



## When self-protection overreaches: Relationship-specific threat activates domain-general avoidance motivation

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### ABSTRACT

Murray, Holmes, and Collins' [Murray, Holmes, and Collins (2006) Optimizing assurance: The risk regulation system in relationships. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 641–666] interpersonal risk regulation model posits that people cope with threats to their romantic relationships by prioritizing self-protection goals over connectedness goals. The current paper tests whether these relationship-specific responses to threat are reflective of broader shifts in motivation. In Study 1, participants were quicker to identify avoidance-related words than approach-related words following a relationship-specific threat. In Study 2, threatened participants performed better than control participants on an anagram task under an avoidance frame, but not under an approach frame. These results suggest that relationship threat nonconsciously heightens global avoidance motivation and that the interpersonal risk regulation model may originate from a more fundamental approach-avoidance system.

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On Friday night, James and Helen are deliberating over the menu of a new restaurant. Although things start out pleasantly, Helen's vacillation between options and James' pointed comment about her having "commitment issues" triggers an argument about their relationship that leaves James doubting Helen's true feelings toward him. For the rest of their meal, James is particularly withdrawn. On the drive home, he deviates from his usual tendency to drive fast and instead, takes great care not to exceed the speed limit. To Helen's annoyance, James stops for gas despite having some left in the tank and informs her that "One can never be too careful."

Our goal in this paper is to examine the possibility that James' reticence toward Helen at dinner and his cautious driving are produced by a common motivational system. Specifically, we hypothesize that situations where the perceived regard of a romantic partner is threatened activate a more general regulatory system. This system shifts people's *general* motivations in ways that facilitate the operation of the more specific interpersonal risk regulation system, a psychological mechanism that allows people to dynamically balance the competing goals of promoting intimacy with romantic partners and avoiding the pain of potential rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Research to date has elucidated many cognitions and behaviors that fulfill connectedness or self-protection goals (e.g., Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth,

1998; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002), but little work has examined the underlying nature of these goals.

In the current paper, we attempt to expand on the interpersonal risk regulation model by demonstrating that threats to one's romantic relationship activate fundamental risk-management goals. We hypothesize that situations where interpersonal risk is salient nonconsciously activates people's general motivation to avoid negative outcomes. This broad motivational response to relationship threat likely drives self-protective responses observed in relationship contexts, for example, distancing oneself from a romantic partner and downplaying the importance of the relationship (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). However, we propose that global shifts in motivation also affect goal pursuit nonconsciously in non-relationship contexts. Thus, both James' withdrawal from Helen and his risk-averse driving can be viewed as a manifestation of a general avoidance motivation. In the present paper, we attempt to show that romantic risk regulation may be intricately related to a more expansive motivational system than previously conceptualized.

### Regulating risk in relationships

Establishing a satisfying romantic relationship can be a risky endeavor. To foster a relationship that fulfills a fundamental need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people must risk dependence on their partners by thinking and behaving in ways that give their partner substantial control over their personal outcomes (Murray, Holmes, et al., 2006). However, increasing dependence

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on a romantic partner often contravenes people's motivation to protect themselves from the pain of possible rejection. A dilemma inherent in interdependent relationships is that the very behaviors and cognitions that satisfy intimacy goals, for example, forgiving a partner's transgressions (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) or disclosing negative information about themselves to their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000), leave people vulnerable to rejection and ultimately amplify the pain that would be experienced if their relationship were to end.

Murray, Holmes, et al. (2006) have proposed the existence of a risk regulation system that allows people to negotiate a balance between seeking closeness with their partners and avoiding potential rejection. This system serves to maximize a person's assurance that they are safe in their level of dependence on their partner and relatively immune from being hurt. It accomplishes this by dynamically shifting priority from self-protection goals to connectedness goals as relationship circumstances dictate. A key variable in the operation of this system is perceived regard – a sense of being accepted, valued and cared for by one's romantic partner. Confidence in a partner's regard allows people to set aside self-protective concerns and risk dependence on their partners in pursuit of a more committed and close relationship (Murray et al., 2003). However, in situations where perceived regard is threatened, the interpersonal risk regulation system operates to prioritize self-protection goals. When a partner's general regard is in doubt, people may think and behave in ways that minimize dependence on their partner, and effectively distance themselves from their relationship to assure relative safety from the pain of rejection (Murray et al., 2003; Murray, Holmes, et al., 2006).

Researchers have illustrated a variety of behavioral and cognitive strategies that people use to fulfill self-protection goals. When a partner's regard is in doubt, people often alter their perceptions of their relationship, seeing it as less valuable (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007) and less intimate (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). They may also shift their perceptions of their relationship partner, evaluating them more negatively (Murray et al., 2002) or perceiving them as a less dependable source of comfort and support (Murray et al., 1998). People regulate risk behaviorally as well, self-protecting by acting hostile to their partners when they anticipate rejection (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998) or by treating their partners badly in the face of criticism (Murray et al., 2003; Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999).

Although most evidence for the risk regulation system has been found within the context of romantic relationships, managing the competing goals of promoting social relationships and insulating the self from the sting of rejection occurs in other interpersonal contexts as well. These processes have been observed in parent-child relationships (DeHart, Murray, Pelham, & Rose, 2003) and in decisions about entering novel social situations (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007). Given the broad and varied means people use to fulfill self-protection goals and the applicability of these goals across a number of interpersonal situations, we sought to investigate the possibility that attempts to regulate risk in an interpersonal context may be reflective of more abstract motivational states than have previously been examined. That is, we suggest that the diverse manner in which connectedness and self-protection goals are pursued may reflect an overarching focus on approaching positive outcomes or avoiding negative outcomes more generally (Kruglanski et al., 2002).

### **Do relationship-specific risk regulation goals reflect domain-general motivations?**

Several motivational theories distinguish between two fundamental means of goal pursuit (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot &

Church, 1997; Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable, 2006; Gray, 1990; Higgins, 1997). According to one prominent account (Elliot & Church, 1997), approach motivation directs the individual toward positive stimuli, leading the individual to behave in ways that increase proximity to desired end-states or rewarding outcomes. In contrast, this account describes avoidance motivation as directing the individual away from negative stimuli, leading one to behave in ways that increase distance from undesired end-states or aversive outcomes (Elliot, 2006).

The goals adopted to regulate risk in romantic contexts seem to share properties with global approach and avoidance motivations. When people are confident in their partner's regard, they devote themselves to growing their relationship and achieving intimacy with their romantic partners. These goals appear decidedly approach-directed in nature. The focus of goal pursuit is on attaining positive outcomes and seeking the nurturance and support inherent in a close relationship. In contrast, doubts about a partner's regard lead to the pursuit of goals that appear to be avoidance-directed in nature. The emphasis of these goals is on avoiding the negative outcomes brought about by potential rebuffs from romantic partners.

We argue that the similarities between interpersonal risk regulation goals and the broader goals described by theories of approach and avoidance reflect a heretofore unexamined relationship between these two regulatory systems. The evolutionary roots of the interpersonal risk regulation system may lie with a more abstract and fundamental motivational system; as a result, relationship-specific concerns may activate more abstract motivational processes. We propose that romantic risk regulation goals are a specific expression of the operation of a broader regulatory system that governs general approach and avoidance behaviors across all domains: Threats to relational security activate global motivations that usually manifest themselves as self-protection for the simple reason that relational contexts often best afford the expression of these motivations. However, we believe that these motivational shifts are in fact global, and can influence cognition and behavior in unrelated domains as well. Thus, prior research on the activation and pursuit of interpersonal risk regulation goals may have captured goals that are not specifically about promoting a relationship or protecting oneself from harm, but are actually expressions of global approach or avoidance motivations that operate nonconsciously.

### **Current research**

The aim of the present research was to extend the interpersonal risk regulation model proposed by Murray, Holmes, et al. (2006) by demonstrating that acute threats to perceived regard can elicit broad shifts in global motivation, and that these shifts can affect goal pursuit in unrelated contexts. More precisely, we propose that relationship-specific threats activate a global avoidance motivation that operates below participants' conscious awareness. We examine this hypothesis directly in Study 1. We further propose that because avoidance-directed responses to relationship threat are truly global, such responses guide goal pursuit outside of relationship contexts. We explore this hypothesis in Study 2 using a value-from-fit achievement paradigm.

### **Study 1**

To demonstrate that interpersonal risk regulation goals ultimately stem from broader motivational shifts, we first examined the extent to which a relationship-specific threat affected the accessibility of approach and avoidance goals. We hypothesized that relative to participants in a control condition, participants

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