



Brief Report

# Adult attachment and attention to positive and negative emotional face expressions

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## Abstract

The present study investigated the relation between adult attachment styles and attention for happy, angry, and neutral emotional face expressions. Using a modified version of the exogenous cueing paradigm, we found that the combination of high attachment anxiety and high attachment avoidance was associated with reduced attention for angry faces. We also observed that anxious people tended to orient attention away from happy faces, especially in combination with high scores on attachment avoidance. These findings replicate and extend the results of a previous study and provide additional information on the role of attention in adult attachment.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory has been proposed as a useful framework for understanding individual differences in emotion regulation (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). According to this theory, the attachment system is critical in the regulation of distress as it motivates people to seek or maintain proximity to the attachment figure when encountering threat. Yet, whether or not people attain the desired state of felt security through support seeking is largely determined by one's appraisal of attachment figure availability. As such, interindividual differences exist in how the attachment system is likely to function and this variability in attachment orientation is commonly described in terms of two attachment dimensions,

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namely anxiety and avoidance. Recently, the role of attachment-related negative biases in several aspects of information processing has been emphasized (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In this context, attention is believed to be essential in the triggering and regulation of the attachment system and clear predictions can be made on the relation between attachment style and attention (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Main & Hesse, 1990). Specifically, it can be assumed that anxious people adopt a hypervigilant attentional style that is oriented towards threat and signs of attachment figure unavailability, whereas attachment avoidance is characterized by dismissal of threatening information in an attempt to prevent activation of the attachment system. Although attention is widely implicated in attachment system functioning, little research has been directed at investigating whether the different attachment strategies guide attention towards or away from threat in the predicted ways.

So far, most of the research on attention and attachment orientation could not confirm the assumed differences in attentional processing as a function of the specific type of attachment insecurity. Instead, it was found that both anxious and avoidant individuals orient attention away from threat and negative emotional information (Kirsh & Cassidy, 1997; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Zeijlmans Van Emmichoven, Van IJendoorn, de Ruiter, & Brosschot, 2003). However, these preliminary studies on attention generally adopted a categorical rather than a dimensional approach on attachment and did not use appropriate experimental tasks that allow one to draw unambiguous conclusions about the spatial orientation of attention. Dewitte, Koster, De Houwer, and Buysse (2007) therefore conducted a new study in which they did adopt a dimensional approach towards individual differences in attachment and used a dot-probe task to examine the spatial allocation of attention. As stimuli, attachment-related threat, general threat, attachment-related positive and general positive words were used. This study revealed that attachment insecurity was associated with an attentional bias away from attachment threat words and this attentional avoidance was best predicted by the interaction between high attachment anxiety and high attachment avoidance. Note that these results contradict the common view that attachment anxiety is associated with hypervigilance for (relational) threat.

Because the study of Dewitte et al. (2007) is until now the only one that examined the relation between attachment dimensions and the spatial orienting of attention to threat, we conducted a new study aimed at replicating and extending the previous results using a different type of stimuli and a different attentional task. In the present study, pictures of emotional facial expressions were presented in an exogenous cueing task (Posner, 1980). We selected pictures of happy, angry, and neutral faces because pictures represent more potent and ecological valid threat cues than words (Bradley et al., 1997) and because previous research has shown that memory and attention impairments are specific to attachment-related themes (e.g., Dewitte et al., 2007; Edelstein, 2006). In relation to the latter, happy and angry faces could be interpreted as signalling attachment figure availability and unavailability, respectively, which are central attachment concerns.<sup>1</sup> The exogenous cueing task is, together with the dot probe task, one of the most widely used tasks

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<sup>1</sup> Previous research has already used emotional faces in the context of attachment (Fraley et al., 2006; Maier et al., 2005; Niedenthal, Brauer, Robin, & Innes-Ker, 2002). In these studies, a morph movie paradigm has been adopted in which a happy, angry or sad face changed gradually into a neutral one and vice versa. Yet, this morph task is primarily measuring one's interpretation of the emotional face rather than registering the direction of spatial attention to the facial cue.

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