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Social Psychological and Personality Science 2011 2: 42 originally published online 11 August 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1948550610379505

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Social Psychological and
Personality Science
2(1) 42-50
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DOI: 10.1177/1948550610379505
http://spps.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Do women's interactions with their grown children improve their emotional lives later in life? Women in their early 60s participated in a 7-day daily experience study of positive and negative events to examine how interactions with their grown children contribute to specific daily emotions as well as how individual differences in adult attachment moderate these effects. Multilevel modeling analyses revealed that when they interacted with their children, women low in attachment avoidance experienced boosts in joy, love, and pride, whereas women high in attachment avoidance only experienced boosts in love. Women low in attachment avoidance also experienced reduced anger but greater sadness during negative events involving their children, whereas for women high in avoidance, the experience of anger and sadness was unaffected by the presence of their children. Implications for attachment theory and parenting across the lifespan are discussed.

Keywords

adult attachment, parenting, discrete emotions, children, daily experience methods

Most parents would agree that their children give their lives a rich sense of meaning and purpose. Seventy-seven percent of *Time* (2005) magazine readers listed their relationship with their children as their major source of happiness. Yet when women are asked to rate how much satisfaction they get from various daily activities, taking care of young children is near the bottom of the list, ranking below cooking and only slightly above housework (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). This research has focused on women caring for young children, but what happens when the children are grown up and no longer living at home? In the current research, we examined how women's interactions with their grown children contribute to specific emotions in later adulthood as well as whether individual differences in avoidant attachment moderate these effects.

Parent-Child Relationships in Late Adulthood

The parent-child relationship often changes as children get older and leave the nest. Tension may arise between parents and their adult children as the relationship becomes more salient and meaningful for the parent than the adult child (Fingerman, 1996, 2000). Parents are often more emotionally invested in their children, turning to them for support and companionship, and this discrepancy can lead children to feel

intruded upon and can put the parent at risk for feeling excluded. Although parent-child relationship quality has been shown to improve after adolescence (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Birditt, Jackey, & Antonucci, 2009; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg, 1981), the parent-child relationship may be best described as ambivalent or a mixture of positive and negative feelings (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002).

Parents are not necessarily any better or worse off than childless adults (Brubaker, 1991; Koropecykj-Cox, 1998; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Parental well-being is not strongly related to proximity or amount of contact with adult children (Brubaker, 1991; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Suitor & Pillemer, 1987). Instead, the benefits of parenthood depend on the quality of the parent-child relationship (Koropecykj-Cox, 2002). Close relationships with children can

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be a source of social support and positive emotion, such as pride in the child's accomplishments and pleasure in the parenting role (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994) and can also buffer older adults against feelings of distress (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1991). In contrast, distant or problematic relationships can be a source of stress (Pillemer & Suito, 1991) and can produce disappointment or a sense of failure as a parent (Connidis & McMullin, 1993).

Discrete Emotions in Parenting Relationships

Many emotion researchers suggest that emotions evolved to serve important social functions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999); thus, parents should experience emotions that help facilitate and maintain close bonds with their children. Emotion researchers have recently emphasized the importance of studying *specific* emotions and how they are differentially affected by relationship experience (Fredrickson, 2001; Keltner & Lerner, 2010). We suggest that three specific positive emotions will play a central role in women's daily interactions with their grown children. First and most broadly, close relationships can be a source of great *joy*. It is easy to observe parents engaging in play and other joyful activities with their young children. Likewise, work by Fingerman (2000) on what makes a mother's relationship with her grown daughter enjoyable suggests that shared activities with one's grown children will be a source of joy in older parents. Second, close relationships provide us with opportunities to take *pride* in the accomplishments of others. As women blend their identities with those of their children (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Troll & Fingerman, 1996), they should be especially likely to feel proud as they watch their children succeed in building families and careers of their own. Third, *love* has been suggested to be the critical emotion in relationships between parents and their offspring (Bowlby, 1969; Diamond, 2003). Parental love, closely tied to caring, is often said to "know no bounds" because the biological kinship with the child is so close and the parental investment so immense. Thus, we expected that women's feelings of joy, pride, and love would all be enhanced when they interact with their grown children.

Close relationships can be a source of great delight, but they can also give rise to negative emotions. Two important negative emotions, *anger* and *sadness*, should be particularly relevant to women's interactions with their grown children. First, grown children have the capacity to make us angry and frustrated, much like most relationship partners do. However, because anger is often destructive to close relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 2000), parents will likely strive to control their angry and hostile feelings when they are around their children. Second, closeness to children should make women more vulnerable to sadness, following the same vicarious process as pride. While parents cherish and take pride in their children's successes, when something bad happens to their children, parents may feel as sad as if it had happened to themselves. Just as parents may feel proud when the child succeeds because this suggests they did a good job raising the child, parents may feel sad when the child fails because this suggests they did a poor job raising the

child (Knoester, 2003; Pillemer & Suito, 1991). Finally, we suggest that although parental *fear* is likely enhanced in a mother's interactions with her young children as she tries to keep them safe and protected, fear should be a less salient emotion in her interactions with her grown children.

Individual Differences in Attachment Avoidance

One critical individual difference variable that should influence the emotions experienced during interactions with children is attachment style. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding emotions across the lifespan: The ways in which individuals experience emotions in relationships should depend on the nature of the working models they have formed in response to their specific attachment histories (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Recent research on adult attachment has emphasized a two-dimensional structure contrasting attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety with security (Fraley & Shaver, 2008).

Of particular relevance to the current study are individual differences in attachment avoidance. Research shows that people who are high in attachment avoidance pursue deactivating strategies, in which they attempt to shut down their attachment system by eschewing interpersonal closeness (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007, for reviews). Research examining how avoidance shapes emotional experiences suggests that avoidant individuals tend to experience more negative emotions, especially anger (e.g., Mikulincer, 1998; Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Fewer studies have focused on positive emotions, but those that have suggest that secure individuals experience more positive emotions than avoidant individuals (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997; Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996).

Research on attachment and emotion has typically focused on romantic relationships, but attachment avoidance may also shape emotional experience in the context of parenting. Research on the transition to parenthood has shown that attachment avoidance in particular is central to women's feelings about parenting. Compared to more securely attached women, those higher in attachment avoidance report feeling less satisfied in their role as parents, less supportive of their children, less close to and less confident in their ability to relate to their children, and more easily aggravated by their children (Rholes, Simpson, & Blakely, 1995; Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997; Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006; Wilson, Rholes, Simpson, & Tran, 2007). Although these studies did not focus on specific emotions in parenting, they are consistent with our argument that attachment avoidance will shape the emotions that women experience during daily interactions with their children in later adulthood.

The Current Study

The current study was designed to examine the impact of women's interactions with their adult children on specific emotions in daily life as well as how women's attachment

avoidance may moderate these effects. A sample of women in their early 60s participated in a 7-day daily experience study in which they reported on a positive and negative event each day, including the extent to which they experienced joy, pride, love, sadness, anger, and fear during each of these daily events.

Drawing on experimental research using stimuli designed to elicit positive and negative emotions (Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998), we sampled positive (or rewarding) events likely to elicit a range of positive emotions as well as negative (or unpleasant) events that likely elicit a range of negative emotions. We suggest that interactions with children for positive daily events should generally facilitate feelings of joy, pride, and love, with this boost being less pronounced for women who are high in attachment avoidance. In unpleasant or stressful situations, the experience of positive emotions is low, but nonetheless, we expected that women who are low in avoidance would be more likely than women high in avoidance to summon up joy, love, and pride when interacting with their children. As for anger and sadness in the negative event, we expected a mixed blessing with the less avoidant experiencing reduced anger but also greater sadness which comes with closeness to one's children. We did not anticipate that highly avoidant women's negative emotions would be affected by their children's presence.

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and two women assessed in the Mills Longitudinal Study (e.g., Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002) participated in a 7-day daily experience study when they were between 60 and 63 years old (mean age = 61). Although college-educated, the Mills women followed a diversity of life paths, including participation and status in work, marriage and family patterns, and household incomes (Helson & Picano, 1990). Eighty-three percent of the women had at least one child ($N = 85$), but by age 61 only 5% had adult children living at home (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008). Among the women with children, 14% had one child, 51% had two children, 25% had three children, and 11% had four children. The children ranged in age from 17 to 47 ($M = 30.9$, $SD = 4.5$).

The women were mailed daily diary forms and were instructed to complete one diary each night at bedtime for 7 consecutive nights. The women returned their diaries when they came to the laboratory for the age 61 assessment. The mean number of diaries completed was 6.9, ranging from a low of 4 to a high of 7; 91% of the women completed all 7 days of diaries.¹ Only women who had children and who completed the background measure of attachment ($N = 75$) were included in the study analyses.

Person-Level Measure of Adult Attachment

Adult attachment was measured with an abbreviated version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) 1 year prior to the diary, thus unconfounding time of testing effects. The women responded to

10 statements designed to assess attachment avoidance, such as "I try to avoid getting too close to my partner," on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*). Similar to other studies of attachment and parenting that focused explicitly on attachment avoidance (e.g., Rholes et al., 2006), we also measured attachment anxiety. The alpha for the Attachment Avoidance subscale was .84 ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.11$), and the alpha for the Anxiety subscale was .70 ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.06$).

Daily Measures

Positive and negative events. Each day, participants were asked to describe a noteworthy positive event (i.e., the high point of the day) and a noteworthy negative event (i.e., the low point of the day). To obtain a qualitative account of the event and relevant contextual information, participants answered the following open-ended questions for each event: (1) Briefly describe the situation, including (a) what happened, (b) when and where, and (c) who else was involved; and (2) "What were your thoughts and feelings during this event?" For each of the two daily events, the women also answered the question, "How important or personally significant was this event?" on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very significant*).

Coding for the presence of the women's grown children. Instead of asking women directly about their interactions with their children, we coded for the presence of children from the women's event narratives, thus providing an unobtrusive measure of their interactions with grown children. To determine whether women's children were present for each of the daily events, two trained coders read each open-ended description. They had available the names of the diarist's children and coded whether any of her children were present (0 = *no children present*, 1 = *one or more children present*) for each event. Events were categorized as having a child present if one or more of the participant's children were *psychologically present*—the child was either physically present and the event description referred to an interaction between the participant and the child (69% of positive events and 57% of negative events), or the participant was engaged in a telephone conversation with her child (31% of positive events and 43% of negative events). Agreement between coders was substantial ($\kappa = .90$), and disagreements were resolved by discussion. Attachment avoidance was not associated with the number of positive or negative events in which the women's children were present, thus eliminating a potential confound in the predictors.

Coding for the presence of other people. Two coders also coded each of the events for the presence of other people, including romantic partners, friends, siblings, parents, and coworkers. Disagreements were again resolved by discussion ($\kappa = .73$). We created a variable representing the presence of anyone else (0 = *no one else present*, 1 = *one or more people present*).

Specific positive and negative emotions. Participants indicated the extent to which they experienced each of the six emotions (joy, pride, love, sadness, anger, and fear) during the positive

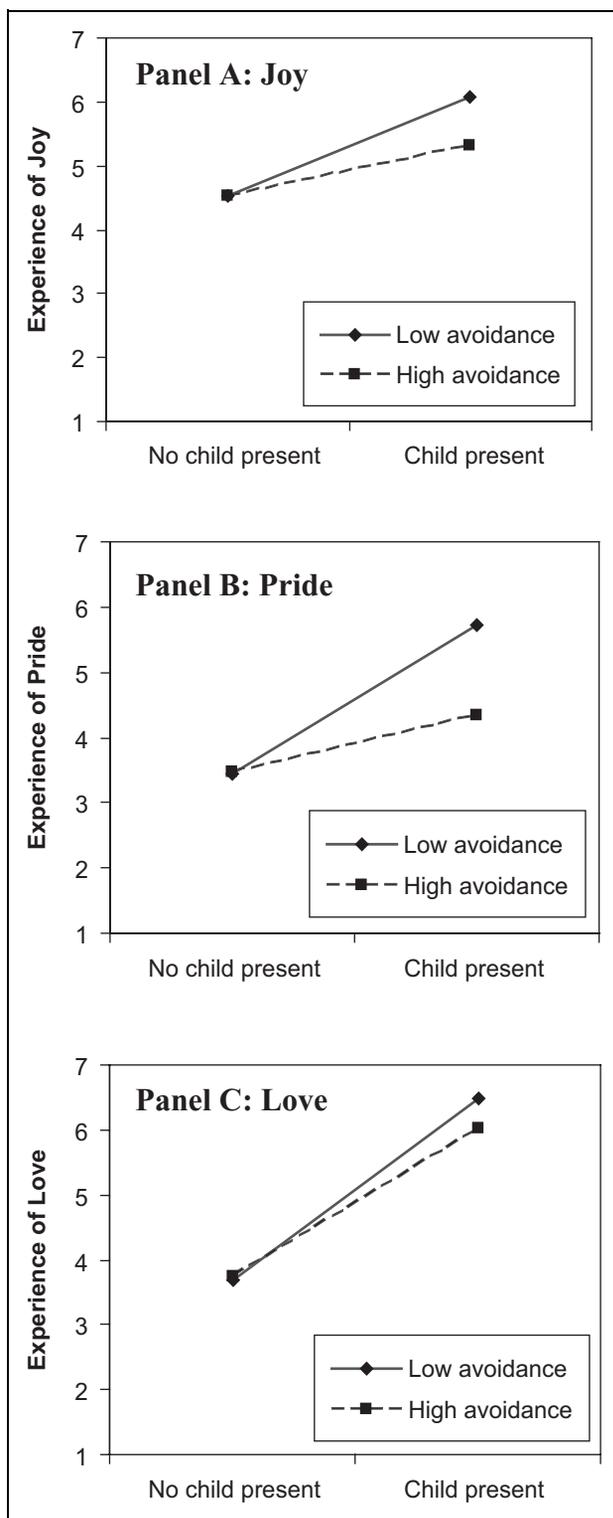


Figure 1. Joint effects of the presence of children and attachment avoidance on the mother’s daily experience of positive emotion in the positive event

and negative daily events on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *a great deal*). Because we were not sure that the women would admit to experiencing the rather strong emotions of anger and fear in events involving their children, we included

two additional markers for each of these negative emotions (frustration and anxiety, respectively). Preliminary analyses showed that ratings of anger and of frustration showed exactly the same effects, as did ratings of both fear and anxiety. Therefore, for all subsequent analyses, we combined the two marker items for each of the two emotions into overall composites of anger (i.e., mean of the anger and frustration ratings) and fear (i.e., mean of the fear and anxiety ratings). There was substantial and meaningful individual-difference variation for the positive emotions in the negative event (e.g., some participants experienced love even in an event that was generally negative). However, there was little individual-difference variation for the negative emotions in the positive event, and so we will not discuss them further.

Results

The data used to test our predictions about the influence of interactions with children and attachment on daily emotion had a two-level structure, including measures assessed on each of the daily surveys (Level 1) nested within each participant (Level 2). To properly model this nested data, we used multi-level modeling in the HLM computer program (HLMwin v.6.08; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004). In all of the analyses, we entered the main effect of children present, the main effect of attachment avoidance, the main effect of attachment anxiety, the interaction between avoidance and children present, and the interaction between anxiety and children present. There were never any significant main effects for attachment anxiety or avoidance. Of the nine possible interaction effects between anxiety and children present, only one was significant, namely joy in the negative event, but that effect did not replicate in the positive event, so we will not discuss attachment anxiety further. In addition, there were never any significant interactions between attachment anxiety and avoidance.

We conducted all analyses separately for the positive and negative events of the day. Because the Level 1 variable was binary (i.e., children present vs. no children present), the unstandardized HLM coefficients reported below can be interpreted as the increase or boost in the particular emotion during events when the women interacted with their children as compared to events when they did not interact with their children. For each of the significant interactions below, we conducted follow-up analyses to test for the “simple effects” of children present on daily emotions separately for women below the median on attachment avoidance and women above the median on attachment avoidance.

Specific Daily Positive Emotions: Joy, Pride, and Love

Joy. On average, the women experienced more joy during positive events when their children were present ($M = 5.69$) than when their children were not present ($M = 4.53$) ($B = 1.16, p < .001$). As expected, the main effect of children present was moderated by attachment avoidance ($B = -.34, p < .05$). This interaction is illustrated in Panel A of Figure 1

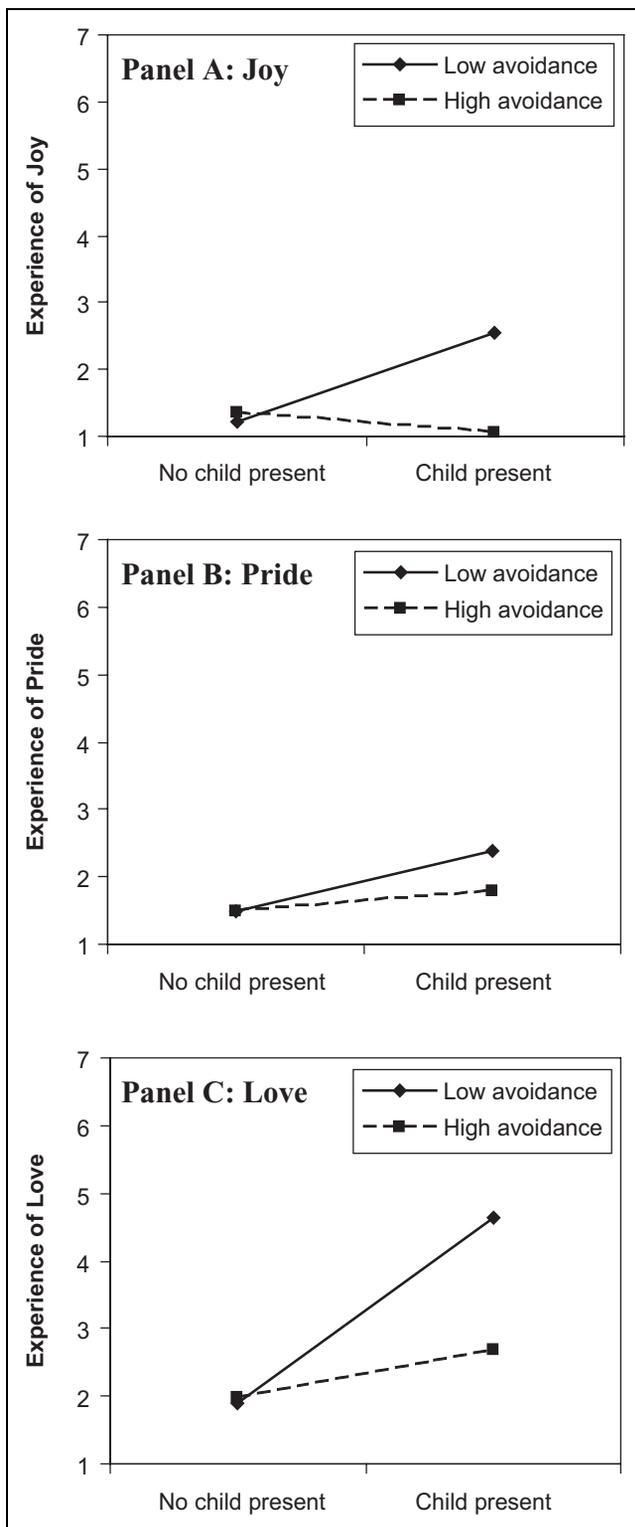


Figure 2. Joint effects of the presence of children and attachment avoidance on the mother's daily experience of positive emotion in the negative event

and shows that whereas women who were low in avoidance experienced a significant increase in joy in the presence of their children ($B = 1.61, p < .001$), women high in avoidance

experienced similar levels of joy regardless of whether their children were present ($B = .32, ns$).

In the negative event, we found a similar interaction between the presence of children and attachment avoidance ($B = -.74, p < .05$). As shown in Panel A of Figure 2, the women low in avoidance experienced an increase in joy during the negative event in which their children were present ($B = 1.15, p < .01$). In contrast, the relatively more avoidant women did not show a significant increase in joy ($B = .09, ns$).

Pride. On average, the women experienced more pride during positive events when their children were present ($M = 5.03$) than when their children were not present ($M = 3.46$) ($B = 1.57, p < .001$). However, this main effect was moderated by avoidance ($B = -.64, p < .01$). As shown in Panel B of Figure 1, whereas women low in avoidance experienced a significant boost in pride during positive events in the presence of their children ($B = 2.32, p < .001$), the relatively more avoidant women experienced similar levels of pride regardless of whether their children were present ($B = .34, ns$).

As shown in Panel B of Figure 2, pride was rare in the negative event. There was neither a main effect nor an interaction.

Love. The biggest main effect of children present in the positive event was found for love. Women experienced much more love during positive events when their children were present ($M = 6.25$) than when their children were not present ($M = 3.71$) ($B = 2.54, p < .001$). There was not a significant interaction between avoidance and the presence of children. As shown in Panel C of Figure 1, women low and high in avoidance experienced a similar boost in love when their children were present.

On average, the women experienced more love during negative events in which their children were present ($M = 3.67$) than negative events in which their children were not present ($M = 1.93$), suggesting that interactions with their children were able to brighten even the most unpleasant or stressful moments of the women's days ($B = 1.74, p < .001$). However, this main effect was moderated by attachment avoidance ($B = -.92, p < .01$). As shown in Panel C of Figure 2, whereas all of the women experienced significant boosts in love during negative events when their children were present, the boost was bigger for women low in avoidance ($B = 2.39, p < .001$) than women high in avoidance ($B = 1.08, p < .05$).

Specific Daily Negative Emotions: Anger, Sadness, and Fear

Anger. We found a significant interaction between the presence of children and attachment avoidance in predicting anger in the negative event ($B = -.74, p < .05$). As shown in Panel A of Figure 3, whereas women low in avoidance experienced a significant decrease in anger ($B = -.72, p < .05$), the relatively more avoidant women experienced similar levels of anger regardless of whether their children were present ($B = .57, ns$).

Sadness. Women experienced more sadness during negative events in which their children were present ($M = 4.27$) than negative events in which their children were not present

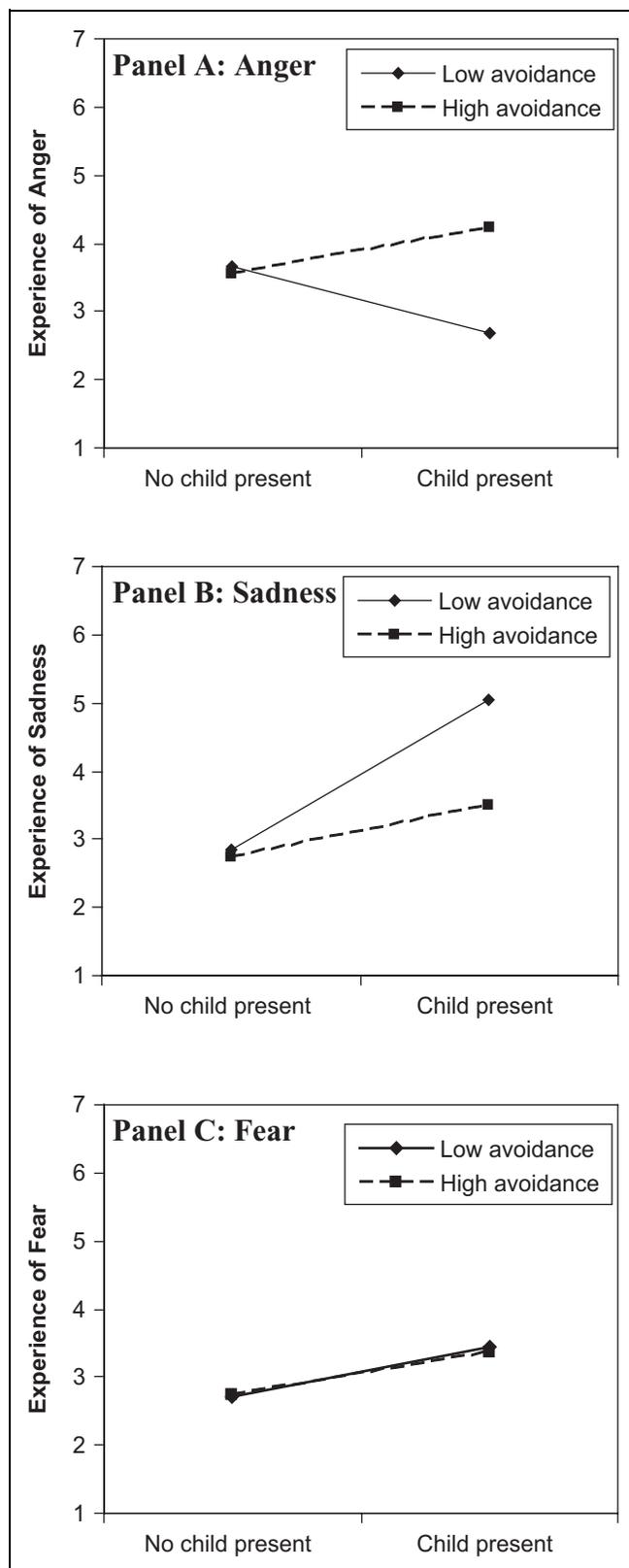


Figure 3. Joint effects of the presence of children and attachment avoidance on the mother's daily experience of negative emotion in the negative event

($M = 2.78$) ($B = 1.49, p < .001$). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with avoidance ($B = -.65, p < .05$). As shown in Panel B of Figure 3, whereas women low in avoidance experienced a significant increase in sadness ($B = 2.16, p < .001$), women high in avoidance experienced similar levels of sadness regardless of whether their children were present ($B = .23, ns$).

Fear. As shown in Panel C of Figure 3, there was neither a main effect of children present nor an interaction of avoidance with the presence of children in predicting fear in the negative event.

Control Analyses

To ensure that the effects were due specifically to the presence of the women's children and not to the presence of any other people, we conducted an additional set of analyses controlling for the presence of anyone else (i.e., romantic partner, sibling, friend, parent, or coworker). All of the interactions between attachment avoidance and the presence of women's grown children remained significant.

To ensure that each of the emotions was uniquely predicted by the interaction between attachment avoidance and the presence of children, we conducted additional analyses in which we controlled for the other emotional outcomes (separately for positive and negative emotions). For instance, in the model predicting joy, we controlled for love and pride. In each of these analyses, the interaction remained significantly associated with each emotional outcome of interest when controlling for the other two emotions.

Attachment avoidance also moderated the effect of children's presence on the perceived importance or personal significance of both the positive event ($B = -.54, p < .01$) and the negative event ($B = -.51, p < .01$). Whereas women low in avoidance rated both the positive and negative events as more important when their children were present than when their children were not present ($B_{\text{positive}} = .84, p < .001; B_{\text{negative}} = .91, p < .01$), women high in avoidance rated events with their children as similarly important to events without their children ($B_{\text{positive}} = -.24, p = .42; B_{\text{negative}} = .03, p = .91$). Once controlling for event importance in subsequent analyses, all of the critical interactions between attachment avoidance and the presence of children in predicting specific daily emotions remained significant, although we should note the limitation of this self-report measure of event importance.

Finally, we conducted more nuanced coding to address the possibility that the nature of the negative events in particular may have differed based on attachment style. Two coders indicated whether the negative event included (1) a personal disclosure of the child to his or her mother, (2) a conflict between a mother and her child, (3) a departure of the mother from her child or child from her mother, and (4) a negative event that happened to the mother in the presence of her child ($\kappa = .76$). Independent sample t tests showed that women who experienced each of these types of events did not differ in terms of either attachment anxiety or avoidance, all p s = ns. These

results suggest that the type of interaction for the negative events did not differ by attachment group but rather that the emotions felt in reaction to the events varied by attachment and the presence of a woman's grown children.

Discussion

In this unique daily diary study of older adult women, we found that women who were low in attachment avoidance experienced more joy, pride, and love during positive daily events spent with their grown children compared to positive events without their children. Women low in avoidance even benefited from their children's presence in the daily negative events; they experienced greater love and joy during events in which their children were present than events in which their children were not present. In contrast, women high in avoidance only felt greater love during events with their children compared to events without their children (i.e., their experience of joy, pride, anger, and sadness were all unaffected by the presence of their children). We found divergent effects for the specific negative emotions of anger and sadness among women low in avoidance. On the one hand, children's presence seemed to be a potential vulnerability for the relatively less avoidant women, as they felt greater sadness during negative events when their children were present. However, they also experienced less anger in the presence of their children, suggesting that they may be able to down-regulate negative emotions that are potentially destructive to their relationships with their children.

Attachment in Later Life

Bowlby (1979) believed that attachment characterized human experience from "the cradle to the grave" (p. 129). Numerous studies in the past three decades have shown how attachment processes play out in adult relationships, but they rarely focus on attachment in older adulthood (Consedine & Magai, 2003). In the current study, we found that a woman's attachment orientation, presumably set in place early in life (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007), influenced specific emotions experienced during interactions with her grown children in later adulthood. In this study, we assessed women's attachment styles to their romantic partners but also showed that these styles were related to attachment relationships in other domains because they presumably tap into a higher order, more generalized attachment style (Overall, Fletcher & Friesen, 2003). Along with Rholes et al. (2006), this is one of the first studies to show how working models of attachment in romantic relationships predict emotional experience *outside* of that particular domain (i.e., in women's relationships with their grown children later in adulthood). Finally, the current findings suggest that previous studies showing greater negative emotion experience and less positive emotion experience associated with attachment avoidance may unduly average across different emotions. Thus, future work on attachment could benefit from applying a discrete emotion perspective.

Parenting Across the Lifespan

Our discrete emotion findings are consistent with research on the transition to parenthood documenting avoidant women's lack of closeness to their children and dissatisfaction with their role as parents (Rholes et al., 1997; Rholes et al., 2006). Taken together, these studies suggest a parenting trajectory that is relatively stable from early to later parenthood, whereby avoidant women start out eschewing closeness with their young children and then, later in adulthood, fail to experience the emotional benefits of interactions with their children that are experienced by the relatively less avoidant women. Future research would benefit from applying a discrete emotions perspective to the study of early parenting to see if the same discrete emotions are relevant. For example, while fear was not particularly relevant to mothers' relationships with their grown children, it may be more relevant to the relationship between a mother and her younger children, whom she is responsible to keep out of harm's way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, avoidant mothers' daily emotions did not seem to be affected by the presence of their grown children, with the exception of feeling more love. In contrast, the emotional lives of mothers who were more open to closeness and intimacy (i.e., low avoidants) were enriched with more joy, love, and pride when their children are present. That closeness also buffered the less avoidant women against feelings of anger and frustration, but it also came with a dose of sadness, making the less avoidant women more vulnerable to the inevitable pains and sorrows of social life.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ravenna Helson for generously supplying the data, Aleksandr Kogan for assistance with data analyses, and Serena Chen for helpful comments on a previous draft.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interests with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed that they received the following support for their research and/or authorship of this article: Completion of this article was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH-43948.

Note

1. Because the women in this study are part of an ongoing, 50-year study of women's development, they see themselves as our informants and research partners and have shown remarkable commitment to the study (e.g., low attrition). Thus, although we could not verify daily compliance, we feel confident that our research produced valid data.

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