Attachment and Emotion Perception in Younger and Older Adults
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Abstract
Past research has investigated how individuals’ attachment style – the level of anxiety and avoidance people feel in relationships – may influence how they perceive the emotions of others. The ability to recognize the emotions of others (emotion perception) is thought to influence a wide range of interpersonal interactions. However, previous research on attachment has mainly focused on younger adults. The aim of the current study is to extend research on attachment and emotion perception accuracy to older adults (over 60 years), as well as younger adults (18-25 years).

Introduction
- People’s ability to recognize others’ emotions (emotion perception) has important implications for social interactions.
- Previous research suggests that an individual’s attachment style may influence his or her emotion perception abilities.
- This study examines attachment on two different dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Individuals with attachment anxiety are preoccupied with how available and responsive their partners are. Individuals with attachment avoidance find it difficult to trust others and feel uncomfortable with physical and emotional intimacy.
- Previous studies have shown age differences in both emotion perception abilities and attachment styles between younger and older adults. Older adults seem to exhibit decreased emotion perception accuracy in comparison to younger adults when performing emotion perception tasks with static facial expressions.
- Younger adults appear to have higher attachment anxiety compared to older adults, with mixed results in regards to avoidance.
- Because few studies have examined attachment beyond young adulthood, we have extended our research to older adults in this study.

Method
Participants were 32 younger adults (M = 19.63, SD = 1.6) and 29 older adults (M = 70.45, SD = 7.74).

Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)
- Questionnaire to assess attachment styles
- Asked to rate each item from 1=“strongly disagree” to 7=“strongly agree”
- Includes statements such as “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me” (attachment anxiety).

Emotion Perception Task
- Stimuli from FACES database
- 120 static images of facial expressions
- Multiple targets presented sequentially
- Happy, sad, fearful, angry, disgusted, and neutral expressions

Results
We performed a mixed 2 (Age: YA, OA) X 2 (Attachment: anxiety, avoidance) ANOVA. A main effect of attachment emerged such that participants reported lower anxiety, F(1, 56) = 6.86, p < .01. There was also a main effect of age where older adults reported less anxiety and avoidance, F(1, 56) = 22.52, p < .001. There was interaction between expressivity and age such that older adults reported greater avoidance compared to anxiety, but younger adults did not differ, F(1, 56) = 5.69, p = .02.

Conclusion
- Younger adults seem to have more anxiety and avoidance in relationships compared to older adults
- Attachment anxiety was positively correlated with overall emotion perception accuracy in younger adults, but not older adults.
- Younger adults with higher attachment anxiety appear to have higher accuracy when identifying the emotions of others, but this relationship did not occur in older adults.
- Younger adults may be in the process of high anxiety with may make them hypervigilant when perceiving emotions

References
7. Fraley, R. C., & Waller, N. (2006). From the cradle to the grave: Age differences in attachment from early adulthood to old age. In J. Reis & J. Fehr (Eds.), The Big Five in adulthood: Personality over time (pp. 173-190). Guilford Press.