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Too close for comfort? Adult attachment and cuddling in romantic and parent–child relationships



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ABSTRACT

Close physical contact is a defining feature of intimate relationships across the lifespan and occurs in nearly all kinds of close relationships. However, there are important individual differences in the extent to which people feel comfortable engaging in intimate interactions. In two samples, attachment avoidance was associated with less positive feelings toward cuddling in adult romantic relationships (Sample 1) and parent–child relationships (Sample 2); attachment anxiety was largely unrelated to feelings about cuddling across relationships. Moreover, the magnitude of the associations between attachment avoidance and feelings about cuddling was similar across relationship types. The current study highlights the similarities in people's use of intimate touch across relationships, namely to communicate affection, trust, and responsiveness to their loved ones. Yet we also identified important attachment-related differences in feelings about intimate touch. The current findings suggest several new directions for future research on the benefits of interpersonal touch.

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1. Introduction

Close physical contact is a defining feature of intimate relationships across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1973). Some form of intimate touch (e.g., cuddling and kissing) is found in nearly all close relationships, including parent–child and adult romantic relationships (Hertenstein & Campos, 2001). Further, more frequent experiences of touch are associated with positive outcomes across relationship types, including adults' romantic relationship satisfaction (Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, & Horn, 2013; Heiman et al., 2011) and children's physical, cognitive, and social development (Anisfeld, Casper, Nozyce, & Cunningham, 1990; Field, 1995; Korner, 1990).

However, there are important individual differences in the extent to which people feel comfortable engaging in intimate interactions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Brennan, Wu, & Loev, 1998). Thus, some people may be less likely to experience the benefits of touch in close relationships. In two samples, we examined how individual differences in adult attachment orientation, or people's characteristic approach to close relationships (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998), were associated with participants'

feelings about intimate touch. We were particularly interested in whether individual differences in adult attachment, typically measured with respect to romantic relationships, predicted feelings about touch in both romantic and parent–child relationships.

Attachment theory is fundamentally a lifespan approach to close relationships, and attachment orientations are commonly presumed to apply to relationships broadly rather than specifically (Cassidy, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). As such, if a general attachment system underlies intimacy across the lifespan, attachment-related differences in feelings toward intimate touch should be observable across different kinds of close relationships. Yet relatively few studies have assessed how adult attachment orientations predict behavior across relationship types (for exceptions see, e.g., Edelstein et al., 2004; Selcuk et al., 2010). Further, to our knowledge, no study has directly compared the degree to which a person's attachment orientation predicts outcomes in both romantic and parent–child relationships.

In the current study, we focused on feelings about *cuddling* specifically because cuddling occurs regularly in both parent–child and adult romantic relationships (Gallace & Spence, 2010). We define cuddling as intimate, physical, and loving contact that involves some degree of whole body touching (van Anders, Edelstein, Wade, & Samples-Steele, 2013). Our prior research

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suggests that cuddling is very common in romantic relationships and is experienced very positively by most participants (van Anders et al., 2013). Moreover, when asked to describe their motivations for and feelings about cuddling with romantic partners, the majority of participants in our previous research reported themes related to love, nurturance, and affection.

1.1. Adult attachment and intimate touch

Despite the demonstrated benefits of intimate touch, relatively little is known about individual differences in touch experiences. In the current study, we used attachment theory as a framework for understanding people's experiences with and feelings about one kind of intimate touch, cuddling. In this framework, individual differences in attachment are conceptualized as differences in two relatively independent dimensions: attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety. *Attachment avoidance* reflects people's level of comfort with closeness and intimacy (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004). Highly avoidant individuals tend to have a compulsively or defensively "self-reliant" approach to close relationships, emphasizing autonomy and interpersonal distance over interdependence (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998). *Attachment anxiety* reflects concern about abandonment (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). Highly anxious individuals tend to be hypervigilant to relationship partners and overly distressed by separations from them (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Individuals who report low levels of both attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety are considered *secure*.

Much of the previous research on attachment and intimate touch has focused on motivations and attitudes toward touch (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998; Brennan, Wu, et al., 1998), or the frequency and duration of touch during stressful situations (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). However, many of the mechanisms linking touch to relationship functioning are thought to be affective (e.g., intimate touch makes individuals feel positively, which reduces relational stress). Further, attitudes do not always predict behavior, and behavior often depends on several factors, including one's subjective evaluation of the outcome (i.e., whether or not the behavior will feel good; Ajzen, 1991). Previous research has not examined people's affective responses toward intimate touch. Past work on adult attachment and intimate touch also focuses mostly on the motivations of touch within stressful contexts (Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson et al., 1992). However, intimate touch can also be used in positive contexts and may enhance closeness outside of stressful circumstances. The current study addresses this gap by examining how individual differences in attachment are related to feelings about cuddling.

Attachment avoidance is generally related to less positive feelings about intimate touch in both adult romantic and parent–child relationships. Observational studies reveal that, in stressful situations, avoidant adults are resistant to touch from romantic partners and less likely to seek physical contact with them (Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson et al., 1992). Avoidantly attached parents also appear uncomfortable with physical contact during interactions with their children (Selcuk et al., 2010) and they provide less support to them in stressful situations (Edelstein et al., 2004; Rholes, Simpson, & Blakely, 1995). Thus, we hypothesized that avoidant individuals would report less enjoyment of their experiences with intimate touch (i.e., cuddling) with both romantic partners and children.

Attachment anxiety is associated with more ambivalent feelings about romantic intimacy. Anxious adults tend to use touch to comfort relationship partners; however, they also tend to use touch for controlling or manipulative purposes (Feeney & Collins, 2001) and they report dissatisfaction with the level of touch in romantic relationships (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Likewise, anxiously attached

adults report that they enjoy the affectionate and intimate aspects of sexual behavior, but also that they are concerned about their attractiveness and acceptability as a sexual partner (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Thus, anxious individuals' concerns about rejection might interfere with their ability to achieve the closeness they desire (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005). These ambivalent feelings toward intimate touch could be reflected in the null associations between attachment anxiety and frequency of touch in behavioral studies among romantic partners (Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson et al., 1992). Much less is known about anxiously attached adults' feelings toward cuddling with children. In fact, to our knowledge, attachment-related differences in parents' emotional responses to intimate touch with their children have not yet been examined. Based on the competing motivations of anxiously attached individuals, we hypothesized that there would be a null association between attachment anxiety and feelings about cuddling with both romantic partners and children.

In two samples, we examined how individual differences in adult attachment orientation were associated with participants' feelings about intimate touch in parent–child and romantic relationships. Based on prior research, we predicted that attachment-related avoidance would be associated with less enjoyment with cuddling and that attachment anxiety would be unrelated to cuddling. Further, these associations between attachment orientation and feelings about cuddling would be similar across romantic and parent–child relationships. We began by examining bivariate associations between attachment orientation and feelings about cuddling. Multivariate regression analyses were then conducted to examine the proportion of the variance in feelings about cuddling explained by attachment-related avoidance and anxiety after controlling for demographic factors. Finally, we statistically compared the two samples to determine whether an individual's attachment orientation explains a similar proportion of the variance in feelings about cuddling in romantic and parent–child relationships. If the associations between attachment orientations and emotional responses are found to be similar in both relationships, it would strengthen the claim that an individual's attachment orientation guides interpersonal behavior in multiple relationships across the lifespan (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two samples were recruited to examine associations between adult attachment orientations and feelings about cuddling. Data from the current study are part of a larger project on intimate touch; some of the descriptive data from Sample 1 are published elsewhere (van Anders et al., 2013), but the data on attachment orientation from Sample 1 have not yet been published. None of the data from Sample 2 are previously published. Both samples were recruited through advertisements posted in the local community and through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). MTurk participants were compensated \$50; participants recruited through the community were given the opportunity to be entered into a raffle for \$50.

In Sample 1, participants were 254 adults (56% women), aged 18–67 who were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Participants self-identified their ethnicity and we categorized these responses as: 73% white, 11% Asian, 7% Latino/a/Hispanic, 5% Black or African–American, and 4% multiracial or other ethnicities. Relationship length ranged from 1 month to 30 years ($M = 57.64$ months, $SD = 69.90$). An additional 38 participants did not complete at least one of the measures of interest and were not considered further.

In Sample 2, participants were 223 adults (48% women), ranging in age from 18 to 56 who were parenting at least one biological or adopted child age 7 or younger. Age 7 was selected as our cut-off because we expected that children older than 7 would be less likely to spend time cuddling with their parents (e.g., because they begin attending school for the majority of the day by this time; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). In Sample 2, 73.1% of participants reported that they were in a romantic relationship. Parents were asked to identify a child with whom they most recently cuddled (for participants with multiple children) and to provide basic demographic information on this child ($M_{age} = 4.24$ years, $SD = 2.66$; 55% female). Participants self-identified their race/ethnicity and we categorized these responses as: 70% white, 14% Black or African-American, 7% Asian, 5% Latino/a/Hispanic, and 4% multiracial or other ethnicities. An additional 93 participants did not complete at least one of the measures of interest and are not considered further.

2.2. Measures

Adult attachment was assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Inventory (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998). The ECR is a widely used measure of attachment-related avoidance and anxiety. In both samples, participants answered the ECR items in reference to their close romantic relationships in general (rather than their current partner). The 18-item *attachment avoidance* subscale reflects an individual's discomfort with closeness. The 18-item *attachment anxiety* subscale reflects an individual's concern about abandonment. Sample items include "I do not feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners" (attachment avoidance), and "I often worry that my partner does not really love me" (attachment anxiety). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Scale reliabilities and means for each sample are reported in Table 1.

Feelings about cuddling were assessed with five items from a longer questionnaire about cuddling in romantic relationships (van Anders et al., 2013). Questions were asked in reference to the last time participants cuddled with their romantic partner or child: "how much do you enjoy cuddling?", "how positive did you feel after cuddling?", and "how negative did you feel after cuddling?" were answered on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). "how nurtured/taken care of did you feel?" and "how protective (taking care of others) did you feel?" were answered on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). These items were significantly intercorrelated in both samples (r 's > |.37|, p 's < .001), so they were combined into a single measure of positive feelings about cuddling. Factor analyses confirmed that the five items loaded on a single factor in both samples.

3. Results

3.1. Bivariate correlations

Correlations between primary study variables are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, attachment avoidance was associated with less positive feelings about cuddling in both samples. Attachment anxiety was associated with less positive feelings about cuddling in Sample 2 (parent-child relationships) but not Sample 1 (romantic relationships). Preliminary analyses indicated that attachment-related avoidance and anxiety were positively correlated in both samples, which is common in young- and middle-adult samples such as our own (e.g., Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013). Age was negatively correlated with attachment anxiety in both samples but positively correlated with attachment avoidance in Sample 2 only. Age was also negatively correlated with positive feelings about cuddling with partners (Sample 1). Women reported more positive feelings about cuddling in both samples compared to men.

3.2. Multivariate analyses

Because age, gender, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance were intercorrelated, we next regressed attachment-related anxiety and avoidance on feelings about cuddling in each relationship while controlling for age and gender. As hypothesized, and consistent with our preliminary analyses, attachment avoidance explained a significant proportion of the variance in feelings about cuddling with both partners, $\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$, and children, $\beta = -.18$, $p = .02$. Attachment anxiety did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in feelings about cuddling with partners, $\beta = .06$, $p = .33$, or children, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .35$.

Next, we compared the proportion of the variance in feelings about cuddling explained by attachment avoidance between the two samples. These analyses tested whether the proportion of variance in feelings about cuddling explained by attachment orientation significantly differed between romantic and parent-child relationships. If the associations between attachment orientations and emotional responses are found to be similar in both relationships, it would strengthen the claim that an individual's attachment orientation guides interpersonal behavior in multiple relationships across the lifespan (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). We began by combining the two samples and creating a variable that designated the "target" of the judgments about cuddling ($-1 =$ child, $1 =$ romantic partner). Attachment-related anxiety and avoidance were mean-centered according to the total combined samples. We next regressed attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, target, and all possible two-way interactions between these variables onto participants' feelings about cuddling. Age and gender were also added as covariates. Consistent with the analyses separated

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among primary study variables.

		1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)	α
1.	Gender		.05	-.07	-.06	.16 [*]		
2.	Age	-.25 ^{**}		.15 [*]	-.21 ^{**}	.10	33.04 (7.76)	
3.	Avoidance	-.04	.05		.44 ^{**}	-.23 ^{**}	2.83 (1.14)	.93
4.	Anxiety	.17 ^{**}	-.16 [*]	.30 ^{**}		-.19 ^{**}	3.11 (1.28)	.95
5.	Feelings about cuddling	.23 ^{**}	-.15 [*]	-.28 ^{**}	.02		.00 (.66)	.73
	Mean (SD)		28.94 (9.70)	2.63 (1.13)	3.55 (1.24)	.00 (.86)		
	α			.93	.92	.82		

Note: Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented below the diagonal for Sample 1 (romantic relationships; $n = 254$) and above the diagonal for Sample 2 (parent-child relationships; $n = 223$). Gender: $-1 =$ men, $1 =$ women.

^{*} $p < .05$.

^{**} $p < .01$.

by target, attachment avoidance predicted a significant proportion of the variance with respect to positive feelings about cuddling overall, $\beta = -.24, p < .001$. Attachment anxiety did not predict a significant proportion of the variance with respect to feelings about cuddling, $\beta = .01, p = .91$. The interaction between attachment avoidance and target did not reach conventional levels of significance, $\beta = -.09, p = .08$, suggesting that attachment avoidance predicted a similar amount of variance in feelings about cuddling in both romantic and parent–child relationships. The interaction between attachment anxiety and target was not significant, $\beta = .08, p = .11$ ¹.

4. Discussion

The current study investigated associations between attachment orientations and people's feelings about cuddling with romantic partners and children. Attachment avoidance predicted fewer positive feelings about cuddling across relationships, supporting the premise that a general attachment system underlies intimacy in both adult romantic and parent–child relationships. Findings with cuddling converged with other sorts of intimate touch, namely that individuals use touch to communicate affection, trust, and responsiveness to their loved ones (Debrot et al., 2013; Hertenstein & Campos, 2001).

The observation that avoidant partners and parents reported less enjoyment of cuddling is consistent with previous research showing that avoidant individuals dislike emotional and physical intimacy (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998; Brennan, Wu, et al., 1998). These findings are also supported by research suggesting that avoidant individuals are less likely to offer both partners and children support in stressful contexts (Edelstein et al., 2004; Simpson et al., 1992). Attachment anxiety was unrelated to feelings about cuddling in both adult romantic and parent–child relationships. Anxious individuals' concerns about abandonment and their suspicions of the motives behind their partners' behavior may interfere with the translation of *desire* for more intimate touch into *actual enjoyment* of intimate touch (Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Shaver et al., 2005). Thus, this ambivalence toward intimate touch could explain the null associations between attachment anxiety and feelings about cuddling in both samples.

The fact that associations were found between self-reported romantic attachment and feelings about intimate touch in parent–child relationships bolsters the predictive range of self-report measures of attachment. Individuals' attachment orientations were assessed with respect to how they *generally* approach close romantic relationships. Few studies have examined the predictive utility of self-report measures of romantic attachment orientation in the context of parenting behavior (Edelstein et al., 2004; Rholes et al., 1995). The consistency in findings across relationships also supports the premise that a general attachment system underlies intimacy in both adult romantic and parent–child relationships and that this system can be reliably measured using self-report instruments (Edelstein et al., 2004; Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

That attachment avoidance predicts feelings toward intimate touch across relationships elucidates some of the pathways hypothesized to underlie the intergenerational transmission of attachment (Chopik, Moors, & Edelstein, 2014; Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). For example, frequency of touch in an individual's

caregiving environment predicts the amount of touch they use in their adult relationships (Schutte, Malouff, & Adams, 1988). Further, Main (1990) found that parents' aversion to physical contact with their children was associated with feelings of rejection from their own parents during childhood. Thus, it is likely that children of avoidant parents grow up to dislike intimate touch in their relationships, with both romantic partners and children. Individual differences in attachment avoidance may therefore facilitate the transference of intimacy in relationships across the lifespan.

The correlational nature of the current study limits the degree to which we can make causal statements. The magnitude of the relationship between attachment avoidance and feelings about cuddling in both romantic and parent–child relationships is also relatively small, so the current study's findings should be interpreted in the appropriate context. However, experimental research provides evidence that intimate touch can provide significant benefits to partners and children alike. For example, Anisfeld et al. (1990) randomly assigned mothers to carry newborns in a soft baby carrier (that promoted touch) or a harder infant seat (that restricted physical contact). Mothers assigned to the soft carrier condition were more responsive to infant vocalizations than mothers using the hard seat. Also, children of mothers in the soft carrier condition were more likely to be securely attached 10 months later. The results of the current study suggest that there may be important individual differences (i.e., attachment orientation) in how people respond to these experimental manipulations. Future research can address this gap by randomly assigning individuals to cuddle with their partner or child and examining how people's attachment orientations are associated with emotional reactions to these intimate activities. Longitudinal research could also shed light on causal connections between individual differences in attachment and feelings about intimate touch. For example, attachment avoidance is likely a precursor to an individual's feelings about intimate touch; however, feelings about touch could reify and influence an individual's attachment orientation over the course of a relationship. Further, the importance and functions of intimate touch likely change across the lifespan, even within relationships. In the current study, older participants reported less positive feelings about cuddling with their romantic partners, suggesting that cuddling may become less central to romantic relationships over time as relationships become more established.

It is also important to note that our measures of attachment and feelings about cuddling were self-report and, thus, are subject to social desirability biases; this limitation could be addressed in future research by incorporating observer-based or physiological measures of attachment and/or cuddling responses. We also did not include a measure of general affect which would have allowed us to demonstrate that the link between attachment avoidance and feelings about cuddling could not be explained by attachment-related differences in general affect (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). However, attachment orientations often predict relational outcomes over-and-above the contributions of positive and negative affect. For example, Wei and colleagues (2005) found that negative affect only partially mediates the association between attachment orientations and interpersonal problems, suggesting that relational outcomes are not entirely attributable to attachment-related differences in affect. Future research could have participants cuddle with their romantic partner and/or child and then rate their feelings and general affect *in situ* to increase the external validity of our findings and reduce memory biases in retrospective reporting (Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). For instance, we found that women reported more positive feelings than men about cuddling across relationship types, which could reflect cultural assumptions held about nurturant behavior. Perhaps these gender differences would be less apparent using other response modalities or timeframes.

¹ In each sample, items regarding feelings about cuddling were standardized before the composite was generated. As such, the mean for feelings about cuddling in each sample is zero. Thus, the main effect of target in these regression analyses is uninterpretable. Because our main comparison of interest was whether the proportion of variance explained by attachment orientation differed between the two samples, we did not conduct any follow-up analyses comparing mean levels on any of the composite items.

These limitations notwithstanding, the current study revealed individual differences in feelings about intimate touch and provides several directions for future research on the mechanisms and the conditions underlying the benefits of interpersonal touch.

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