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# Attachment and Information Seeking in Romantic Relationships

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*Testing predictions derived from attachment theory, this research investigated how adult attachment orientations are associated with selective exposure to information about the self, one's partner, and one's relationship. The results of two studies revealed that (a) more avoidantly attached individuals have limited interest in knowing their partner's intimate thoughts and feelings, (b) more anxiously attached individuals selectively prefer information on intimate topics pertaining to their partner and relationship and focus on information that highlights their own as well as their partner's shortcomings, and (c) regardless of attachment orientation, individuals express interest in learning about the negative relationship behaviors and characteristics of their insecurely attached partners. These findings suggest that selective information seeking may have important effects on relationships and may help explain how attachment orientations affect important relationship outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *attachment; selective attention; close relationships; working models; self*

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), mental representations or "internal working models" of close relationships develop gradually from infancy through adolescence, largely in response to experiences with attachment figures. With time, these models become increasingly stable and generalized and eventually

motivate coherent patterns of thought, affect, and behavior in relationships with attachment figures outside of the nuclear family. Working models, therefore, constitute the bridge between early experiences with attachment figures and adult attachment orientations and relationships.

Among their several functions, working models guide the processing of information about relationships. A review by Collins, Guichard, Ford, and Feeney (2004) suggests that information tends to be interpreted in ways consistent with the content of attachment orientations and their underlying working models. It also shows that individuals who have different attachment orientations remember and selectively attend to information differently. Of these three forms of information processing, selective attention has received the least attention. With the studies reported in this research, we begin to fill this gap in the literature.

Selective attention is important to attachment theory for two major reasons. First, the development of adult relationships may be partially governed by the extent to which adults selectively notice or seek out information that is consistent with either their insecure, pessimistic

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or their secure, optimistic models of relationships. Second, attachment orientations and their underlying working models should remain unchanged by new relationship experiences to the extent that selective attention and related processes prevent individuals from recognizing that a particular relationship or partner does not fit the mold cast by their working models.

### Attachment Orientations

In some of the earliest research on adult attachment, adult attachment orientations were measured through self-reports as three distinct categories: anxious, avoidant, and secure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Subsequent developments in measurement have produced measures that assess two adult attachment dimensions: avoidance and anxiety. Security tends to be defined as the absence of higher levels of anxiety and avoidance. Higher levels of attachment anxiety manifest themselves in countervailing approach and avoidance tendencies (Bowlby, 1988). Highly anxious individuals worry about being abandoned and not having their needs for care and affection met. At the same time, however, they resent what they see as uncaring and untrustworthy treatment by previous attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973; Rholes, Paetzold, & Friedman, *in press*). Their desire to attain greater security within their relationships motivates highly anxious people to seek constant reassurance from their partners, even though they often remain unconvinced of their partner's real love and commitment (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005). Avoidant working models, by comparison, center on firm expectations that attachment figures will not be available or responsive when needed. These expectations often emanate from a history of consistent rejection by familial attachment figures. To protect themselves from rejection in adult relationships, highly avoidant individuals distance themselves emotionally and psychologically from relationship partners (Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). They also are less involved with and less responsive and sensitive to their partners and relationships, preferring self-reliance in lieu of being vulnerable or dependent on their partners or their relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

### Selective Attention

To date, the research on selective attention has shown that highly avoidant people are more successful at excluding certain types of threatening information from information processing than less avoidant people, that more avoidant people are better at suppressing unwanted relationship-relevant thoughts than more anxious people, and that highly secure people are more open to new information (Baldwin & Kay, 2003; Fraley, Garner, &

Shaver, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Green-Hennessy & Reis, 1998; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). There are at least two reasons why attachment orientations and their underlying working models may dictate attention: One is that selectively attending to and selectively ignoring certain information may facilitate the relationship goals associated with different attachment orientations, and another is that it is difficult to absorb and process information when it is inconsistent with current working models because conflicting information tends to introduce uncertainty and anxiety (Bowlby, 1980). Accordingly, individuals should attend to or selectively expose themselves to information that typically is consistent with their goals and working models and avoid exposure to information that is inconsistent with them.

One of the cardinal differences between highly avoidant and highly anxious people is that more avoidant individuals strive to exclude certain kinds of attachment-relevant information from information processing (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Fraley et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995; Vetere & Myers, 2002), whereas highly anxious persons seem motivated to gather as much attachment-relevant information as possible (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Although highly avoidant individuals should, in certain situations, assimilate attachment-irrelevant or nonthreatening information into their working models, they often should attempt to maintain their models by excluding certain kinds of incongruent or potentially incongruent information as well as any information that could undermine their goal of maintaining emotional independence. One way to do so is not to expose oneself to new information about the partner or the relationship that might be too intimate or too personal. Thus, when given an opportunity to view such information versus the opportunity to view nonrelationship information, more avoidant persons should be more interested in receiving information that is not tied to their partner or relationship.

Highly anxious individuals, on the other hand, should want as much personal and intimate information about their partners and relationships as possible. One reason may be because they want to strengthen emotional bonds between themselves and their partners. They also might be interested in such information because of their chronic worries about the state and quality of their relationships (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), especially in relationship-threatening situations (Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). By vigilantly seeking information, highly anxious individuals lessen the chance of missing cues that might signal a downturn in the partner's perceptions or feelings about the relationship. Hence, when given an opportunity to examine information regarding personal, intimate details about their partners or relationships, highly anxious persons should be eager to do so.

These information-seeking tendencies may be amplified when individuals are distressed. Bowlby (1969) conjectured that the attachment system influences the amount of proximity seeking and exploration displayed by people. Certain conditions in the environment (e.g., external threats or dangers), within the person (e.g., fear or illness), or associated with attachment figures (e.g., their current proximity or availability) should activate the attachment system, causing it to have a greater impact on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors by encouraging proximity seeking and curtailing exploration. In some (but not all) past studies, certain activating conditions have been found to amplify prototypically avoidant tendencies in persons who are more avoidantly attached and prototypically anxious tendencies in those who are more anxiously attached (e.g., Feeney, 1999; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001; Simpson et al., 1992). Although we were not certain whether greater induced stress would necessarily affect information-seeking tendencies, we included stress as a variable in both of the studies described below.

### STUDY 1

Study 1 tested whether highly avoidant and highly anxious individuals preferentially seek different types of novel information about their partners and relationships as attachment theory anticipates. In Study 1, participants (individuals and their current dating partners) first provided personal information about themselves that ostensibly would be analyzed by a computer program to create a relationship profile. Once the information had ostensibly been tabulated, each participant indicated how much he or she wanted to know about his or her current romantic partner's responses to three key information categories: (a) the partner's private thoughts and feelings, (b) the partner's plans and goals regarding the future of the relationship, and (c) the partner's preferences regarding less intimate and less relationship-relevant topics (e.g., music, entertainment). We considered the intimacy and relationship future items to be two separate content areas under the larger rubric of sensitive relationship information. Each participant also indicated how much he or she generally knew about his or her partner and how important it was to know more about her or him. To determine whether information preferences were moderated by stress, participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental stress condition (described below) or a no-stress condition before indicating their information preferences.

Guided by attachment theory and previous research, we predicted that more avoidant individuals would express less interest in viewing either intimate, personal

information about their partner or their partners' goals and hopes for the future of the relationship. However, we expected that this tendency would not extend to information preferences for less intimate, non-relationship-relevant partner topics. We also predicted that highly avoidant individuals would report knowing less about their partners than would other people and believe that it is less important to learn more about them. Finally, we predicted that more avoidant individuals under stress would seek less intimate information, report less knowledge of their partners, and report that knowing more about their partners was less important to them than their nonstressed counterparts.

With regard to attachment anxiety, we predicted that more anxious individuals would express a stronger desire to view intimate, personal information about their partners, including their partners' goals and hopes about the future of the relationship. Given the nature of their working models and their chronic hypervigilance, we did not expect that highly anxious individuals would report knowing less about their partners than less anxious persons, but we hypothesized that they would believe it was important to learn more about their partners (Horowitz, Rosenberg, & Bartholomew, 1993; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). We did not anticipate an interaction between anxiety and the stress condition (cf. Simpson et al., 1992).

Finally, we tested whether general beliefs about the importance of learning more information about the partner mediated any of the observed links between the two attachment dimensions and the amount of information that individuals sought.

### METHOD

#### Participants

Seventy-six undergraduate dating couples (76 women, 76 men) were recruited from an introductory psychology class at a Southwestern university. At least one member of each couple was a student who received class credit for participation. To ensure that relationships were reasonably well established, couples had to have been dating for at least 3 months. The mean age of the men and women was 19.70 and 18.97 years, respectively, ranging from 18 to 26. The mean length of relationships was 13.35 months, ranging from 3 to 27 months.

#### Measures

Each participant first completed an adapted version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), a relationship

satisfaction scale (Hendrick, 1988), and a relationship information measure constructed for use in this study. The ECR was answered on 7-point Likert-type scales. It was adapted so that all items inquired about how participants felt about romantic partners in general rather than a mix of their current partner and partners in general. For example, the item, "I get frustrated when my partner is not around as much as I would like" was changed to "I get frustrated when romantic partners are not around as much as I would like." The anxiety and avoidance dimensions of the ECR were both reliable:  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .91$ , and  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = .89$ , respectively. Relationship satisfaction also was answered on 7-point Likert-type scales, and it also was reliable:  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = .69$ . Relationship satisfaction was treated as a covariate in the analyses reported below to determine whether attachment effects remained significant when satisfaction was statistically controlled. A bogus Computerized Relationships and Well-Being Questionnaire also was created for this study. It asked participants how they felt about themselves, their partner, and their relationship. Questions asked about personal values, goals, personality traits, and other interests. Participants were told that each partner's responses to this questionnaire would be compiled by the computer to generate a relationship profile that both dating partners could view later.

## Procedure

When couples arrived at the lab, they were led to separate rooms where each partner was given an overview of the study. Each partner was told that he or she would participate in two separate studies, the first of which involved completing questionnaires assessing his or her thoughts and feelings about the self, his or her partner, and the current relationship. Once both partners had completed the questionnaires described above, the experimenter introduced the second study.

Partners were randomly assigned to either a non-stress condition or a stress condition. In the nonstress condition, participants completed a simple and stress-free word search task. They were told that the task was designed to be easy and fun to complete. In the stress condition, participants were told they would engage in a task that generated stress. No further explanation, however, was provided. For participants in the stress condition, their pulse was recorded, after which the experimenter led them to a room that contained what appeared to be physiological recording equipment. A set of syringes and vials sat on a table next to the equipment. While waiting in the room for the procedures to begin, participants in the stress condition completed a stress scale that contained two items assessing their level

of stress and anxiety. When the experimenter returned, participants were told that due to missing equipment, they would complete this portion of the study later. Each stress participant was then escorted back to the room where he or she had completed the original questionnaires. The remaining procedures for the stress and the no-stress condition were identical.

At this point, all participants in the study (both those in the stress and in the nonstress condition) were told that the computer had combined their responses with their partner's responses to generate a relationship profile specific to their relationship. Participants were then given an opportunity to choose which portions of the profile they were most interested in viewing. They could view three sets of information. The first set contained information-seeking items designed to index how much individuals were interested in learning about their partner's intimate information. A sample item from this scale was, "Your partner's deepest wants and needs." Participants rated their interest in seeing each item on Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 (*a slight interest*) to 7 (*a great interest*). This scale contained seven items:  $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = 5.87$ ,  $SD = .94$ . The second set assessed the amount of information individuals were interested in learning about their partner's thoughts relevant to his or her own future and the future of the relationship. A sample item from this scale was, "What his/her [the partner's] relationship with you might be like in a year." This scale contained 10 items:  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ . The third set assessed how much individuals were interested in learning about their partner's day-to-day material interests. A sample item from this scale was, "What music CD your partner most wants." This scale contained eight items:  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ . It is important to note that participants never saw a relationship profile. Similar information-seeking procedures have been used by Aronson, Blanton, and Cooper (1995).

Following these procedures, each participant then answered two partner knowledge scales. The items on each of these scales were identical to those on the information-seeking scales described above. However, respondents were now asked to indicate how much information they felt they already knew about their partners and how important it was for them to know that information. The amount of knowledge items were answered on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*knew very little*) to 9 (*knew a great deal*):  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 5.33$ , and  $SD = 1.67$  for the intimacy items;  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 6.69$ , and  $SD = 1.30$  for the future items; and  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 6.35$ , and  $SD = 1.16$  for the material items. The importance of knowing items also were answered on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 9 (*very important*):  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 7.16$ , and  $SD = 1.36$  for the intimacy items;  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 7.39$ , and

**TABLE 1:** Attachment and Information Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Avoidance	1.00											
2. Anxiety	.09	1.00										
3. Intimacy information seeking	-.27*	.25*	1.00									
4. Intimacy knowledge	-.32**	-.06	.14	1.00								
5. Importance of intimacy	-.50**	.02	.60**	.39**	1.00							
6. Information seeking about future	-.39**	.11	.46**	.33**	.51**	1.00						
7. Future knowledge	-.48**	-.08	.20	.64**	.36**	.48**	1.00					
8. Importance of future	-.49**	.06	.41**	.43**	.56**	.80**	.66**	1.00				
9. Information seeking about material	-.24*	.03	.39**	.29*	.43**	.68**	.29*	.49**	1.00			
10. Knowledge of material	-.30**	-.01	.16	.62**	.29*	.26*	.55**	.37**	.31**	1.00		
11. Importance of material	-.33**	.02	.32**	.24*	.53**	.48**	.29*	.60**	.70**	.41**	1.00	
12. Sex	-.10	.01	.10	-.02	.04	-.07	.05	.03	-.14	.05	-.15	1.00

NOTE:  $N = 76$ .\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

$SD = 1.31$  for the future items; and  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 6.24$ , and  $SD = 1.61$  for the material items.

Finally, participants answered demographic questions and were carefully debriefed. Only one couple voiced suspicions about the study. This couple's data were eliminated from the data analyses.

## RESULTS

We analyzed the data using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). The APIM is appropriate for use when the dyad (i.e., the romantic couple) is the unit of analysis and tests must be performed between and within dyads (Kenny, 1996). More traditional types of data analyses (e.g., ANOVA or ordinary least squares regression) cannot properly model the covariation and statistical dependency that naturally exists when individuals are nested within certain dyads. The APIM solves the issue of interdependence by pooling the between-dyad and within-dyad standard errors to create a standard error that can be used to test for actor and partner effects separately. The degrees of freedom for each test are a function of the individual and pooled standard errors, with the resulting degrees of freedom being appropriate (Kashy & Kenny, 2000).

The APIM can test not only whether an actor's own attributes predict his or her responses and behaviors, controlling for the partner's attributes, but also whether his or her partner's attributes predict the actor's responses and behaviors, controlling for the actor's attributes. In the current study, for example, an actor effect for avoidance would be evident if an individual's score on the avoidance attachment dimension predicted his or her information seeking, controlling for his or her partner's level of avoidance. A partner effect would be evident if an individual's

partner's avoidance score predicted the actor's information seeking, controlling for the actor's own level of avoidance. In the analyses reported below, all statistically significant effects that emerged are reported.

## Preliminary Findings

The correlation between avoidance and anxiety was nonsignificant ( $r = .08$ , *ns*). The correlations between gender and the major predictor variables also were all nonsignificant. Correlations between the amount of information selected, knowledge about the information, and importance of the information for each category—(a) partners' intimacy information, (b) partners' thoughts about the future, and (c) partners' nonrelationship material interests—were all significant, with  $r$ s ranging from .31 to .80, all  $p$ s  $< .001$ . Correlations between all the major variables in Study 1 are reported in Table 1.

## Information-Seeking Effects

The first set of analyses examined the effects of attachment orientations predicting the type of information that participants selected to view from the relationship profile. Each information-seeking category (i.e., information about partners' undisclosed intimate information, partners' thoughts about and plans for the future, and partners' day-to-day material interests) was treated as a dependent variable in separate analyses. For each analysis, actor avoidance and anxiety scores, partner avoidance and anxiety scores, participant sex, experimental condition, and all two-way interaction terms were entered as predictor variables. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 2.

The results revealed significant main effects for actor avoidance predicting all three information-seeking categories, with more avoidant individuals seeking less



**TABLE 2:** Summary of APIM Analyses for Information-Seeking Variables

Variable	Model for Intimacy			Model for Future			Model for Material		
	b	t	df	b	t	df	b	t	df
Actor avoidance	-0.28**	-3.23	147	-0.42**	-3.93	147	-0.41**	-3.19	147
Partner avoidance	0.10	1.17	147	0.09	0.82	147	-0.02	-0.12	147
Actor anxiety	0.19*	2.68	145	0.21*	2.35	145	0.13	1.17	144
Partner anxiety	-0.02	-0.30	145	0.02	0.22	145	-0.07	-0.69	144
Sex	0.06	1.01	73	0.02	0.23	73	-0.23*	-2.48	73
Condition	0.03	0.20	73	0.27	1.70	73	-0.02	-0.09	73

NOTE: APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .**TABLE 3:** Summary of APIM Analyses for Knowledge Variables

Variable	Model for Intimacy			Model for Future			Model for Material		
	b	t	df	b	t	df	b	t	df
Actor avoidance	-0.62**	-3.75	143	-0.67**	-5.16	142	-0.35**	-2.96	135
Partner avoidance	-0.03	-0.16	143	-0.20	-1.57	142	0.13	1.08	135
Actor anxiety	0.04	0.28	147	0.02	0.20	134	0.16	1.66	143
Partner anxiety	0.21	1.50	147	0.04	0.40	134	-0.03	-0.32	143
Sex	0.02	0.17	73	0.14	1.69	73	0.11	1.09	73
Condition	0.21	0.80	73	0.24	1.38	73	0.19	0.96	73

NOTE: APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

information about their romantic partners across all three categories. Specifically, greater avoidance was associated with less seeking of intimate information,  $b = -.28$ ,  $t(147) = -3.32$ ,  $p < .003$ , less seeking of future-oriented information,  $b = -.42$ ,  $t(147) = -3.93$ ,  $p < .001$ , and surprisingly less seeking of nonrelationship material interests,  $b = -.41$ ,  $t(147) = -3.19$ ,  $p < .01$ . Contrary to predictions, there were no significant interactions between avoidance and stress for any of the information-seeking dimensions.

In addition to effects for avoidance, there were also main effects for actor anxiety predicting the selection of information about the partners' intimate thoughts and feelings,  $b = .19$ ,  $t(145) = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ , and information about the partners' plans for the future,  $b = .21$ ,  $t(145) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .02$ . More anxiously attached individuals were more interested in obtaining information pertaining to intimacy-related issues and the future of the partner and relationship than were less anxious individuals. There was also an unexpected main effect for gender predicting material information seeking,  $b = -.23$ ,  $t(73) = -2.48$ ,  $p < .02$ , indicating that men were more interested than women in obtaining nonrelationship material information.

### Partner Knowledge and Importance Effects

The second set of analyses examined participants' knowledge about their partner and the importance of

information about their partner pertaining to the three information categories. The results of these analyses are shown in Tables 3 and 4. Main effects emerged for avoidance predicting knowledge about the partner and the importance of information about the partner on all three dimensions. In particular, more avoidant people reported knowing less about their current romantic partners' intimate thoughts and feelings,  $b = -.62$ ,  $t(143) = -3.75$ ,  $p < .001$ , and that such intimacy information was less important for them to know,  $b = -.77$ ,  $t(141) = -6.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . More avoidant people also reported knowing less about their partners' thoughts about the future,  $b = -.66$ ,  $t(142) = -5.16$ ,  $p < .001$ , and this information was also less important for them to know,  $b = -.72$ ,  $t(147) = -6.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, more avoidant people reported knowing less about their partners' nonrelationship material interests,  $b = -.34$ ,  $t(135) = -2.96$ ,  $p < .01$ , which was less important for them to know,  $b = -.58$ ,  $t(145) = -3.74$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>1</sup> Contrary to predictions, there were no significant interactions between avoidance and stress for any of the knowledge or importance variables.

There also was a significant main effect for actor anxiety predicting importance of partners' intimate thoughts and feelings,  $b = .25$ ,  $t(132) = 2.46$ ,  $p < .05$ , and importance of information about the future of the relationship,  $b = .21$ ,  $t(145) = 2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, there were significant main effects for sex,  $b = .17$ ,  $t(73) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , and for experimental condition,  $b = .37$ ,

**TABLE 4:** Summary of APIM Analyses for Importance of Information Variables

Variables	Model for Intimacy			Model for Future			Model for Material		
	b	t	df	b	t	df	b	t	df
Actor avoidance	-0.76**	-6.46	141	-0.72**	-6.26	147	-0.58**	-3.74	145
Partner avoidance	-0.16	-1.38	141	-0.19	-1.65	147	-0.24	-1.58	145
Actor anxiety	0.25*	2.46	132	0.21*	2.11	145	0.23	1.79	147
Partner anxiety	0.11	1.05	132	-0.09	-0.88	145	-0.16	-1.25	147
Sex	0.14	1.81	73	0.17*	2.01	73	-0.14	-1.18	73
Condition	0.30	1.92	73	0.37*	2.18	73	0.26	1.09	73

NOTE: APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

$t(73) = 2.18, p < .04$ , predicting the importance of information pertaining to the relationship future. Considered together, these results indicated that more anxiously attached individuals believed that information on topics related to intimacy and the future of the relationship were more important for them to know.

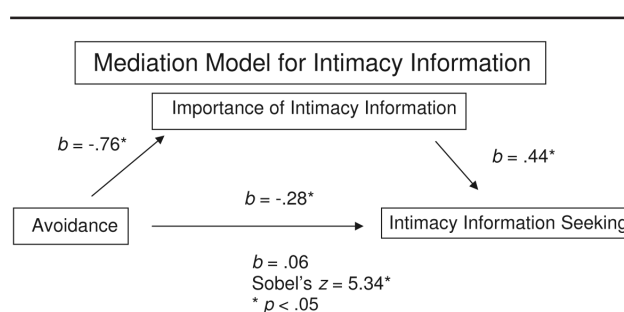
### Discriminant Analyses

Relationship satisfaction could be partially responsible for the effects reported above. Accordingly, we reran the APIM analyses described above controlling for actors' relationship satisfaction. When we did so, all of the significant effects reported above (both main effects and interactions) remained significant except two, which remained marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). These results, therefore, are not attributable to the fact that more insecurely attached individuals tend to be involved in less-satisfying relationships (see Simpson, 1990).

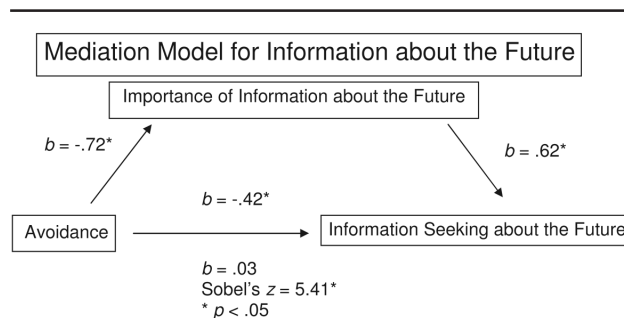
### Mediation Tests

In the final set of analyses, we tested mediation models. We predicted that the importance of information might mediate the relation between avoidance and information seeking. Specifically, highly avoidant people may seek less information because they believe that it is less important to do so. Each mediation analysis was tested separately for each of the three information-seeking categories and was conducted following the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). All of the conditions necessary to test for mediation were present.

The results revealed that the link between avoidance and seeking information about intimacy became nonsignificant when the importance of intimacy information was included in the model,  $b = .05, ns$ , Sobel's  $z = -3.13, p < .002$  (see Figure 1). Moreover, the association between avoidance and seeking information about partners' thoughts concerning the future of the relationship became nonsignificant when this mediator was included in the model,  $b = .02, ns$ , Sobel's  $z = -3.69,$



**Figure 1** The mediation model of the association between attachment avoidance and the selection of information pertaining to the partners' intimate thoughts and feelings, mediated by the importance of intimate information.

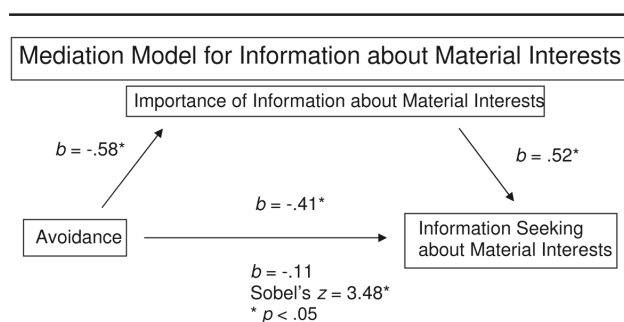
\* $p < .05$ .

**Figure 2** The mediation model of the association between attachment avoidance and the selection of information pertaining to the partners' thoughts and feelings about the future, mediated by the importance of future information.

\* $p < .05$ .

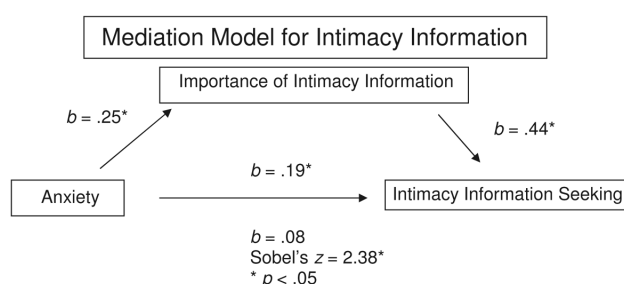
$p < .001$  (see Figure 2). The association between avoidance and seeking information about partners' thoughts pertaining to nonrelationship material interests also became nonsignificant when the importance of material information was included in the model,  $b = -.07, ns$ , Sobel's  $z = -3.03, p < .002$  (see Figure 3).

Similar to the models proposed above, we predicted that the relation between anxiety and information seeking



**Figure 3** The mediation model of the association between attachment avoidance and the selection of information pertaining to the partners' thoughts and feelings about non-relationship-oriented material interests, mediated by the importance of information about material interests.

\* $p < .05$ .



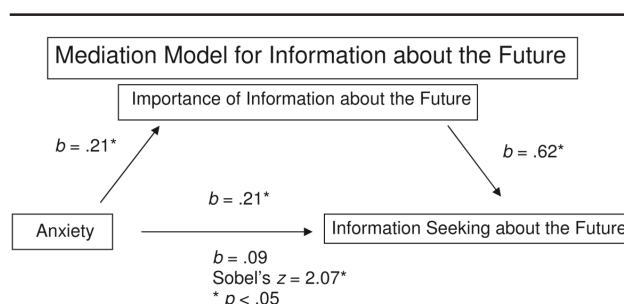
**Figure 4** The mediation model of the association between attachment anxiety and the selection of information pertaining to the partners' intimate thoughts and feelings, mediated by the importance of intimate information.

\* $p < .05$ .

might be mediated by the importance people placed on the information. The conditions necessary to test for mediation were present for intimacy and future-oriented information but not for material interests. Full mediation was found both for intimacy,  $b = .08$ ,  $ns$ , Sobel's  $z = 2.38$ ,  $p < .05$ , and for future,  $b = .09$ ,  $ns$ , Sobel's  $z = 2.07$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Figures 4 and 5).

## DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 indicate that highly avoidant individuals seek to limit the amount of information they have about their partners, presumably to maintain psychological independence, and that more anxious individuals do the opposite. One implication of this research is that more insecure persons should be distressed if the amount or type of information they receive is inconsistent with their broader relationship goals. Another is that some forms of behavior (e.g., withdrawal



**Figure 5** The mediation model of the association between attachment anxiety and the selection of information pertaining to the partners' thoughts and feelings about the future, mediated by the importance of future information.

\* $p < .05$ .

from discussions about conflictual issues) may be motivated by the desire to limit or increase the flow of information. These findings, of course, are consistent with Bowlby's (1980) claim that a key psychological defense commonly used by highly avoidant individuals should be the exclusion of threatening information from processing.

## STUDY 2

Study 1 was limited in three important ways. First, it tested a relatively small set of information categories, each of which focused primarily on the partner. Study 1 did not canvas other theoretically important types of information, such as positive and negative information about both the self and the partner. Second, the fear-induction paradigm in Study 1 may not have been strong enough to induce high levels of stress. In Study 1, participants were asked to wait in an ordinary room that contained what appeared to be physiological equipment. This procedure may not have been sufficiently threatening to activate the attachment system. A more stress-inducing task (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992) may be needed to test the effects of distress on attachment-relevant behaviors. Third, Study 1 examined one type of stress, namely, a fear-induced form of stress that was external to the relationship. From an attachment perspective, another important form of stress should be internal to the relationship in the form of rejection or lack of support from the partner, particularly when an individual needs comfort and consoling.

Study 2 was designed to rectify these shortcomings. In Study 2, dating couples first provided information about themselves (individually) that supposedly was entered into a computer program for analysis. One partner in each relationship (the actual participant) was then exposed to a stronger stress-induction procedure (see below), after which he or she received either a



supportive or a nonsupportive handwritten note from his or her dating partner (who served as an experimental accomplice in the second half of the study). After receiving the note, the actual participant was given an opportunity to view novel information about himself or herself or his or her partner that was positive or negative in valence. Each participant also had the chance to view novel nonrelationship information.

As discussed earlier, highly anxious people tend to hold fairly negative self-views, feel unworthy of love, and worry about losing their partners' support and affection. Given the assimilative nature of their working models coupled with their low self-esteem and chronic concerns about their self-worth in relationships (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), highly anxious individuals should express greater interest in viewing negative information about themselves and less interest in viewing positive self-information than less anxious individuals. Highly anxious individuals also view their partners in fairly negative terms (e.g., as untrustworthy and unsupportive), yet they long for closer and more intimate relationships with their partners. This approach-avoidance conflict is a defining feature of both children and adults who have anxious attachment orientations (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973). To seek information that might confirm negative views of a partner may intensify fears and insecurities about the partner at the same time that it confirms anxious working models (cf. Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999; Simpson et al., 1992). Because of these countervailing pressures, we did not derive hypotheses about the preferences of more anxious individuals in terms of selecting negative information about their partners.

One of the most robust findings in the attachment literature is that the partners of highly anxious individuals tend to be very dissatisfied (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1999; Simpson, 1990) and they view their highly anxious companions in derogatory terms (i.e., as feeble, dependent, and emotionally unstable; see Rholes et al., 2001). Accordingly, if individuals are involved with highly anxious partners, they should select information that is consistent with the negative views they hold of their partners, a process that should reinforce and sustain their negative impressions and dissatisfaction.

Unlike highly anxious individuals, highly avoidant people desire to maintain a comfortable degree of emotional and psychological distance from their partners. When given the opportunity to view new, potentially intimate information about their partners versus novel, nonrelationship information, highly avoidant individuals should select information that is not tied to their partners or relationships.

Similar to Study 1, we were not certain whether the external stressor (the fear-induction procedures) or the internal stressor (a nonsupportive note written by

the participant's partner) would amplify the information-seeking predictions outlined above. We suspected, however, that a supportive or unsupportive act by the partner might partially counteract (in the supportive note condition) or enhance (in the unsupportive note condition) the effects that highly avoidant and highly anxious working models have on information seeking.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred twenty-six dating couples (126 women, 126 men) were recruited from an introductory psychology course at a large Southwestern university. Couples were required to have dated exclusively for at least 3 months to ensure that they were involved in fairly well-established relationships. Of the 126 couples, 3 participants failed to follow directions when completing the questionnaires and data from 2 participants were lost due to equipment malfunctions. These 5 couples were dropped from the analyses, leaving a sample of 121 couples. The mean age of the participants was 19.23 years; ages ranged from 18 to 26 years. The mean length of the dating relationships was 13.05 months and ranged from 3 to 26 months.

### Measures

Participants completed an adapted version of the ECR (Brennan et al., 1998), a relationship satisfaction scale (Hendrick, 1988), and a bogus relationship measure created for this study (see below). The descriptive statistics for the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of the ECR were  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = .86$  and  $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = .80$ , respectively. Cronbach's alphas were .86 and .91, respectively. Relationship satisfaction was treated as a covariate in the analyses reported below to determine whether attachment effects remained significant when relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) was statistically controlled.

A bogus Computerized Relationships and Well-Being Questionnaire was created for the current study. Similar to Study 1, the questionnaire asked participants how they felt about themselves, their partner, and their relationship. Questions inquired about personal values, goals, and personality traits, including those related to career choices. Participants were told that both their responses and their partner's responses would be compiled to create a relationship profile specific to their relationship.

### Procedure

When each dating couple arrived at the lab, each partner first completed the self-report questionnaires,

which were administered by one experimenter. Once both partners had finished, a second experimenter then explained that the partners would be doing two different studies. Participants were told that one of them had been randomly selected to undergo a series of physiological procedures. The experimenter then said, "I have to tell you that many people find this to be very stressful and anxiety-provoking." The other partner would engage in a different, nonstressful task (see below).

The experimenter then asked the participant who was about to undergo the physiological procedures to sign a consent form. Each participant's pulse was then recorded as a baseline measure. The purpose of the consent form and pulse measures was to make the physiological procedure seem realistic and more stress/anxiety provoking. The other participant (the partner) was told that he or she would complete more questionnaires and solve some puzzles.

The experimenter then showed both partners the room in which the physiological procedures would occur. The room looked like a meat locker with a heavy metal door, metal walls, and a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. In the room, the experimenter asked the stressed partner to take a seat next to the physiological equipment, which had an abundance of buttons, knobs, and wires. There was also a table with a set of syringes, medical ointment, and gloves.

The participant (partner) who was assigned to complete questionnaires and puzzles was then escorted to another room. At this point, this partner was asked to help the experimenter conduct the rest of the study. Specifically, this partner was asked to copy either a supportive or nonsupportive note (created by the authors) in his or her own handwriting, which would be delivered to the partner. The supportive statement read, "Don't worry. You'll do great in that dark room!" and the unsupportive statement read, "Don't embarrass me in that stress thing!" Both notes were extensively pilot tested before the study was run. The experimenter then left this participant alone to complete the questionnaires and work on puzzles. Thus, the primary reasons for bringing the helper partner into the lab was to have him or her (a) complete the questionnaires from which the relationship profiles were supposedly generated by the computer and (b) write a supportive or a nonsupportive note that was then delivered to his or her stressed partner.

The note was then delivered to the stressed partner, who was still waiting to undergo the physiological procedures. Half of the stressed participants were randomly assigned to receive a supportive note and half were randomly assigned to receive a nonsupportive note. After about 20 seconds of trying to get the equipment ready, the experimenter told the stressed participant that something

was missing. The experimenter then supposedly tried to locate some needed equipment.

Each stressed participant was then led back to his or her original room to finish the remaining part of the study. The information-seeking task was administered during this phase. The experimenter explained that the computer program had generated the computerized relationship profile and the participant would have a few minutes to examine it. Each stressed participant was told that the profile could be customized to address the concerns of the person requesting information from it and he or she could choose which issues or topics he or she most wanted to see.

The five categories of information from which participants could select were (a) positive information about one's own relationship behaviors and characteristics ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 7.62$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ), (b) positive information about the partner's relationship behaviors and characteristics ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 8.03$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ), (c) negative information about one's own relationship behaviors and characteristics ( $\alpha = .64$ ,  $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ), (d) negative information about the partner's relationship behaviors and characteristics ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 6.62$ ,  $SD = 2.45$ ), and (e) nonrelationship, career-oriented information about themselves ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ). Once participants indicated on 10-point scales how interested they were in seeing each category of information (no profile information was actually provided), they completed measures that assessed their relationship satisfaction as well as items that tapped their perceptions of the partner's general supportiveness (outside of the experiment), perceptions of the supportiveness of the note they received (during the experiment), and their self-rated stress while waiting to undergo the physiological procedures. Once these measures were completed, the study ended and participants were fully and very carefully debriefed. When participants were asked if they had any doubts about the study, only one person questioned the authenticity of the physiological equipment. This person's data was eliminated from the data set. No one voiced any concerns or questions about the handwritten note.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

The mean ratings of supportiveness of the note, general supportiveness of the partner, and self-reported stress are summarized in Table 5. As expected, the supportive note was rated as significantly more supportive than the nonsupportive note. Participants' ratings of their partners' general level of supportiveness were not significantly different in the supportive versus unsupportive

**TABLE 5:** Mean Differences Between Supportive and Unsupportive Conditions

	<i>Supportive Condition</i>		<i>Unsupportive Condition</i>		<i>t</i> (109)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Note supportiveness	11.79	2.75	6.32	3.50	9.56**
General supportiveness	12.02	2.04	12.42	1.52	-1.19
Self-reported stress	8.19	3.75	8.24	3.64	-.07

\*\* $p < .01$ .

note conditions. Thus, participants' perceptions of the note did not affect their perceptions of their partners' overall supportiveness. Participants' stress levels in the supportive and unsupportive conditions also were not significantly different. Across both note conditions, participants' ratings of their experience of stress varied considerably ( $M = 8.23$ ,  $SD = 3.68$ ), suggesting that some participants were better able to regulate their emotions than others. The correlations of self-reported stress with avoidance and anxiety indicated that more anxious individuals experienced greater stress/anxiety (in response to the fear induction) than did less anxious individuals ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas no such pattern emerged for avoidance ( $r = -.05$ ,  $ns$ ). Correlations between all the major variables in Study 2 are reported in Table 6.

### Primary Analyses

Because dating partners in Study 2 were not exposed to the same experimental procedures and did not answer identical measures, we could not use the APIM to analyze the Study 2 data. Therefore, we used hierarchical regression techniques that effectively treated each couple (dyad) as the unit of analysis.

To test the Study 2 predictions, we performed five regression analyses (one for each of the five information-seeking dependent variables). The five dependent variables were the preferential selection of (a) positive information about the self, (b) positive information about the partner, (c) negative information about the self, (d) negative information about the partner, and (e) nonrelationship (career-related) information. All five analyses had the same general format. The first variables entered into each analysis were the stress participants' anxiety and avoidance scores. The next block of variables included the stress participants' self-reported stress and the supportive versus unsupportive note condition to which he or she was assigned (coded 1 and -1, respectively). The third block contained all of the main two-way interactions: Anxiety  $\times$  Stress, Anxiety  $\times$  Note Condition, Avoidance  $\times$  Stress, Avoidance  $\times$  Note Condition, and Stress  $\times$  Note Condition. The final block included two theoretically rel-

**TABLE 6:** Correlations Between the Major Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Anxiety							
2. Avoidance	.25**						
3. Partner anxiety	.15	.32**					
4. Partner avoidance	.19*	.16	.12				
5. Note condition	.15	.13	.06	.13			
6. Self-reported stress	.34**	-.05	.00	-.04	-.01		
7. Satisfaction	-.30**	-.27**	-.23*	-.27**	-.14	-.02	

\*\* $p < .01$ .

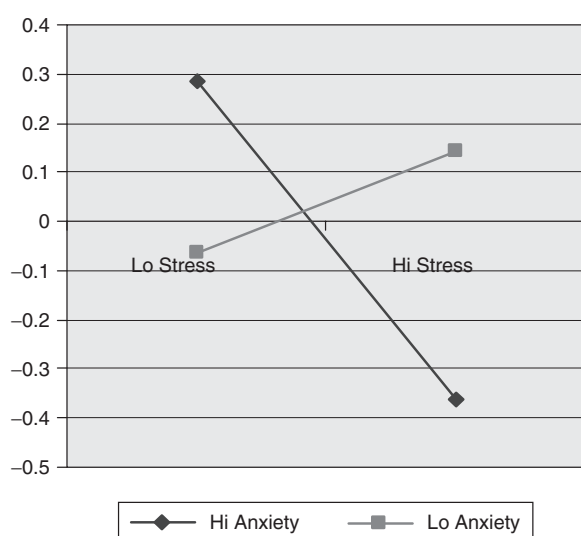
evant three-way interactions: Anxiety  $\times$  Stress  $\times$  Note Condition and Avoidance  $\times$  Stress  $\times$  Note Condition.

### Actor Effect Findings

The first analysis tested interest in negative self-information as the dependent variable. A main effect of anxiety,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(118) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ , revealed that more anxious individuals expressed greater interest in receiving information about their negative relationship behaviors and characteristics than did less anxious individuals. This effect was not moderated by either self-reported stress or receiving a supportive versus an unsupportive note from the partner. These results imply that highly anxious persons have a general proclivity to seek negative self-information.

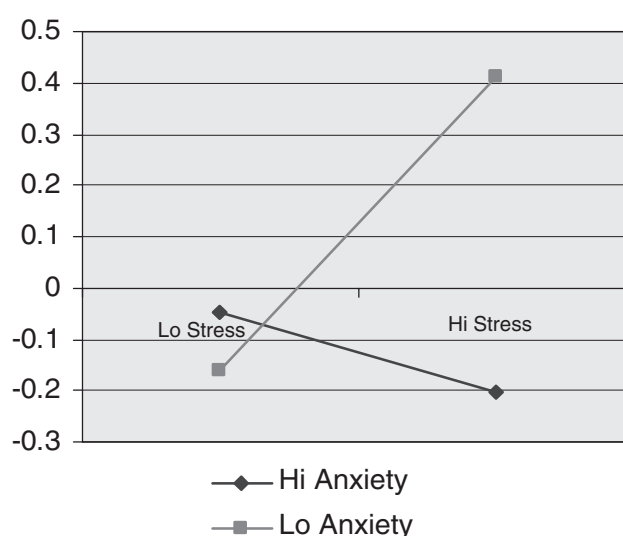
The second analysis examined interest in positive self-information as the dependent variable. An interaction between anxiety and stress emerged,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(111) = -2.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . As shown in Figure 6, highly anxious individuals sought less positive information about themselves if they felt more stressed. In addition, a marginally significant interaction between anxiety and stress,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t(111) = -1.81$ ,  $p = .07$ , indicated that individuals who were less anxious and more stressed expressed a slightly stronger interest in receiving positive information about their partners (see Figure 7). The simple slopes for these interactions are summarized in Table 7. In terms of attachment anxiety, no significant or marginally significant effects were found for the other three information categories.

With respect to avoidance, the results of the five hierarchical regression analyses (described above) revealed a marginally significant two-way interaction between avoidance and stress predicting the selection of nonrelationship (career-related) information,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t(111) = 1.80$ ,  $p = .08$ . As shown in Figure 8, when highly stressed, less-avoidant individuals sought less nonrelationship information than did those who were more avoidant. This analysis also revealed a significant three-way interaction between avoidance, stress, and note condition predicting the selection of nonrelationship (career-related)



**Figure 6** The two-way interaction between attachment anxiety and self-reported stress predicting the selection of positive information about one's own relationship behaviors and characteristics.

NOTE: Regression lines are plotted for anxiously attached individuals scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean.



**Figure 7** The two-way interaction between attachment anxiety and self-reported stress predicting the selection of positive information about the partner's relationship behaviors and characteristics.

NOTE: Regression lines are plotted for anxiously attached individuals scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean.

information,  $\beta = -.31$ ,  $t(109) = 2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ . As depicted in Figure 9, more avoidant individuals sought more non-relationship information when they were highly stressed and received an unsupportive note from their partners. There also was a marginally significant three-way interaction between avoidance, stress, and note condition involving the selection of negative self-relevant information,  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $t(109) = 1.78$ ,  $p = .08$ . As shown in Figure 10, more avoidant persons sought more negative information about themselves when they were highly stressed and received an unsupportive note. In terms of attachment avoidance, no significant or marginally significant effects were found for the other information categories.

### Partner Effect Findings

The five hierarchical regressions also revealed main effects of the partners' attachment on the selection of information about the partner and the self. Specifically, individuals whose partners scored higher in attachment anxiety expressed a stronger interest in receiving negative information about the partner,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $t(117) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ . Similarly, having a partner who was higher in avoidance also predicted greater interest in receiving negative partner information,  $\beta = .32$ ,  $t(117) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, partner avoidance was associated with individuals' selection of negative self-information,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(117) = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ , with individuals

who had more avoidant partners expressing greater interest in receiving negative self-information.

### Discriminant Analyses

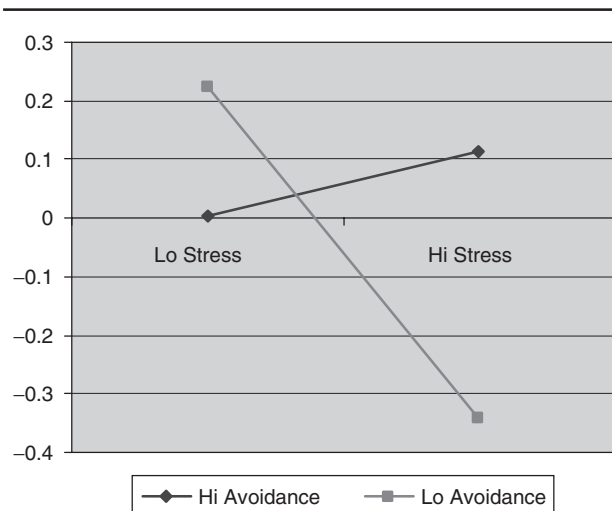
Partners' attachment styles and relationship satisfaction might be partially responsible for the effects reported above. Accordingly, we reran the five hierarchical regression analyses described above controlling for partner anxiety, partner avoidance, and relationship satisfaction (reported by actors). When we did so, all of the effects reported above remained significant or marginally significant.

We also reran the analyses for all five dependent variables (i.e., positive self, negative self, positive partner, negative partner, and neutral information seeking) including relationship length as a potential moderator. The results revealed a significant interaction between anxiety and relationship length predicting positive self,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(108) = 2.66$ ,  $p < .01$ , negative self,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t(108) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , positive partner,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t(108) = 1.95$ ,  $p = .05$ , and negative partner,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(108) = 2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ . These findings revealed the same general trend. Highly anxious individuals selected more positive and negative information about themselves and their partners the longer they had been in their relationships, whereas individuals who scored lower in anxiety selected less information about themselves and their partners the longer they had been in

**TABLE 7:** Significance Tests for Simple Slopes

DV	Interaction	Simple Slope	t	p Value
Pos self-info	Anxiety $\times$ Stress	(1) Hi anxiety	-1.64	.10
		(2) Lo anxiety	.44	.66
Pos partner info	Anxiety $\times$ Stress	(1) Hi anxiety	-.28	.78
		(2) Lo anxiety	1.61	.11
Neutral info	Avoidance $\times$ Stress	(1) Hi avoidance	.33	.74
		(2) Lo avoidance	-1.74	.08
Neutral info	Avd $\times$ Stress $\times$ Cond	(1) Hi avd, Unsupp cond	1.73	.08
		(2) Lo avd, Unsupp cond	-2.04	.04
		(3) Hi avd, Supp cond	-.29	.77
		(4) Lo avd, Supp cond	-.59	.56
Neg self-info	Avd $\times$ Stress $\times$ Cond	(1) Hi avd, Unsupp cond	2.62	.01
		(2) Lo avd, Unsupp cond	.135	.89
		(3) Hi avd, Supp cond	-.75	.45
		(4) Lo avd, Supp cond	-.41	.68

NOTE: DV = dependent variable; pos self-info = positive self-information; pos partner info = positive partner information; Avd = avoidance; Cond = condition; Unsupp = unsupportive; Supp = supportive; Neg self-info = negative self-information.



**Figure 8** The two-way interaction between attachment avoidance and self-reported stress predicting the selection of nonrelationship (career-oriented) information about the self.

NOTE: Regression lines are plotted for avoidantly attached individuals scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean.

their relationships. It could be that highly anxious people feel more insecure as their relationships develop and, therefore, remain vigilant to information that is relevant to their relationships. In contrast, less anxious individuals may feel increasingly secure and confident as their relationships develop, resulting in less need to monitor or

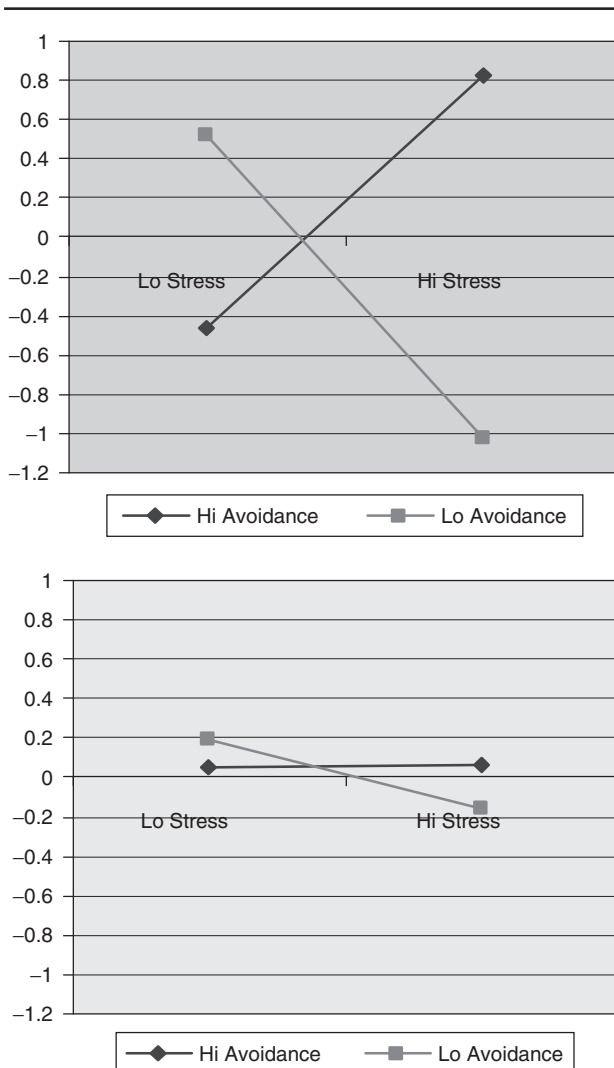
gather additional information. There were no significant findings for neutral information seeking.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present studies are the first to demonstrate systematic connections between attachment orientations and information-seeking proclivities. The findings reveal that more avoidantly attached adults have limited interest in knowing their partner's intimate thoughts and feelings. They also reveal that more anxiously attached adults have greater interest in information on intimate topics pertaining to their partners and relationships and they are inclined to select information that directs their attention toward their own shortcomings as relationship partners. Moreover, regardless of their specific attachment orientation, people are interested in learning about the negative relationship behaviors and characteristics of more anxiously and more avoidantly attached partners.

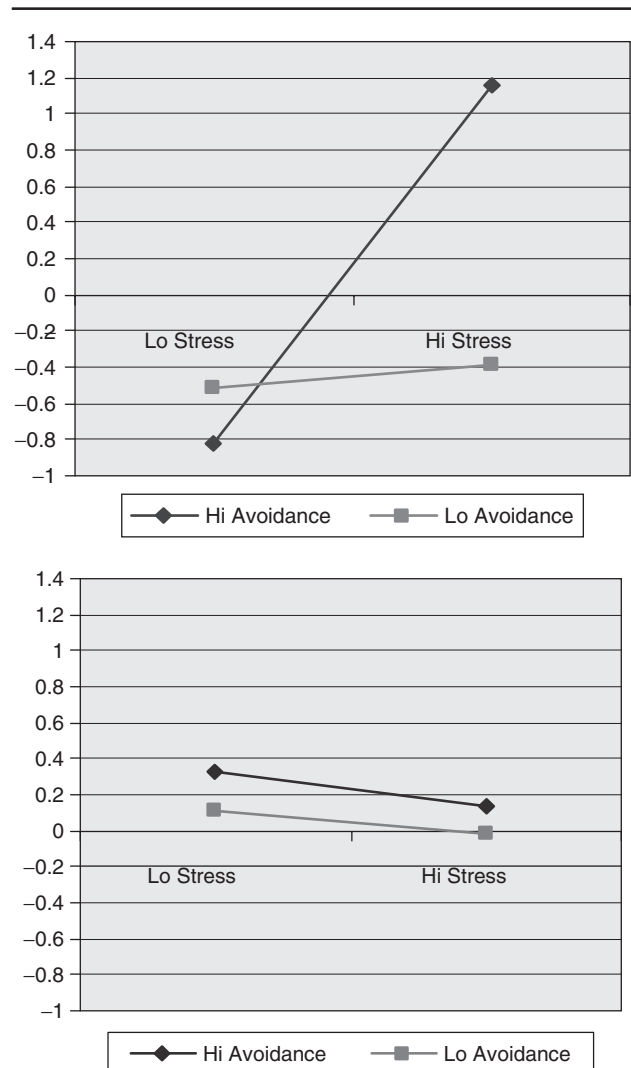
The findings in Study 1 for avoidance are consistent with studies indicating that more avoidant adults engage in limited self-disclosure (see Rholes et al., in press). Generally speaking, more avoidant adults share less information about themselves and seek less information about their partners. These two proclivities may have somewhat different origins and explanations. The failure to self-disclose may be motivated by fears of emotional vulnerability. Disinterest in partner information, however, cannot be explained in the same terms.





**Figure 9** The three-way interaction between attachment avoidance, self-reported stress, and the supportive/unsupportive note condition predicting the selection of nonrelationship (career-related) information about the self.

NOTE: Regression lines are plotted for avoidantly attached individuals scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean.



**Figure 10** The three-way interaction between attachment avoidance, self-reported stress, and the supportive/unsupportive note condition predicting the selection of negative information about one's own relationship behaviors and characteristics.

NOTE: Regression lines are plotted for avoidantly attached individuals scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean.

One possible explanation for partner disinterest could be that because highly avoidant people want to keep their lives private, they assume that others do as well. Accordingly, they do not seek personal information about their partners out of consideration for their privacy. This explanation is problematic, however, because avoidance also is associated with insensitivity and less concern for the welfare of partners (cf. Rholes et al., 2001). Another possibility is that highly avoidant adults adopt a dismissive stance toward others (including relationship partners), viewing them as unimportant and not

worth knowing well. Although this explanation seems more plausible, we suspect that highly avoidant individuals most likely worry that if they come to know their partners too well, they might relinquish some of the independence and emotional distance that they yearn to maintain between themselves and their partners.

Indeed, this explanation is supported by the findings of Study 2, which show that highly avoidant individuals prefer less intimate nonrelationship career information when they are more distressed (i.e., when they experience stress from an external threat stemming from an

experimental task and from an internal threat generated by an unsupportive note ostensibly written by their partner). This particular finding suggests that when avoidant working models are triggered by heightened external and internal threats, highly avoidant individuals may rely more heavily on defensive coping strategies by restricting attention to intimate information about their partners and relationships (see also Fraley et al., 2000).

The findings in Study 1 for anxiety are consistent with highly anxious individuals' strong desire for intimacy and hypervigilance to information about their partners and relationships. These findings are also in accord with the results of several studies revealing that more anxious individuals disclose more about themselves than do their more avoidant counterparts (see Rholes et al., *in press*). In essence, highly anxious persons both seek and disclose more relationship-relevant information.

The results of Study 2 also confirmed that highly anxious individuals seek more negative information about their own relationship behaviors/characteristics and, when experiencing greater stress, also express less interest in positive self-information. Previous research has shown that highly anxious adults have lower self-esteem (Brennan & Morris, 1997; Bylsma, Cozzarelli, & Sumer, 1997) and more negative self-images (Mikulincer, 1995), believing that they are not worthy of the kind of treatment from their partners they would ideally like to receive. To explain why highly anxious individuals are more interested in negative information about themselves, we have emphasized Bowlby's (1980) view that information that contradicts current working models ought to introduce uncertainty and anxiety. Consequently, information about personal faults and shortcomings might actually be comforting to highly anxious persons because it reconfirms their jaded views of themselves. This explanation involves motives similar to Swann's epimistic motive for self-verification (see Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), which has an important influence on the behavior and cognitions of people who have low self-esteem.

There is yet another possible explanation for this effect. Information-seeking choices could have been made in the interest of self-improvement. This, however, is not the best account of the present results because there is no *a priori* reason to expect a selective focus on negative characteristics if self-improvement is the overarching goal. Learning about one's strengths also should be critical to self-improvement. Moreover, the tendency to avoid positive information emerged primary when highly anxious individuals experienced higher levels of stress. There is no apparent reason why stress ought to enhance a motive for self-improvement.

Selection of information about partners was not related to attachment anxiety. These null results are

consistent with the view that highly anxious partners in relationships harbor conflicted feelings about their attachment figures. On one hand, they view them as not meeting their emotional needs; on the other hand, they yearn to maintain close emotional ties with them. Given this strong approach-avoidance conflict, it is not surprising that the information-seeking tendencies of highly anxious persons did not reveal consistent trends in either a positive or negative direction.

Regardless of their own attachment orientation, individuals involved with highly anxious or highly avoidant partners tend to be dissatisfied with their relationships (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002; Simpson, 1990). An interest in seeking negative information about partners might reflect needs to understand why a relationship is not going well or to reconfirm existing, negative impressions of a partner. Regardless of the exact origins, negative selective exposure to partner information is likely to sustain dissatisfaction over time by offering further evidence that the current partner or relationship is indeed problematic.

Three unanticipated findings emerged from these studies. Only one, however, was more than marginally significant. It indicated that the partners of more avoidant persons were more likely to select negative information about themselves. Although caution is necessary in interpreting this unanticipated result, it seems to suggest that involvement with highly avoidant partners could raise self-doubts. Having a romantic partner who consistently eschews intimacy and tries to maintain emotional distance may be viewed as a reflection of negative aspects of the self. Another unexpected finding was that less anxious (i.e., more secure) individuals chose to view positive information about their partners when they were more stressed. This may indicate that people who have fewer doubts about their partners' love and trustworthiness cope with stress by enhancing their views of their partners (cf. Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). The final unanticipated result indicated that highly avoidant people seek more negative information about themselves when they are highly stressed and are not supported by their partners. Attachment theory suggests that highly avoidant and highly anxious individuals both harbor self-doubts resulting from adverse experiences with attachment figures earlier in social development (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). The primary difference is that highly avoidant individuals are generally able to defensively exclude such information from processing and can maintain positive (but brittle) self-views. Under very high levels of stress (i.e., combinations of external and internal threats), avoidance defenses may be sufficiently weakened to allow the underlying negative sense of the self to emerge, leading highly avoidant persons to then seek confirming information.

In conclusion, the primary findings of these studies indicate that highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals tend to seek (or fail to seek) information about their partners and relationships in ways that appear to further their goals of creating (or avoiding) emotional bonds. They also suggest that highly anxious individuals might maintain their negative model of self in relationships by selectively attending to information about their negative behaviors/characteristics. Finally, they suggest that the partners of highly anxious and highly avoidant persons may remain dissatisfied with their relationships in part because they selectively attend to the negative qualities of their insecure partners.

## NOTE

1. When examining relationship length, several significant effects were found. In general, participants reported that they knew more intimacy, more future, and more material information about their partners if they had dated them longer. Participants in longer relationships also reported that information about the future was more important. This effect, however, was moderated by avoidance, with highly avoidant people in longer relationships being less inclined to believe that knowing more information about the future was important. In addition, an interaction between relationship length and avoidance for future information seeking revealed similar effects. In particular, less-avoidant people sought more information about the future if they were involved in longer relationships but the same effect was not true for more avoidant people.

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