Article

A Relationship With God? Connecting with the Divine to Assuage Fears of Interpersonal Rejection

Kristin Laurin[1], Karina Schumann[2], and John G. Holmes[3]

Abstract

We examine the possibility that people can leverage their "relationship" with God as a stand-in for interpersonal relationships. More specifically, we hypothesize that people will seek closeness with the divine when facing the threat of interpersonal rejection and that conversely, they will seek interpersonal closeness when facing the threat of divine rejection. We test this idea across four studies. Along the way, we test additional predictions derived from the close relationships literature, concerning the consequences of this process and the moderating role of self-esteem. Taken together, our findings add to the literature on God as a relationship partner and connect this idea to the dynamic ebb and flow of interpersonal connection.

Keywords

religion, self-esteem, close relationships, interpersonal processes, coping

The word "relationship" means, broadly speaking, connection or association. It also has a more specific meaning: An interactive, transactional connection between two beings that involves mutual feelings of affection and intimacy and fulfills needs for belonging and connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The idea of people having this latter type of relationship with God has given rise to writings ranging from serious academic publications (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Pollner, 1989) to light-hearted satirical journalism (Nordstrum, 2007). Here, we build on the idea that people's "relationships" with God can function similarly to their relationships with other humans. More specifically, we propose that God can serve as an alternative source of closeness in the face of threats to interpersonal relationships and vice versa.

Important differences exist between people's relationships with their spouses, children, friends and colleagues, and their "relationships" with God. No one honeymoons with God, no one negotiates curfews with God, no one chews over the latest celebrity gossip with God, and no one plays with God on the office softball team. And yet the concept of a relationship with God is a pervasive one. In some religions, nuns "marry" God. In Christianity and Judaism, God is called the Holy "Father." People report that they talk and listen to God (Hamilton, Powe, Pollard, Lee, & Felton, 2007; Mackenzie, Rajagopal, Meibohm, & Lavizzo-Mourey, 2000). Even these two activities alone could allow people to engage with God in many processes fundamental to relationships, such as support provision (Wills & Shinar, 2000), conflict resolution (Billings, 1979; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996), and capitalization (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Yet little research has

examined the extent to which these fundamental processes apply to people's relationship with God. Here, we take some first steps in that direction, testing one hypothesis derived by linking the literature on close relationships to the idea of a relationship with God. Specifically, we hypothesize that people will use connection with the divine to compensate for the threat of rejection in interpersonal relationships. We also test the parallel hypothesis that people will use interpersonal connection to compensate for the threat of divine rejection.

The idea that people do in fact have a relationship with God has received some scholarly attention. For example, some have argued that God plays a role resembling that of the parent in the parent–child relationship and that God meets the criteria that define attachment figures (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Further, people have measurable attachment styles in their relationship with God, which correspond to and contrast with their attachment to human figures in theoretically consistent ways (see Granqvist et al., 2010). Scholars have also noted other resemblances between relationships with God and interpersonal relationships: People characterize their relationship with

[1] Stanford Graduate School of Business, Palo Alto, CA, USA
[2] Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
[3] Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Kristin Laurin, Stanford Graduate School of Business, 655 Knight Way, Palo Alto, CA 94305, USA.
Email: klaurin@stanford.edu

God along dimensions of intimacy and frustration, much as they do their interpersonal relationships (Beck, 2006), and a relationship with God can make people feel supported and guided through life and increase their well-being (Gall, 2004; Levin, 2002; Mackenzie et al., 2000; Pollner, 1989), benefits which parallel those people reap from their interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Given the considerable overlap between relationships with God and interpersonal relationships, here we propose that people will seek divine closeness to compensate for threatened interpersonal closeness in the form of interpersonal rejection and that conversely they will seek interpersonal closeness in the face of divine rejection. At a broad level, this hypothesis is consistent with work showing that people turn to God and religion in times of distress (Feher & Maly, 1999; Ironson, Stuetzle, & Fletcher, 2006; Park, 2005), and, indeed, people find interpersonal rejection distressing (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001). On a more concrete level, we know that God and religion play a role in reducing loneliness (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Kirkpatrick, Shillito, & Kellas, 1999), suggesting that God and religion might be used to compensate for the absence of meaningful human relationships.

Thus, existing evidence suggests that God can serve as a buffer against distress and may help people meet their relationship needs, all of which fits with the idea that closeness with God could serve to compensate for interpersonal rejection and vice versa. However, the bulk of findings on God as a buffer against distress examine responses to majorly disruptive events like diagnosis with a terminal illness (e.g., Ironson et al., 2006). Moreover, much of the work portraying God as a relationship figure is correlational (but see Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Epley et al., 2008). Here, we take a dynamic approach to studying how people's feelings about their relationship with God can vary in response to subtle challenges to their interpersonal relationships. This approach lends itself well to experimental designs; more crucially, it enables us to extend previous findings in important ways. The vast majority of work portraying connections with God as relationship like use the lens of attachment theory, where the primary process is unilateral provision of support by God. Moreover, most research has focused on people's overarching, stable patterns of attachment to God. Here, we take the broader perspective that people can cultivate a bidirectional relationship with God and that their desire to pursue that relationship will vary with dynamic fluctuations that occur in people's relationships with other human beings. In other words, we hypothesize:

(a) that people will seek enhanced divine connection when facing interpersonal rejection and
(b) that, conversely, when facing divine rejection, people can compensate by drawing closer to their human relationship partners.

We test these hypotheses across four studies. In each case, we either threaten people's interpersonal relationships and measure their felt closeness with God (Studies 1, 2, and 3) or

threaten their relationship with God and measure their felt closeness with existing relationship partners (Study 4). Along the way, we test additional predictions derived from the close relationships literature, concerning the consequences of this process as well as the moderating role of self-esteem.

Study 1

In Study 1, we sought preliminary evidence for the hypothesis that people will report enhanced closeness with God when facing interpersonal rejection. After threatening participants with interpersonal rejection using a standard close relationship manipulation, we assessed their felt closeness to God. We also assessed a potential downstream consequence of felt closeness: intentions to respond constructively to God's perceived transgressions against them (i.e., to *accommodate*; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Because accommodation is tied to closeness in the context of human relationships (McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi & Takada, 2001), we expected that increases in felt closeness with God would mediate an effect of relationship threat on accommodation, showing parallels to the dynamics in interpersonal relationships.

We measured both closeness and accommodation using the very same measures used to assess these constructs in the context of human relationships, modifying them only as necessary so that they plausibly referred to God.

Method

Participants

Sixty-one predominantly Christian undergraduate students (89% female; $M_{age} = 19.9$ years; 57% Caucasian) participated in exchange for partial course credit. In all studies reported here, we recruited only participants who had a romantic partner.

Procedure

Participants completed an online study where we first manipulated romantic relationship threat using techniques from risk regulation research. Following a procedure developed by Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, and Kusche (2002), half of our participants (threat condition) read that most people have "secret selves," which they try to conceal from their partners. They read that these secret selves typically come to light eventually and cause problems in their romantic relationship. Participants chose three aspects of themselves from a list of five (e.g., habits or behaviors, private thoughts) and described their "secret self" for each. This manipulation specifically induces relationship concerns, without making participants sad or disappointed in themselves (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2010).

The other half of participants (no threat condition) proceeded directly to the dependent measures. All participants reported their felt closeness to God using both the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) measure (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and a relationship closeness scale (12 items; e.g., "Right

Table 1. Items Used to Measure Accommodation in Study 1.

#	Text	Category
1	I would pray even more to God	Voice
2	I would work to strengthen my faith in God	Voice
3	I would talk to God calmly about how I felt He let me down in my time of need	Voice
4	I would still feel sure that He would be there for me next time I needed Him	Loyalty
5	I would remind myself that God knows what is best for me	Loyalty
6	I would forgive God and move on	Loyalty
7*	I would be angry at God	Exit
8*	I would demand that He help me next time I needed Him	Exit
9*	I would stop believing in God	Exit
10*	I would stop asking God for help	Neglect
11*	I would feel less close to God	Neglect
12*	I would put less effort into my relationship with God	Neglect

Note. Voice and loyalty are constructive responses to transgressions; exit and neglect are destructive responses.*Indicates reverse-scored items (i.e., destructive responses).

now, I feel close to God"; α = .95; Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007), both rated on 7-point scales. Both are standard relationship measures that we adapted to refer to participants' relationship with God. The two measures of felt closeness were highly correlated, r = .86; we therefore averaged them into a composite measure of felt closeness with God. Here—as well as in Studies 2 and 4—we focus on the main text on analyses using this composite measure; however, the supplementary online material (see Online Supplemental Material found at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental) contains analyses for each measure separately, showing virtually identical results.

We also measured participants' intentions to accommodate God's transgressions. In the context of human relationships, the closer the people feel to a relationship partner, the more likely they are to respond constructively to that partner's transgressions (McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi & Takada, 2001). We reasoned that if relationships with God share psychological processes with interpersonal relationships, threatened participants' attempts to draw closer to God should motivate them to accommodate God's transgressions.

To assess intentions to accommodate, we constructed a measure based on those used by other researchers (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Participants imagined that "sometime in the next month, you turn to God for help during a time of need. You have faith that He will be there for you and answer your prayers, but in the end you feel that He did not help you." They then considered 12 different behaviors, designed to fit into established categories of constructive and destructive responses to transgressions (Rusbult et al., 1991; see Table 1). Participants rated their likelihood of engaging in each behavior using a 9-point scale (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 9 = *extremely likely*). We computed an accommodation index by reverse scoring ratings of destructive behaviors and averaging across all 12 ratings (α = .84). (See supplementary online material

found at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental for additional analyses taking into account participants' preexisting religious beliefs for Studies 1 through 4.)

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the threat condition reported feeling closer to God compared to participants in the no threat condition and planned to respond more constructively to God's hurtful behavior (see Table 2). Participants' reports of closeness mediated the effect of threat on intentions to respond constructively, indirect effect = 0.64, standard error (SE) = 0.29, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.08, 1.25]; we conducted this analysis as well as all meditational analyses following Hayes (2012). In sum, after a threat to an important interpersonal relationship, participants reported feeling closer to God and more willing to accommodate God's transgression. Given our use of materials drawn from the interpersonal relationships literature and the observed link between participants' reports of closeness and their behavioral intentions to accommodate, this study provides evidence for considerable overlap between people's divine and interpersonal relationships.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought additional evidence for our hypotheses by testing how well our effect maps onto a prominent model of human relationship processes. The risk regulation model (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006) describes and explains a robust pattern observed in close relationships: That self-esteem is an important psychological determinant of how people cope with relationship threats. According to this model, individuals with high self-esteem, confident in their own value in the eyes of others, respond to threats to their interpersonal relationships by seeking more connectedness (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). Individuals with low self-esteem, by contrast, have little confidence that others value them and respond to threats by withdrawing to avoid the anticipated sting of rejection. In other words, high-self-esteem individuals might be particularly likely to respond in the same way as participants in Study 1, seeking out closeness with the divine as a stand-in for a threatened interpersonal relationship. For low-self-esteem individuals, however, this compensatory strategy is likely incompatible with the avoidance motivation induced in them by the threat of rejection (see Cavallo et al., 2010). In Study 1, we had no measure of self-esteem with which to test this hypothesis; we therefore included one in Study 2. In Study 2, we also sought to recruit a broader, cross-national sample from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to test the generalizability of our findings.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-seven adults recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (48% female; M_{age} = 31.8 years; primarily American [44%] and Indian [36%], primarily Christian

Table 2. Reported Closeness With God Among Threatened and Unthreatened Participants (Study 1).

	Threat		No threat					
Dependent measure	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t^a	p	d	95% CI$_{diff}$
Closeness composite	3.76	1.69	2.89	1.36	2.22	.030	0.58	[0.08, 1.66]
Accommodation	5.91	1.60	5.01	1.40	2.33	.023	0.61	[0.13, 1.66]

Note. CI = confidence interval; SD = standard deviation.
[a]The degrees of freedom are 59.

Table 3. Regression Analyses for Study 2.

Dependent Measure Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	SE	95% CI	t^a	p	sr
Closeness composite						
(Constant)	4.41	0.17	[4.06, 4.75]	25.34	<.001	—
Threat condition	0.20	0.27	[−0.33, 0.73]	0.74	.460	.05
Self-esteem	0.06	0.15	[−0.24, 0.35]	0.38	.702	.03
Threat × Self-Esteem	0.57	0.22	[0.14, 1.01]	2.59	.010	.18
Accommodation						
(Constant)	5.85	0.17	[5.51, 6.19]	33.88	<.001	—
Threat condition	0.29	0.27	[−0.24, 0.81]	1.02	.281	.08
Self-esteem	0.21	0.15	[−0.08, 0.51]	1.41	.159	.10
Threat × Self-Esteem	0.58	0.22	[0.15, 1.01]	2.63	.009	.181

Note. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.
[a]The degrees of freedom are 183.

[38%], Hindu [26%], Muslim [5%], or nonreligious [21%]) participated in exchange for 50 cents.

Procedure

Participants completed an online study where we first measured self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale consists of 10 items (e.g., ''On the whole, I am satisfied with myself'') rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). These items formed a reliable index of self-esteem (α = .88). The website then randomly assigned participants to the threat and no threat conditions, which were the same as those used in Study 1. All participants then completed both closeness measures from Study 1 (r = .74), and the accommodation measure from Study 1 (α = .88). Finally, participants filled out a demographics form, which included a question about their country of birth.

Results and Discussion

Two linear regressions tested our predictions, using condition (0 = *no threat*, 1 = *threat*), self-esteem (centered around 0) and their interaction to predict first closeness, and then accommodation (see Table 3). In both cases, the interaction achieved significance (see Figure 1). In all analyses presented here, we used the Aiken and West (1991) method to decompose interactions, looking at simple slopes in each condition and at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of self-esteem. High-self-esteem participants exhibited
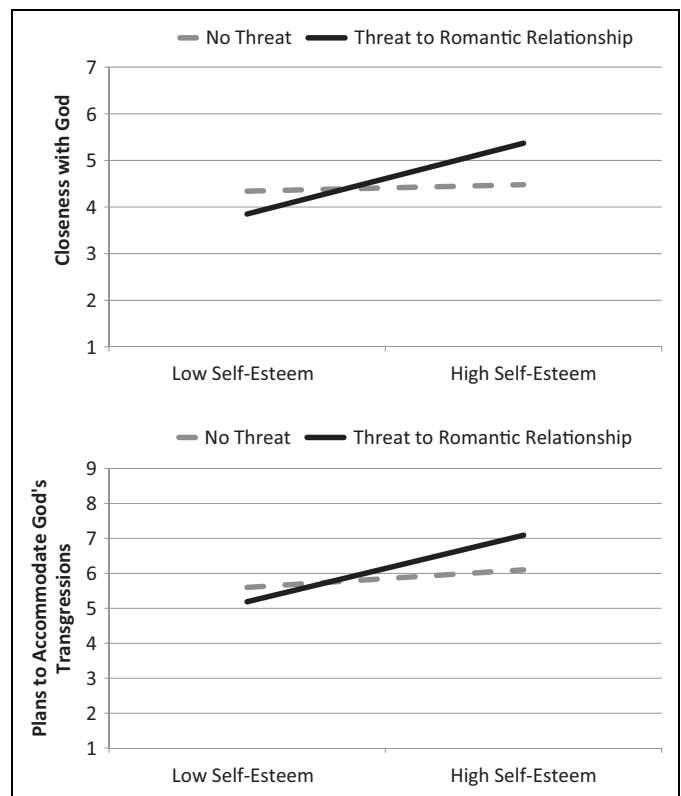
Figure 1. Participants' self-reported closeness with God and accommodation of God's trasngressions as a function of condition (threat to romantic relationship vs. no threat) and self-esteem (Study 2).

Table 4. Regression Analysis for Study 3 (Predicting Interest in God Exercise).

Dependent Measure Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	SE	95% CI	t^a	p	sr
Interest in God exercise						
(Constant)	2.84	0.27	[2.31, 3.38]	10.58	<.001	—
Threat condition	0.84	0.40	[0.05, 1.62]	2.12	.037	.22
Self-esteem	−0.37	0.29	[−0.95, 0.22]	1.26	.213	−.13
Threat × Self-Esteem	0.88	0.45	[−0.01, 1.76]	1.97	.053	.20

Note. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.
[a]The degrees of freedom are 89.

the effect we found in Study 1: They enhanced their closeness to and accommodation of God when we threatened their romantic relationship, compared to when we did not, $B_{closeness} = 0.89$, 95% CI = [0.15, 1.63], $t(183) = 2.37$, $p = .019$, $sr = .17$; $B_{accommodation} = 0.98$, 95% CI = [0.25, 1.72], $t(183) = 2.65$, $p = .009$, $sr = .18$. Among low-self-esteem participants, condition did not predict closeness or accommodation, $B_{closeness} = -0.49$, 95% CI = [−1.24, 0.26], $t(183) = 1.29$, $p = .198$, $sr = −.09$; $B_{accommodation} = -0.41$, 95% CI = [−1.15, 0.34], $t(183) = 1.08$, $p = .281$, $sr = −.07$. As in Study 1, we tested whether closeness mediated the effects on accommodation among high-self-esteem participants. The indirect effect of threat (on accommodation) through closeness was significant among high-self-esteem participants, indirect effect = .73, $SE = .33$, 95% CI = [0.01, 1.32], but not among low-self-esteem participants, indirect effect = −.40, $SE = .35$, 95% CI = [−1.14, 0.25].[1]

Using two different measures, Study 2 found that participants sought to enhance their relationship with God when their romantic relationship had been threatened but only to the extent that they had high self-esteem. This matches predictions derived from the risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006), which suggests that only individuals with high self-esteem seek opportunities for connectedness in the face of relationship threats. This lends further support to the idea that people regulate their relationship with God using the same psychological processes they use to regulate their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, additional analyses reported in the supplementary online material (see Online Supplemental Material found at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental) failed to produce any evidence that these effects operated differently as a function of participants' cultural background. In other words, the tendency to reconnect with God in response to threatened human relationships has appeal beyond strictly monotheistic traditions.

Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, we tested our predictions by examining self-reported closeness and behavioral intentions in response to hypothetical transgressions. In Study 3, we seek to generalize these results using a different, more behavioral-dependent measure. We again manipulated relationship

threat and then asked our high- and low-self-esteem participants about their interest in taking part in a second, unrelated study where they would have the opportunity to demonstrate their closeness with God. We expected that, particularly among high-self-esteem participants, the relationship threat would enhance interest in this closeness-demonstrating activity.

Method

Participants

Ninety-three predominantly Christian students at a large west coast university (58% female; $M_{age} = 22.6$ years, 48% Caucasian and 42% Asian) participated in exchange for US$5.

Procedure

Participants completed an online study where we first measured self-esteem, using the same method as in Study 2. The website then randomly assigned participants to the threat or no threat conditions from Studies 1 and 2. We then asked for participants' input on five different activities we claimed to be considering for future research. Participants rated these activities in a fixed order, with the following exercise coming second:

In this exercise, you will have a conversation with God. You will first write a short essay sharing your insights about how to have a deeper conversation with God. You will then engage in a private conversation with God, using the strategies you identified for how to communicate with God and feel closer to Him.

Participants rated each activity on 7-point scales in terms of how much they thought they would enjoy it, how appealing it was, and how much they thought they could benefit from it (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). The three ratings formed a reliable index of participants' interest in the God exercise, $\alpha = .95$.

Results and Discussion

We predicted that high-self-esteem participants would report a greater interest in the God exercise after their romantic relationship had been threatened. We tested this prediction by regressing participants' interest on condition (0 = no threat, 1 = threat), self-esteem (centered around 0), and their interaction (see Table 4). The analysis revealed an effect of threat
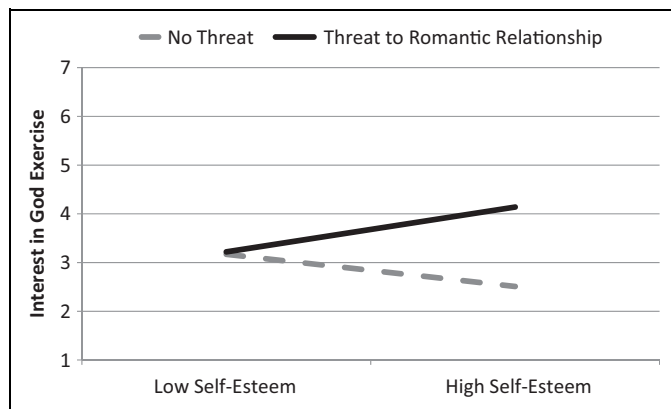
Figure 2. Participants' interest in an exercise where they could express their closeness with God as a function of condition (threat to romantic relationship vs. no threat) and self-esteem (Study 3).

indicating that across participants, the threat condition increased participants' interest in the God exercise. This main effect was qualified by a Threat × Self-Esteem interaction (see Figure 2). The effect of threat was robust among participants with high self-esteem, $B = 1.62$, 95% CI = [0.50, 2.75], $t(89) = 2.86$, $p = .005$, $sr = .29$, but absent among participants with low self-esteem, $B = 0.05$, 95% CI = [−1.06, 1.16], $t(89) = 0.09$, $p = .927$, $sr = −.01$. In other words, Study 3 provided additional evidence that the psychological processes the individuals use to regulate their human relationships extend to their connection with God.[2]

Study 4

In our final study, we sought evidence for our second, parallel hypothesis that people will draw closer to their interpersonal relationship partners in the face of divine rejection. To test this prediction, we used a procedure similar to that used in Study 2 but switched the relationships targeted by the manipulation and the dependent measures. We measured self-esteem and then threatened participants' relationship with God. We then measured participants' felt closeness to their romantic partners, predicting that participants high in self-esteem would exhibit greater interpersonal closeness when faced with the threat of divine rejection.

Method

Participants

Sixty-one American adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (73% female; $M_{age} = 31.3$ years, 85% Caucasian) participated in exchange for 50 cents.

Procedure

Participants completed an online study where we first measured self-esteem, using the same method as in Studies 2 and 3. The website then randomly assigned participants to the threat and no threat conditions. These conditions were identical to the

ones used in Studies 1, 2, and 3, but the introductory text in the threat condition referred to God rather than to romantic partners:

Based on previous research, we know that people sometimes try to conceal aspects of themselves that could potentially undermine God's regard for them. What this means is that there might be things about yourself that you try not to show to God, because you're worried that they will make God lose respect for you or love you less.

As in Studies 1, 2, and 3, participants in the threat condition then selected three from a list of five aspects of themselves and described their "secret self" for that aspect. Participants in the no threat condition proceeded directly to the dependent variables. All participants completed the same measure of felt closeness used in Studies 1 and 2, reworded to refer to their romantic partner.

Results and Discussion

We tested our prediction with a linear regression, using condition (0 = *no threat*, 1 = *threat*), self-esteem (centered around 0), and their interaction to predict both measures of felt closeness and the composite measure (see Table 5). Overall, participants whose relationship with God had been threatened reported feeling closer to their romantic partners. More critically, this effect was qualified by a Self-Esteem × Threat Interaction (see Figure 3). High-self-esteem participants felt closer to their romantic partners when we threatened their relationship with God, $B = 1.52$, 95% CI = [0.50, 2.54], $t(56) = 2.98$, $p = .004$, $sr = .37$; among low-self-esteem participants, condition did not predict felt closeness, $B = −0.01$, 95% CI = [−1.01, 0.99], $t(56) = 0.02$, $p = .982$, $sr = −.003$. Thus, just as we found that high-self-esteem participants report greater closeness with God in the face of a threat to their interpersonal relationship, they conversely report greater closeness with their partners in the face of divine rejection.

General Discussion

Across four studies, we investigated the hypothesis that people's relationship with God can serve to compensate for the threat of interpersonal rejection and vice versa. Participants whose romantic relationship was threatened responded by drawing closer to God (Studies 1 through 3), and participants whose relationship with God was threatened responded by drawing closer to their romantic partner (Study 4). The studies employed manipulations and measures identical to those used in traditional close relationships research, and we observed our effects especially among participants high in self-esteem (Studies 2–4) as predicted by theoretical work on relationships. One possible limitation of our studies is that our control conditions employed no writing task in place of the threat conditions' writing task; however, it seems implausible to suggest that the act of writing might have in and of itself led high-self-esteem participants to draw closer to God. Rather, it is more reasonable, and consistent with prior work, to assume that *this particular*

Table 5. Regression Analyses for Study 4.

Dependent measure Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	SE	95% CI	tᵃ	p	sr
Closeness composite						
(Constant)	4.66	0.29	[4.07, 5.24]	16.04	<.001	—
Threat condition	0.76	0.26	[0.05, 1.46]	2.15	.036	.26
Self-esteem	−0.27	0.26	[−0.78, 0.25]	1.05	.300	−.13
Threat × Self-Esteem	0.64	0.30	[0.03, 1.25]	2.11	.039	.26

Note. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.
ᵃThe degrees of freedom are 59.
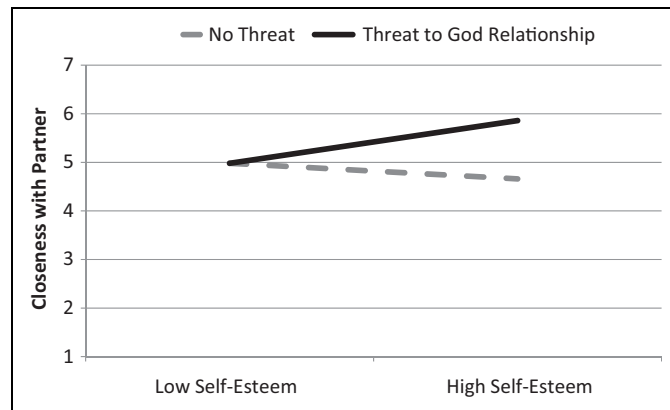
Figure 3. Participants' closeness with romantic partner as a function of condition (threat to relationship with God vs. no threat) and self-esteem (Study 4).

writing task—writing about the secret selves that could threaten their relationship—is what made high-self-esteem participants turn toward an alternative source of closeness.

These findings fit into a broader body of research demonstrating that people can turn to God to help satisfy a number of basic needs typically satisfied by other, nonsupernatural sources (e.g., Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). They also add evidence from a long-term relationship perspective to the idea that sources of connectedness or belonging may be interchangeable—that is, that people deprived of the connection they normally gain from one source can compensate by drawing closer to an alternative source (see Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008).

One obvious question is whether people's religious beliefs have any role to play in the process we have described here. Analyses described in the supplementary online material (see Online Supplemental Material found at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental) provide mixed evidence that, on the balance, favors the idea that people must have some degree of belief in God in order to evince the effect we have documented. In other words, it seems likely that individuals who have firm beliefs that God does not exist will not suddenly develop a relationship with God in response to a relationship threat. Our findings on this matter are not conclusive, however, and may warrant future attention.

In particular, future research might more thoroughly explore differences between religions in the relationships people have with God. With the exception of our small sample of Indian participants (mostly Hindu) in Study 2, we studied predominantly Western, Christian samples. Specific religious beliefs—for example, the extent to which God is perceived as a benevolent protector or harsh punisher (e.g., Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011)—can differ both within and between religions. These differences might well influence how people conceive of and use their relationships with God.

The notion that people have a relationship with God is age old. The experiments described here represent an important advance in our understanding of this idea; however, future research might continue to examine whether people's relationships with God resemble their close human relationships in other important ways. For example, do people disclose their positive experiences to God, and does this capitalization increase their well-being as it does in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Gable & Reis, 2010)? Do their relationships with God also thrive with commitment (e.g., Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001-2002), trust (e.g., Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), and constructive communication (e.g., Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010)? Given the central role of religion in so many people's lives (Gallup, 2014; Steger & Frazier, 2005), it is important that we understand the nature and consequences of their relationships with God.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Supplemental Material

The online [appendices/data supplements/etc] are available at http://spp.sagepub.com/supplemental

Notes

1. These analyses exclude an additional 53 participants who coders identified as having exhibited poor written English skills in their responses to open-ended debriefing questions. Including these

participants did not significantly alter results. Both interactions remained significant, $B_{closeness} = .42$, $t(236) = 2.17$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.81], $p = .031$, $sr = .14$, $B_{accommodation} = .49$, $t(236) = 2.56$, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.86], $p = .011$, $sr = .16$; and in both cases the effect of threat was significant among participants with high self-esteem, $B_{closeness} = .80$, $t(236) = 2.39$, 95% CI = [0.14, 1.47], $p = .018$, $sr = .15$, $B_{accommodation} = .83$, $t(236) = 2.54$, $p = .012$, 95% CI = [0.19, 1.48], $sr = .15$. The indirect effect of threat (on accommodation) through closeness being significant among high-self-esteem participants, 95% CI = [0.02, 1.12] but not among low-self-esteem participants, 95% CI = [−0.69, 0.32].

2. We also conducted similar analyses on participants' interest in the other four exercises. See supplementary online material (see Online Supplemental Material found at http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental) for the full set of results. We found no main effects of threat condition. We found one significant interaction on the exercise that came in the fourth position, which was described as a meditation exercise. This interaction had the same sign as the one reported for the God exercise, but different simple effects: Rather than increasing high-self-esteem participants' interest in the meditation exercise, the relationship threat reduced low-self-esteem participants' interest. These results may suggest that relationship threats make low-self-esteem individuals hypervigilant and averse to relaxation (see Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009, 2010).

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Author Biographies

Kristin Laurin is an Assistant Professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. She studies how religions and political ideologies intersect with goals and motivations.

Karina Schumann is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Psychology department at Stanford University. She studies revenge, apologies, and intellectual humility.

John G. Holmes is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. He studies how expectations and emotions color social perception in close relationships.