were currently involved in a romantic relationship and 13.8% were married. Of the participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship, length of relationship ranged from 1 to 180 months ($M = 42.72$, $SD = 39.48$). Education level ranged from 12 to 20 years of schooling ($M = 14.98$, $SD = 1.48$). All participants had experienced heterosexual intercourse, in either a current or past relationship. No significant difference between conditions was found in any of the assessed sociodemographic variables.

Measures and procedure. Participants were approached individually by a research assistant and asked whether they would like to take a part in a study on sexuality in close relationships. Participants were asked to work through a packet of questionnaires at their own pace but make sure to follow the order in which the questionnaires were arranged. Following the instructions, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (a) a relationship threat scene in which they were asked to imagine that their partner was involved in a serious, emotional, and passionate romantic affair with an attractive man or woman; (b) a nonrelationship threat scene (i.e., no relationship threat was present) in which participants were asked to imagine that they had just failed in an important exam—this condition was used to test whether the content of sexual fantasies is affected by global aversive feelings or by specific threats to the relationship; and (c) a totally nonthreatening scene in which participants were asked to imagine that their partner was going to the grocery store. The scenes used in each condition had been pretested on the level of threat provoked by an independent group of 30 graduate students (ranging from 25 to 41 years of age, $M = 30.36$, $SD = 4.34$). After imagining one of these three scenes,

participants answered an open-ended probe: "Describe the emotions and thoughts that this situation arouses in you." Answers to this question served as manipulation checks to ensure that each participant had had the proper scene in mind before describing a sexual fantasy. In addition, participants were asked to rate the degree of threat posed by the scene they had described (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

Following the experimental procedure, all the participants were presented with the following definition of the term *sexual fantasy*, adapted from Leitenberg and Henning (1995):

Sexual fantasies refer to any mental imagery that is sexually arousing or erotic to the individual. A sexual fantasy can be an elaborate story, or it can be a fleeting thought of some romantic or sexual activity. It can involve bizarre imagery, or it can be quite realistic. It can involve memories of past events, or it can be a completely imaginary experience.

Then, participants were given the following instructions:

Please think of a sexual fantasy and write about the first one that comes to mind in the space below. Please describe in detail the specific scene, series of events, the figures, wishes, sensations, feelings, and thoughts that are experienced by you and the other figures in your fantasy. At this point, we wish to note that you are writing anonymously, so feel free to write anything you like.

Two judges (psychology graduate research assistants), who were blind to the condition that preceded the particular fantasy, used a fantasy checklist to analyze the sexual fantasies by their content. The fantasy checklist was developed by Birnbau (2007b) and was based on the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) measure (Luborsky, 1977; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998), a system used for identifying the central patterns of interpersonal relationships in both dreams and waking narratives (e.g., Popp et al., 1996). This checklist included 15 items that were uniquely formulated for the content of sexual fantasies, corresponding to tailor-made CCRT components (e.g., Popp et al., 1996). Fantasies were evaluated for the presence of three components of relationship themes: (a) the desires expressed in the sexual fantasy (expressed desire; e.g., desire for intimacy), (b) responses from others to the subject (others' responses; e.g., perceiving the objects of the fantasy as alienated), and (c) responses of the subject to others (subject's responses; e.g., representation of the self as pleasing).

The two judges, who were trained to perform the coding, used this themes checklist to score fantasies for the different components of relationship themes. These

judges independently rated the extent to which each item described the expressed desires, others' responses, and subject's responses in each sexual fantasy on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Pearson correlations computed between the scoring of both judges for the expressed desires, others' responses, and subject's responses yielded reliability coefficients of .97 on average, reflecting high agreement between judges. Accordingly, we averaged the scores of the two judges.

The first component of the relationship theme, expressed desires, includes four items (desire for intimacy, desire to be irresistibly desired, desire to sexually satisfy others, and desire to be sexually satisfied) that represent central sexual desires expressed in sexual fantasies (see the review by Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Each of these items embodies a broader category of desires (e.g., the desire for intimacy includes the desire for emotional connection and the desire to feel loved; the desire to sexually satisfy includes the desire to indulge and pamper others). These items were therefore analyzed singly rather than being grouped into factors to prevent further information loss (see Birnbau, 2007b). Also, the correlations among the four expressed desires items were of small magnitude (ranging from .01 to .19, except for the correlation between the desire to sexually satisfy others and the desire to be sexually satisfied, $r = .60$, $p < .001$) and thus did not justify grouping items into factors either.

The second component, others' responses, consists of six items organized around two factors: (a) Aggressive and Alienated Others includes three items tapping the perception of others as aggressive, abusive, and alienated, and (b) Affectionate and Pleasing Others includes three items tapping the perception of others as affectionate, pleasing, and supportive. Cronbach's alphas for the two others' responses factors were .73 and .71, respectively, implying adequate internal consistency. On this basis, two scores were computed for each participant by averaging the items loading on each factor.

The third component, subject's responses, consists of five items organized around two factors: (a) Pleasing and Passionate Subject includes three items reflecting the portrayal of the self as pleasing, passionate, and supportive in the sexual fantasy, and (b) Alienated Subject includes two items tapping the representation of the self as alienated and hostile. The coefficient alpha reliability and the interitem correlation were adequate for the two subject's responses factors (.62 for Pleasing and Passionate Subject and $r = .32$, $p < .001$, for the two Alienated Subject items), implying adequate internal consistency. On this basis, two scores were computed for each participant by averaging the items loading on each factor.

Before ending the experiment, participants were asked to complete a Hebrew version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), which assesses attachment orientations. This self-report scale consists of 36 items tapping the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings in close relationships on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Eighteen items tapped attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry about being abandoned”) and 18 items tapped attachment avoidance (e.g., “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close”). The ECR was translated into Hebrew by Mikulincer and Florian (2000), who also validated its two-factor structure on an Israeli sample. In the current sample, Cronbach’s alphas were high for the 18 anxiety items (.88) and the 18 avoidance items (.90). Higher scores indicated greater attachment-related avoidance or anxiety. Participants were also asked to provide demographic and relationship information, including age, current relationship status, and length of current relationship.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation question, “Please rate the degree of threat posed by the scene you described” yielded the expected effect of threat, $F(2, 84) = 46.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .53$. Relationship threat led to higher levels of perceived threat ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.31$) than nonrelationship threat ($M = 3.03, SD = 1.03$), which in turn led to higher levels of perceived threat than no-threat condition ($M = 1.21, SD = 0.42$).

Threat, attachment, and sexual fantasies. The data were analyzed by a series of three-step hierarchical regressions examining the unique and interactive effects of threat conditions, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and gender on the various themes constructing the three central components of sexual fantasies. In the first step, we examined main effects for threat conditions (we created two effects-coded variables—one contrasting the relationship threat condition to the no-threat condition and the other contrasting the nonrelationship threat condition to the no-threat condition), gender—a contrast code variable comparing women (1) to men (–1)—and the attachment scores of anxiety and avoidance (entered as standardized scores). The two-way interactions were entered in the second step, and the three-way interactions were added in the third step. Tables 1 and 2 present the standardized regression coefficients (β s) for each effect at the step in which it was entered into the regression. Regression analyses revealed

TABLE 1: Predicting the Desires Expressed in the Sexual Fantasies From Threat (Relational vs. Nonrelational), Attachment Orientations, and Gender (Study 1)

	<i>Expressed Desires Scores</i>			
	<i>Intimacy</i>	<i>Be Desired</i>	<i>To Satisfy</i>	<i>Be Satisfied</i>
Step 1				
Relational threat	.03	.05	.06	.06
Nonrelational threat	.12	.04	–.24*	–.16
Anxiety	.04	.28*	.15	.13
Avoidance	–.10	.07	.12	.12
Gender ^a	.40***	–.01	.02	–.04
Step 2				
Relational Threat × Anxiety	.10	.12	.23*	.21
Relational Threat × Avoidance	–.05	.07	.09	–.06
Relational Threat × Gender	–.01	–.01	.28*	.12
Nonrelational Threat × Anxiety	.36**	.13	–.03	–.23
Nonrelational Threat × Avoidance	–.09	.04	–.05	–.13
Nonrelational Threat × Gender	–.18	.17	.05	–.03
Anxiety × Gender	–.28**	–.11	–.14	–.04
Avoidance × Gender	–.05	.03	.05	.02
Step 3				
Relational Threat × Anxiety × Gender	.07	–.19	–.03	–.14
Relational Threat × Avoidance × Gender	.04	.30*	–.07	.01
Nonrelational Threat × Anxiety × Gender	–.01	.13	–.01	.03
Nonrelational Threat × Avoidance × Gender	.04	–.18	–.03	–.05

a. A contrast code variable comparing women (1) with men (–1). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

no meaningful interactions between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety; hence, they are not reported. For simplicity, only effects involving threat are described.

Expressed desires. The regressions indicated that the Relationship Threat × Gender and Relationship Threat × Anxiety interactions were significant for the desire to satisfy others (see Table 1). Using Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure for examining simple slopes, we found that relationship threat induced the expression of more desire for satisfying others among women, $\beta = .34, p < .05$, and when attachment anxiety was high (1 *SD* above the mean), $\beta = .29, p < .05$, but not among men, $\beta = –.22, ns$, or when attachment anxiety was low (1 *SD* below the mean), $\beta = –.17, ns$. Figure 1 illustrates the Relationship Threat × Anxiety interaction. Additionally, the Relationship Threat × Avoidance × Gender interaction was

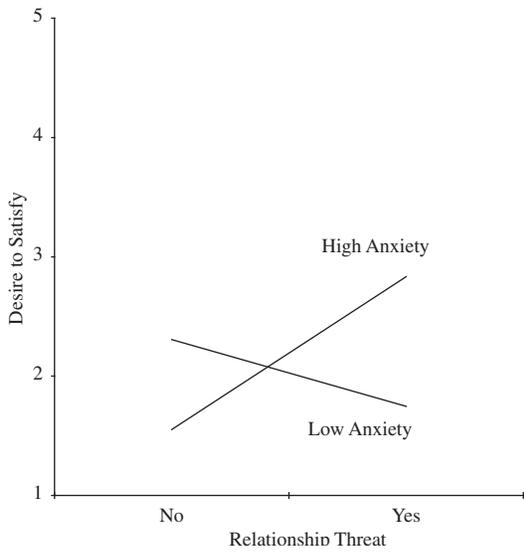


Figure 1 Interaction of relationship threat and attachment anxiety predicting the desire to satisfy others (Study 1). NOTE: Variables are presented as standardized; low and high anxiety refer to values -1 and $+1$ SD from the mean, respectively.

significant for the desire to be desired. The regression coefficients indicated that more avoidant women were most likely to desire to be irresistibly desired following relationship threat, $\beta = .42, p < .05$.

The main effect for nonrelational threat also made a significant unique contribution to the desire to satisfy others, such that nonrelational threat lessened the desire to sexually satisfy others. Furthermore, the interaction between nonrelationship threat and attachment anxiety was significant for the desire for intimacy. The regression coefficients showed that nonrelationship threat led to heightened desire for intimacy when attachment anxiety was high (1 SD above the mean), $\beta = .48, p < .05$, but not when attachment anxiety was low (1 SD below the mean), $\beta = -.24, ns$.

Others' responses. The main effect for relationship threat made a significant unique contribution to Aggressive and Alienated Others (see Table 2). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction between relationship threat and gender. The regression coefficients showed that relationship threat led to perceiving others as more alienated among men, $\beta = .68, p < .001$, but not among women, $\beta = .13, ns$. Furthermore, the interaction between nonrelationship threat and anxiety was significant for Affectionate and Pleasing Others. The regression coefficients showed that nonrelationship threat led to perceiving others as more affectionate when attachment anxiety was high (1 SD above the

TABLE 2: Predicting Others' and Subject's Responses in the Sexual Fantasies From Threat (Relational vs. Nonrelational), Attachment Orientations, and Gender (Study 1)

	<i>Others' Responses</i>		<i>Subject's Responses</i>	
	<i>Alienated</i>	<i>Affectionate</i>	<i>Pleasing</i>	<i>Alienated</i>
Step 1				
Relational threat	.41***	-.09	-.02	.36***
Nonrelational threat	-.20	.22	-.01	-.26*
Anxiety	.03	.17	.07	.06
Avoidance	.15	-.02	.01	.13
Gender ^a	-.28**	.15	.11	-.39***
Step 2				
Relational Threat × Anxiety	.06	-.05	.03	.12
Relational Threat × Avoidance	.16	-.10	.25*	.07
Relational Threat × Gender	-.27*	.05	.28*	-.23*
Nonrelational Threat × Anxiety	-.03	.28*	.31**	-.26*
Nonrelational Threat × Avoidance	.06	-.23	.07	.13
Nonrelational Threat × Gender	.14	-.15	-.12	.23*
Anxiety × Gender	-.09	-.31**	-.22*	.16
Avoidance × Gender	-.06	-.08	.05	-.07
Step 3				
Relational Threat × Anxiety × Gender	.03	-.15	.05	-.23*
Relational Threat × Avoidance × Gender	-.01	.12	.32*	.08
Nonrelational Threat × Anxiety × Gender	-.02	.13	.19	.12
Nonrelational Threat × Avoidance × Gender	-.14	-.09	-.26*	-.12

a. A contrast code variable comparing women (1) with men (-1). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

mean), $\beta = .50, p < .01$, but not when attachment anxiety was low (1 SD below the mean), $\beta = -.06, ns$.

Subject's responses. Relationship threat made a significant unique contribution to Alienated Subject (see Table 2). The interaction between relationship threat and gender was also significant for Alienated Subject. These effects were qualified by a significant Relationship Threat × Gender × Anxiety interaction. The regression coefficients indicated that relationship threat led women to represent themselves as more alienated when anxiety was high, $\beta = .25, p < .05$, but not when anxiety was low, $\beta = .01, ns$. Relationship threat also led men to represent themselves as more alienated when their anxiety was high, $\beta = .71, p < .001$, and to a lesser degree when their anxiety was low, $\beta = .47, p < .001$.

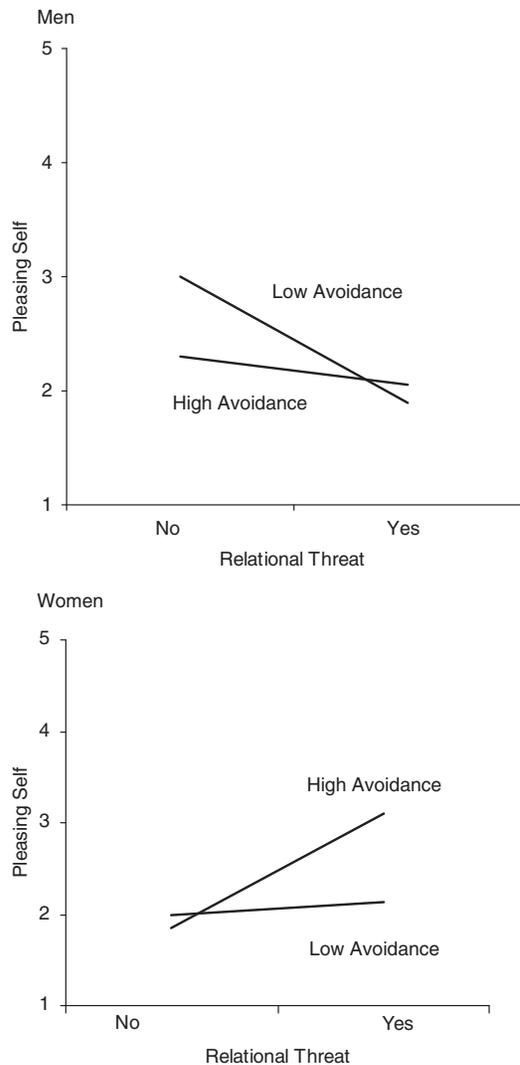


Figure 2 Interaction of relationship threat and attachment avoidance predicting the representation of the self as pleasing in men and women (Study 1).

NOTE: Variables are presented as standardized; low and high avoidance refer to values -1 and $+1$ *SD* from the mean, respectively.

The interactions between relationship threat and avoidance as well as between relationship threat and gender were significant for Pleasing and Passionate Subject. These interactions were qualified by a significant Relationship Threat \times Avoidance \times Gender interaction. The regression coefficients indicated that relationship threat led women to represent themselves as more pleasing, $\beta = .55$, $p < .001$, when their avoidance was high, but not when it was low, $\beta = .05$, *ns*. Relationship threat led men to represent themselves as less pleasing, $\beta = -.59$, $p < .001$, when their avoidance was low, but not when it was high, $\beta = -.09$, *ns* (see Figure 2).

It is interesting that the interaction between nonrelationship threat and anxiety was significant for Pleasing and Passionate Subject as well as for Alienated Subject. The regression coefficients showed that nonrelationship threat led to representing the self as more pleasing, $\beta = .30$, $p < .01$, and less alienated, $\beta = -.52$, $p < .001$, when attachment anxiety was high, and as less pleasing, $\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$, when attachment anxiety was low. The interaction between nonrelationship threat and gender was also significant for Alienated Subject. The regression coefficients indicated that nonrelationship threat led to representing the self as less alienated in men, $\beta = -.49$, $p < .001$, but not in women, $\beta = -.03$, *ns*. Finally, the Nonrelationship Threat \times Avoidance \times Gender interaction was significant for Pleasing and Passionate Subject. The regression coefficients indicated that nonrelationship threat led men to represent themselves as less pleasing, $\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$, when their avoidance was high, but not when it was low, $\beta = .18$, *ns*. In contrast, nonrelationship threat led women to represent themselves as less pleasing, $\beta = -.34$, $p < .01$, when their avoidance was low, but not when it was high, $\beta = -.20$, *ns*.

The moderating effects of relationship status. To examine whether relationship status moderated the effects of threat on sexual fantasies, we conducted three-step hierarchical regressions examining unique and interactive effects of threat conditions, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, gender, and relationship status—a dichotomous variable comparing participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship (code = 1, $N = 47$) with those who were not currently involved in such a relationship (code = -1 , $N = 40$). These analyses showed that the significant threat effects reported in Tables 1 and 2 did not notably change and remained significant after the statistical control for relationship status. In addition, the regressions indicated that the interaction between relationship threat and relationship status was significant for the desire to be satisfied, $\beta = .29$, $p < .05$; the desire to be desired, $\beta = .38$, $p < .01$; Aggressive and Alienated Others, $\beta = .32$, $p < .01$; Alienated Subject, $\beta = .27$, $p < .01$; and Pleasing and Passionate Subject, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$. The regression coefficients showed that relationship threat led partnered individuals to express more desire to be satisfied and desired, β s = $.36$ and $.43$, respectively, $p < .05$, and to perceive both themselves and others as more alienated, β s = $.64$ and $.74$, respectively, $p < .001$, as well as to represent themselves as more pleasing, $\beta = .21$, $p < .05$. Conversely, relationship threat led people who were not currently involved in a relationship to express less desire to be desired and to represent themselves as less pleasing, β s = $-.33$ and $-.27$, respectively, $p < .05$.

The regression analyses revealed no other significant effects for relationship status. Together, these findings showed that partnered individuals were more likely than uninvolved individuals to experience ambivalent fantasmatic expressions following major relationship threat, possibly manifesting hurt and anger, along with heightened desire to maintain existing relationship.

Overall, the findings clearly indicated that both relationship and nonrelationship threats had distinctive effects on the desires expressed in the sexual fantasies, as well as on the way the fantasizer represented himself or herself and others. Specifically, relationship threat led to fantasies that involved interpersonal distance and hostility themes, reflecting typical responses to relational threat (e.g., Sharpsteen, 1995). Nonrelational threat lessened the desire to sexually satisfy others, apparently manifesting decrease in sexual desire because of the increase in perceived stress (e.g., Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). As expected, the effects of threat on the content of sexual fantasies were moderated by gender and attachment orientations. Following relationship threat, women were most likely to express the desire to satisfy others, whereas men were most likely to perceive others as alienated. These findings indicated that women's tendency to use relationship-maintaining strategies when coping with relationship threat (e.g., Gagné & Lydon, 2003; Lydon, 1999) was also reflected in their sexual fantasies. It is interesting that more avoidant women were particularly likely to desire to be irresistibly desired and to represent themselves as pleasing following relationship threat, implying that the somewhat protected realm of fantasies enabled them to expose their insecure nature and denied needs for proximity (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2002). These findings support past research showing that the avoidant effect is less marked in women's sexuality than in men's (e.g., Cooper et al., 2006), possibly reflecting the amplification of women's habitual nurturing tendencies under major relationship threat conditions.

Consistent with our predictions, following relationship threat, more anxiously attached individuals were also more likely than less anxiously attached individuals to express a desire to satisfy others. At the same time, they were most likely to represent themselves as alienated and hostile, apparently reflecting intensification of negative affect, self-relevant thoughts, and anger outburst typical of relationship-threatening events (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). As expected, more anxious people were particularly likely to express the desire for intimacy, to represent themselves as pleasing, and to perceive others as affectionate following nonrelational threat. Threat may enhance highly anxious individuals' tendency to engage in sex to please their

partner and avoid abandonment (e.g., Cooper et al., 2006), regardless of its relevance to the relationship. These findings suggest that rejection fears associated with pleasing one's partner remain to "haunt" more anxious individuals in their world of fantasy, which is further colored by anger when their worst fears are realized in the form of full-blown relationship threat.

STUDY 2

Partner's infidelity scenario, such as the one used in Study 1, may threaten both sexual and romantic exclusivity of one's relationship. These distinctive aspects of relationship threat may elicit different reactions, depending on one's expectations, goals, and assessment of threat (Harris, 2003). Emotional threat is more likely than sexual threat to be perceived as a threatened loss of an attachment figure (e.g., Sabini & Green, 2004; Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997), whereas sexual threat is more likely to threaten the image of the self as attractive and sexually potent and of high status (Berman & Frazier, 2005). Study 2 was designed to uncouple the effects of threat to the sexual exclusivity of one's relationship from those of threat to the romantic exclusivity. Participants imagined sexual threat (partner's sexual infidelity), emotional threat (partner's emotional infidelity), or a nonthreatening scene (the same scenario that was used in Study 1) and then described in narrative form a sexual fantasy. We expected that participants would be particularly likely to employ relationship-maintaining strategies following emotional threat. In contrast, we hypothesized that participants would respond to sexual threat from a more individualistic perspective and would protect themselves from personal loss of perceived attractiveness, self-esteem, and reputation in their sexual fantasies.

In examining reactions to emotional and sexual threats, we also considered that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety represent two extremes relevant to the linkage between sexual and emotional aspects of romantic relationships. Highly anxious individuals tend to conflate sex and love and are thus less likely to differentiate between sexual and emotional aspects of the relationship, including corresponding threats. Conversely, highly avoidant individuals tend to engage in sex for relationship-irrelevant reasons and to detach sex from other relationship qualities (e.g., Birnbbaum et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2004). We therefore predicted that attachment avoidance would be more relevant than attachment anxiety to the distinction between emotional and sexual threats. Specifically, we expected attachment avoidance to interact with type of threat,

such that more avoidant individuals would be more likely than less avoidant individuals to exhibit distress reactions and feelings of hostility in their sexual fantasies following emotional threat but not following sexual threat.

Method

Participants. The sample consisted of 92 Israeli participants (45 women and 47 men ranging from 21 to 40 years of age, $Mdn = 25$) who volunteered for the study without compensation. All participants were recruited from universities, colleges, community centers, and sport clubs in the central area of Israel. Of the participants, 72.9% were currently involved in a romantic relationship and 14.1% were married. Of the participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship, length of relationship ranged from 1 to 156 months ($M = 29.00$, $SD = 29.39$). Education level ranged from 12 to 17 years of schooling ($M = 13.59$, $SD = 1.59$). All participants had experienced heterosexual intercourse, in either a current or past relationship. No significant difference between conditions was found in any of the assessed sociodemographic variables.

Measures and procedure. Participants were approached individually by a research assistant and asked whether they would like to take a part in a study on sexuality in close relationships. The general instructions were identical to those described in Study 1. After receiving the instructions, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (a) a sexual threat scene in which they were asked to imagine that their partner had a one-night stand without emotional involvement, (b) an emotional threat scene in which participants were asked to imagine that their partner fell in love with someone else but did not have sex with that person, and (c) a totally nonthreatening scene in which participants were asked to imagine that their partner was going to the grocery store. After receiving the specific written instructions, participants in each of the three conditions completed the open-ended question described in Study 1 with regard to the imagined situation. Following the previously described procedure, all of the participants described in narrative form a sexual fantasy. As in Study 1, two judges (psychology graduate research assistants), who were blind to the condition that preceded the particular fantasy, used a fantasy checklist to analyze the sexual fantasies by their content. Pearson correlations computed between the scoring of both judges yielded reliability coefficients of .80, reflecting good agreement between judges. Accordingly, we averaged the scores of the two judges.

Coefficient alpha reliabilities and interitem correlations were adequate for the two factors of the others'

responses component (.51 for Aggressive and Alienated Others and .61 for Affectionate and Pleasing Others) and for the two factors of the subject's responses component (.60 for Pleasing and Passionate Subject; $r = .52$, $p < .001$, for the two Alienated Subject items). On this basis, we computed four scores by averaging items loading on each factor. Then, participants completed the ECR (Brennan et al., 1998) described in Study 1. In the current sample, Cronbach's alphas were high for the 18 anxiety items (.91) and the 18 avoidance items (.86). Therefore, two scores were computed by averaging items on each subscale.

Results and Discussion

We conducted a series of three-step hierarchical regressions similar to those described in Study 1. Specifically, we examined the effects of sexual threat (an effects-coded variable contrasting the sexual threat condition to the no-threat condition), emotional threat (an effects-coded variable contrasting the emotional threat condition to the no-threat condition), gender, and the attachment scores of anxiety and avoidance on the various themes constructing the three central components of sexual fantasies. Tables 3 and 4 present the standardized regression coefficients (β s) for each effect at the step in which it was entered into the regression. Regression analyses revealed no meaningful interactions between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety; hence, they are not reported. For simplicity, only effects involving threat are described.

Expressed desires. The regressions indicated that sexual threat led to marginally significant heightened desire to sexually satisfy others and to a significant decrease in the desire for intimacy, whereas emotional threat led to significantly heightened desire to be desired (see Table 3). In addition, there was a significant interaction between emotional threat and gender for the desire to be satisfied. Using Aiken and West's (1991) procedure for examining simple slopes, we found that emotional threat induced the expression of more desire to be satisfied among men, $\beta = .38$, $p < .05$, but not among women, $\beta = -.26$, *ns*. Additionally, the interaction between sexual threat and gender was significant for the desire to be desired. The regression coefficients showed that sexual threat induced the expression of more desire to be desired among men, $\beta = .30$, $p < .05$, but not among women, $\beta = -.20$, *ns* (see Figure 3).

Others' responses. The main effect for emotional threat made a significant unique contribution to Affectionate and Pleasing Others, such that emotional threat led to perceiving others as more affectionate and pleasing (see Table 4). The interaction between emotional threat and

TABLE 3: Predicting the Desires Expressed in the Sexual Fantasies From Threat (Sexual vs. Emotional), Attachment Orientations, and Gender (Study 2)

	<i>Expressed Desires Scores</i>			
	<i>Intimacy</i>	<i>Be Desired</i>	<i>To Satisfy</i>	<i>Be Satisfied</i>
Step 1				
Sexual threat	-.20*	.05	.21 [†]	.19
Emotional threat	.18	.24*	.07	.06
Anxiety	.16	-.08	-.11	-.05
Avoidance	-.23*	-.16	.03	.05
Gender ^a	.34***	-.06	-.24*	-.20
Step 2				
Sexual Threat × Anxiety	.09	-.12	-.08	-.01
Sexual Threat × Avoidance	-.02	-.04	.09	-.15
Sexual Threat × Gender	-.15	-.25*	-.20	.08
Emotional Threat × Anxiety	-.17	.11	.07	-.01
Emotional Threat × Avoidance	-.12	.07	-.10	-.01
Emotional Threat × Gender	.17	-.03	.03	-.32*
Anxiety × Gender	.06	-.03	.01	.02
Avoidance × Gender	.08	-.21	-.05	-.13
Step 3				
Sexual Threat × Anxiety × Gender	-.08	.03	.18	.03
Sexual Threat × Avoidance × Gender	-.06	-.01	-.15	.01
Emotional Threat × Anxiety × Gender	.04	-.14	-.14	-.07
Emotional Threat × Avoidance × Gender	-.12	-.08	.15	.23

a. A contrast code variable comparing women (1) with men (-1).
[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

avoidance was significant for Aggressive and Alienated Others. This interaction was qualified by a significant Emotional Threat × Avoidance × Gender interaction. The regression coefficients indicated that emotional threat led to perceiving others as more alienated in more avoidant women, $\beta = .88, p < .001$, and to a lesser degree in more avoidant men, $\beta = .16, p < .05$. Emotional threat led to perceiving others as less alienated in less avoidant men, $\beta = -.72, p < .001$, but not in less avoidant women, $\beta = .01, ns$ (see Figure 4).

Subject's responses. Emotional threat led to representing the self as more pleasing and passionate, whereas sexual threat led to representing the self as marginally more alienated and hostile (see Table 4). The latter effect was qualified by a significant interaction between sexual threat and gender. The regression coefficients indicated that sexual threat led to representing the self



Figure 3 Interaction of sexual threat and gender predicting the desire to be irresistibly desired (Study 2).
 NOTE: Variables are presented as standardized; low and high anxiety refer to values -1 and $+1$ SD from the mean, respectively.

as more alienated among men, $\beta = .46, p < .05$, but not among women, $\beta = -.04, ns$.

Taken together, the findings showed that sexual and emotional threats had distinctive effects on the content of sexual fantasies. As expected, sexual threat led to heightened desire to sexually satisfy others, along with decreased desire for intimacy among both men and women. Sexual threat also led to heightened desire to be irresistibly desired and to the representation of the self as more alienated, but only among men. These findings corroborate Berman and Frazier's (2005) suggestion that sexual threat is particularly likely to threaten one's self-image and therefore to elicit protective responses in which the self is represented as sexually potent (i.e., compensatory self-enhancement).

Emotional threat, on the other hand, led to representing the self and others as more affectionate and pleasing in both men and women. These findings support the contention that emotional threat is more likely than sexual threat to threaten the future of the relationship (e.g., Sabini & Green, 2004; Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997) and thus to elicit protective responses designed to improve the relationship (i.e., compensatory relational restoration strategies). At the same time, emotional threat also induced the expression of more desire to be irresistibly desired. Furthermore, emotional threat led to heightened desire to be sexually satisfied, but only among men. Thus, self-enhancement was more pervasive in men's sexual fantasies than in women's fantasies following both types of threats. This pattern suggests that men's self-orientation (Cross & Madson, 1997)

TABLE 4: Predicting Others' and Subject's Responses in the Sexual Fantasies From Threat (Sexual vs. Emotional), Attachment Orientations, and Gender (Study 2)

	<i>Others' Responses</i>		<i>Subject's Responses</i>	
	<i>Alienated</i>	<i>Affectionate</i>	<i>Pleasing</i>	<i>Alienated</i>
Step 1				
Sexual threat	-.04	-.18	-.14	.21 [†]
Emotional threat	.08	.26*	.26*	-.03
Anxiety	-.07	.09	-.09	-.12
Avoidance	.03	-.13	-.12	-.08
Gender ^a	-.12	.19	-.04	-.17
Step 2				
Sexual Threat × Anxiety	-.01	.02	.04	.10
Sexual Threat × Avoidance	-.11	-.06	.05	-.09
Sexual Threat × Gender	-.12	-.22	-.03	-.25*
Emotional Threat × Anxiety	.02	-.11	.06	-.07
Emotional Threat × Avoidance	.44**	-.14	-.12	.20
Emotional Threat × Gender	.18	.07	-.13	-.12
Anxiety × Gender	-.01	.07	-.05	.13
Avoidance × Gender	.10	-.02	-.09	-.03
Step 3				
Sexual Threat × Anxiety × Gender	.07	-.08	-.03	.10
Sexual Threat × Avoidance × Gender	-.03	-.12	-.16	.16
Emotional Threat × Anxiety × Gender	.05	-.04	-.06	-.13
Emotional Threat × Avoidance × Gender	.36*	-.11	.04	.08

a. A contrast code variable comparing women (1) with men (-1).
[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

may be amplified under threat conditions and take the form of gratification of one's sexual needs, at least in the fantasies realm.

It is interesting that compared to their less avoidant counterparts, more avoidant individuals were more likely to perceive others as alienated following emotional threat, suggesting that the use of this distancing coping strategy was exacerbated by emotional threat that might confirm highly avoidant people's negative view of others. However, the avoidant effect was more pronounced in more avoidant women's sexual fantasies than in more avoidant men's fantasies, unlike Study 1, in which the avoidant effects were weaker for women. Gender differences in the perceived level of threat in the global relationship threat versus emotional threat conditions may account for these differences. Emotional threat might be perceived by more avoidant men as less threatening than global relationship threat, leading them to perceive others in less negative terms, compared to more avoidant women.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research extends previous work on reactions to relationship threats by examining the manifestations of different types of threats in the realm of sexual fantasies. Study 1 showed that relationship threat led to fantasies that involved interpersonal distance and hostility themes. As predicted, the effects of threat on the content of sexual fantasies were moderated by gender and attachment orientations. Specifically, women and more anxiously attached people were particularly likely to use relationship-maintaining strategies in their sexual fantasies (e.g., pleasing one's sexual partner) following relational threat. It is interesting that more anxiously attached people were also particularly likely to represent themselves as alienated and hostile. Study 2 indicated that sexual threat led to sexual fantasies that involve self-enhancement (e.g., perceiving the self as sexually potent). Emotional threat, by comparison, led to fantasies involving both self-enhancement and attachment-related themes (e.g., perceiving the self and others as affectionate and pleasing). It is not surprising that emotional threat was also most likely to induce a negative view of others in more avoidant people. Additionally, self-enhancement was more pervasive in men's sexual fantasies than in women's fantasies following both emotional and sexual threats.

As predicted, the content of sexual fantasies reflected the typical attachment-related strategies employed when facing threats. More anxiously attached individuals were more likely than their less anxious counterparts to express the desire to satisfy the objects of their fantasies following relationship threat. They were also particularly likely to express the desire for intimacy as well as to represent themselves and others as affectionate and pleasing following nonrelational threat. These findings accord with a correlational study that showed that more anxious individuals habitually experienced sexual fantasies in which they pleased their partners and nurtured them (Birnbaum, 2007b). These sexual themes may be motivated by attachment-based goals (e.g., keeping one's partner in the relationship, maintaining closeness; Davis et al., 2004) and therefore be intensified by conditions that activate the attachment system (e.g., relational and nonrelational threats; Mikulincer et al., 2000). Thus, it is hardly surprising that nurturing themes were most pronounced in highly anxious individuals' sexual fantasies in these threat contexts. The nature of these nurturing themes differed somewhat, however, between the two threat conditions. Whereas nonrelational threat led more anxious individuals to experience mutually nurturing themes, relational threat—a potentially major attachment-related crisis—led them to engage in relationship-restoration strategies

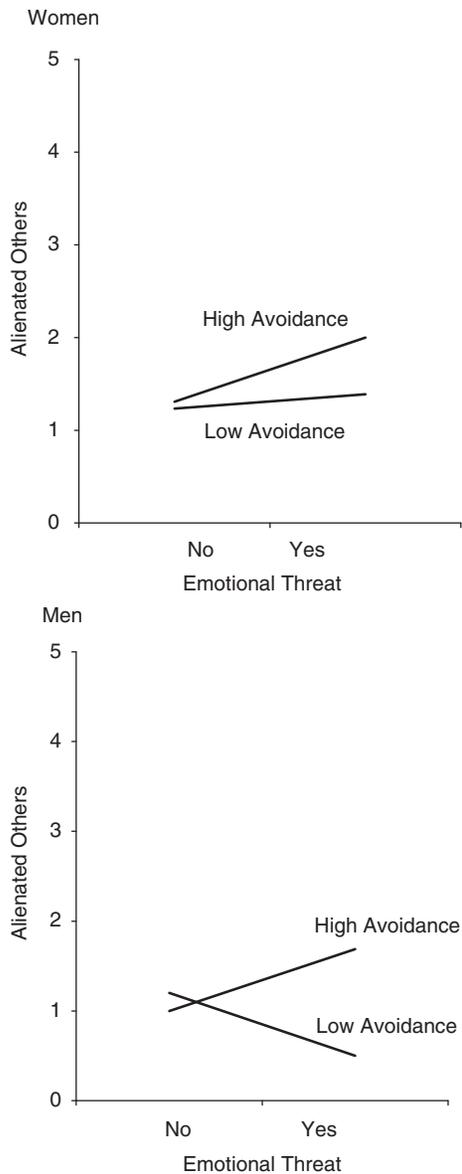


Figure 4 Interaction of emotional threat and attachment avoidance predicting perceiving others as alienated in men and women (Study 2).

NOTE: Variables are presented as standardized; low and high anxiety refer to values -1 and $+1$ SD from the mean, respectively.

that focus primarily on partner's needs, possibly exacerbating negative self-view.

Highly avoidant individuals' sexual fantasies, in contrast, reflected the use of distancing coping, combined with a hint of the insecurity behind their hostile stance. Whereas global relationship threat—a major threat to both sexual and romantic exclusivity of one's relationship—led to experiencing interpersonal distance and hostility themes regardless of attachment orientations, emotional

threat—a purely attachment-related threat—induced a negative view of others primarily in more avoidant individuals' fantasies. Threat imposed by the partner to the future of the relationship may affirm highly avoidant individuals' negative core beliefs about others and be channeled into feelings of detachment and hostility (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007), even in the realm of fantasies. Alternatively, this pattern of perceiving others more negatively than the self may merely manifest highly avoidant persons' tendency to defensively project unwanted traits of themselves onto others (Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999), which is amplified under threatening conditions (Mikulincer, Orbach, & Iavnieli, 1998).

The major distinction between highly avoidant individuals' and highly anxious individuals' reactions to attachment-related threats was paralleled by the distinction between men's and women's reactions. Men were more likely than women to perceive themselves as detached from the objects of their fantasies and to emphasize the fulfillment of their sexual needs, whereas women were more likely than men to focus on others' needs. These findings are consistent with Berman and Frazier's (2005) contention that people who feel relatively dependent on their partners (and these are more likely to be women and more anxious individuals than men and more avoidant individuals) are more likely to be threatened by the potential loss of the relationship than by personal losses of self-esteem. As such, they may be particularly likely to exhibit reactions designed to maintain the relationship. Conversely, individuals who feel less dependent on their partner are more likely to be threatened by potential personal rather than relational losses and respond accordingly in a way that makes them feel better about themselves. This response pattern may be particularly pronounced in the realm of sexual fantasies, where differences between women's relational focus and men's recreational focus culminate (see the review by Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). The finding showing that more avoidant women were those who were most likely to represent themselves as pleasing and affectionate following major relationship threat suggests that women's relational orientation may mitigate the effects of avoidance (see also Cooper et al., 2006).

The current research highlights the potential importance of gender- and attachment-related goals to the comprehension of fantasmatic reactions to threat. These reactions, however, may also be affected by threat characteristics that signify what it is that is threatened. The finding that proximity themes were only elicited by purely attachment-related threats, regardless of gender and attachment orientations, supports Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick's (1997) suggestion that threat to romantic rather than sexual exclusivity activates the attachment system. In contrast, threat to sexual exclusivity may

activate the sexual system, which is aimed at genetic self-promotion. Indeed, sexual threat led to fantasies that predominantly involved enhancing one's mate value in the sexual arena, which might compensate for perceived loss of sexual appeal. It is interesting that threat to both romantic and sexual exclusivity (i.e., the relationship threat condition) also elicited proximity themes, but mainly in women and more insecurely attached individuals. Men who were least likely to fantasize about proximity themes following this type of threat might be either more attuned to cues of sexual infidelity than to cues of emotional infidelity or more sensitive to personal than to relational losses. They might also be least likely to fight for the relationship under conditions that make forgiveness difficult.

Several limitations of our research qualify the interpretation of these results. First, we employed hypothetical threat scenarios rather than a paradigm in which participants were actually exposed to threats. Results from studies assessing reactions to threats in the real world suggest that actual reactions may differ from hypothetical reactions (e.g., attenuated gender differences; Berman & Frazier, 2005). The generalizability of the effects reported here should be examined in future studies using more ecologically valid designs and various sexual expressions (e.g., sexual motives, actual sexual behavior). Second, our research focused on threats to the exclusivity of one's relationship. A romantic relationship may be threatened, however, by a diverse set of threats from other sources (e.g., external threats, threats within the person) that may differentially activate personal and interpersonal goals (e.g., sex-related goals of genetic self-promotion, attachment-related goals of maintaining the bond). Future research should further explore which goals are activated by different aspects of relational threats and how individual differences in the importance of these goals may moderate the effects of threats on sexual fantasies. Finally, relationship threats do not usually occur in a "relational vacuum" and are generally integrated into relational contexts. Further research is needed to examine the possible role of relational variables (e.g., relationship quality, the meaning of sex in close relationships) in moderating the effects of threat on sexual fantasies and the processes underlying these effects.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the content of sexual fantasies reflects one's typical coping strategies while pursuing the personal and interpersonal goals that are most likely to be challenged by the specific threat. Sexual fantasies thus constitute a unique route of coping with threats whose elusive nature enables the exposure of preconscious attachment-based goals. Whether fantasmatic expression of threats helps one sustain his or her self-esteem, facilitates corresponding coping behavior, or is merely another reflection of attachment

strategies is a question for future research. Our research raises additional questions about the functional significance of sexual fantasies in threat contexts. For example, does the content of fantasies reflect one's desires or merely reflect one's fears? Are relational threats indeed likely to lead to sexual rather than nonsexual fantasies? Is this expected effect particularly pronounced among more anxious individuals who channel their attachment needs into the sexual route? Will nonsexual fantasies and sexual fantasies show similar relational themes following relational threat? Clearly, much more research is needed to elucidate the contextual determinants of sexual fantasizing, the psychological mechanisms regulating this distinctive sexual expression, and the implication of fantasizing for personal and relationship well-being.

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