



Adult Attachment and the Perception of Facial Expressions of Emotion: Activating the Attachment System with a Distress Manipulation

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Introduction

- Attachment system allows infants to assess whether caregiver is nearby, accessible, and attentive (Bowlby, 1969), and the same form of attachment relations play a powerful role in adults' later emotional lives (Bowlby, 1980)
- Adult attachment research has demonstrated that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety are related to different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving in interpersonal relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)
- A central assumption of attachment theory is that cognitive processes underlying individual differences in adult attachment affect how an individual appraises and monitors his or her environment (Fraley et al., 2006)
- These cognitive processes are thought to influence how individuals' process information about other's emotions (Collins & Read, 1994)
- Fraley et al. (2006) found that adults with high attachment anxiety perceived the offset of emotion earlier than their low attachment anxiety counterparts, suggesting that participants higher in attachment anxiety displayed a general hypervigilance to emotional changes
- To make claims about vigilance or sensitivity to emotional changes of others, it is necessary to put individuals in a distressing situation such that that insecure individuals lack a "safe haven"

Research Questions

- Do participants high in attachment anxiety perceive the offset of emotion earlier than participants low in attachment anxiety?
- What is the effect of a distress manipulation on the perception of the offset of emotion?

Method

Participants

- 78 participants (39 F) from University of Minnesota. 56% White, 5% African-American, 31% Asian-American, and 4% other racial background.

Outcome

- Facial emotion processing task using a movie-morph paradigm. Digital photos of actors expressing happiness, sadness, and anger. Movie-morphs seamlessly morphed from displaying emotion to no emotion. Participants indicated when emotion disappeared from the face.

Predictor

- Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1990) - a measure of adult romantic attachment orientations. Seventeen items, 7-point, Likert-type items (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). Two dimensions: Anxious and Avoidant.

Covariates

Positive and Negative Affect Scale

Berkeley Personality Profile – Neuroticism

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire

Fig 1. Offset of Angry Faces

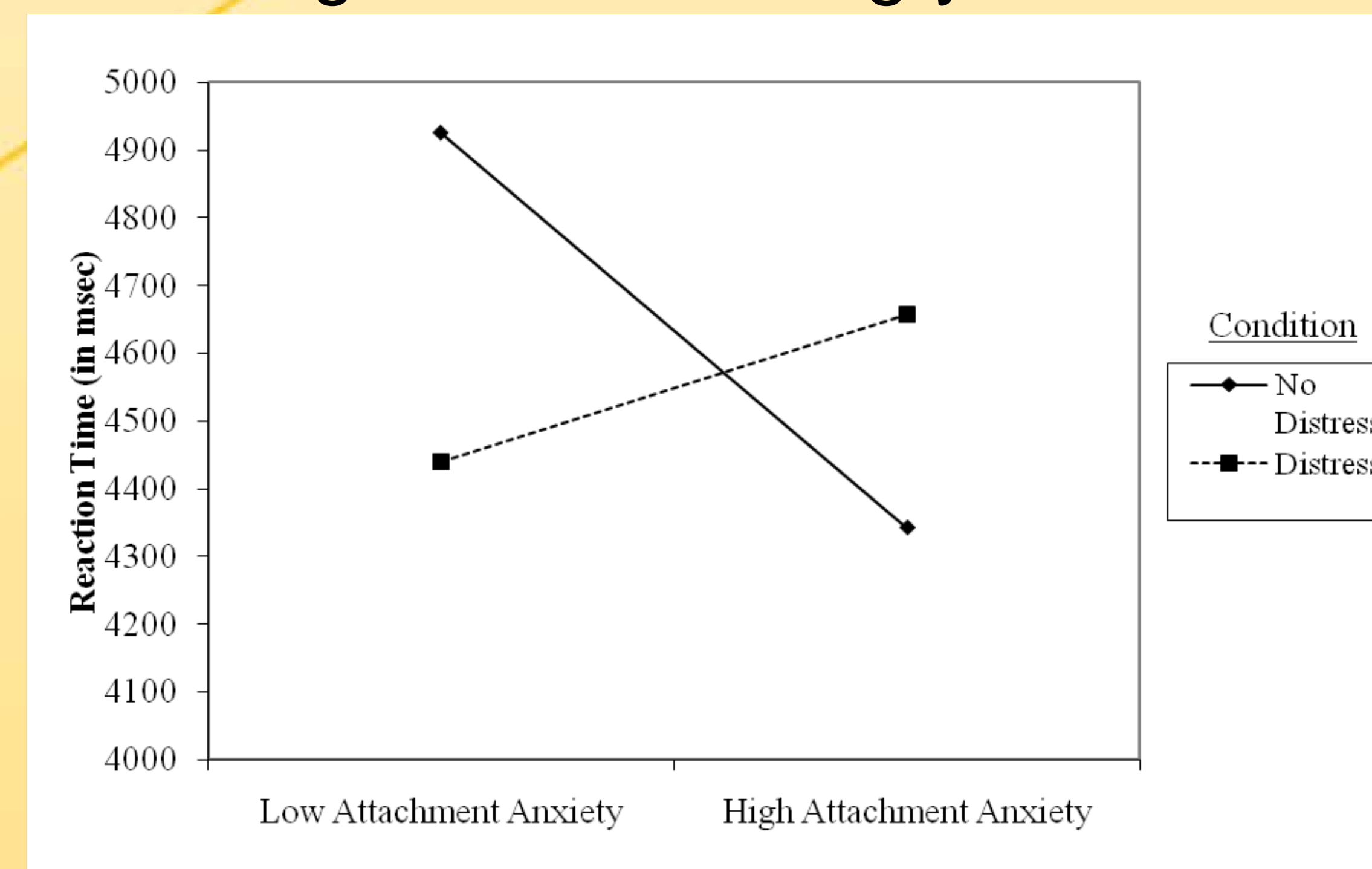
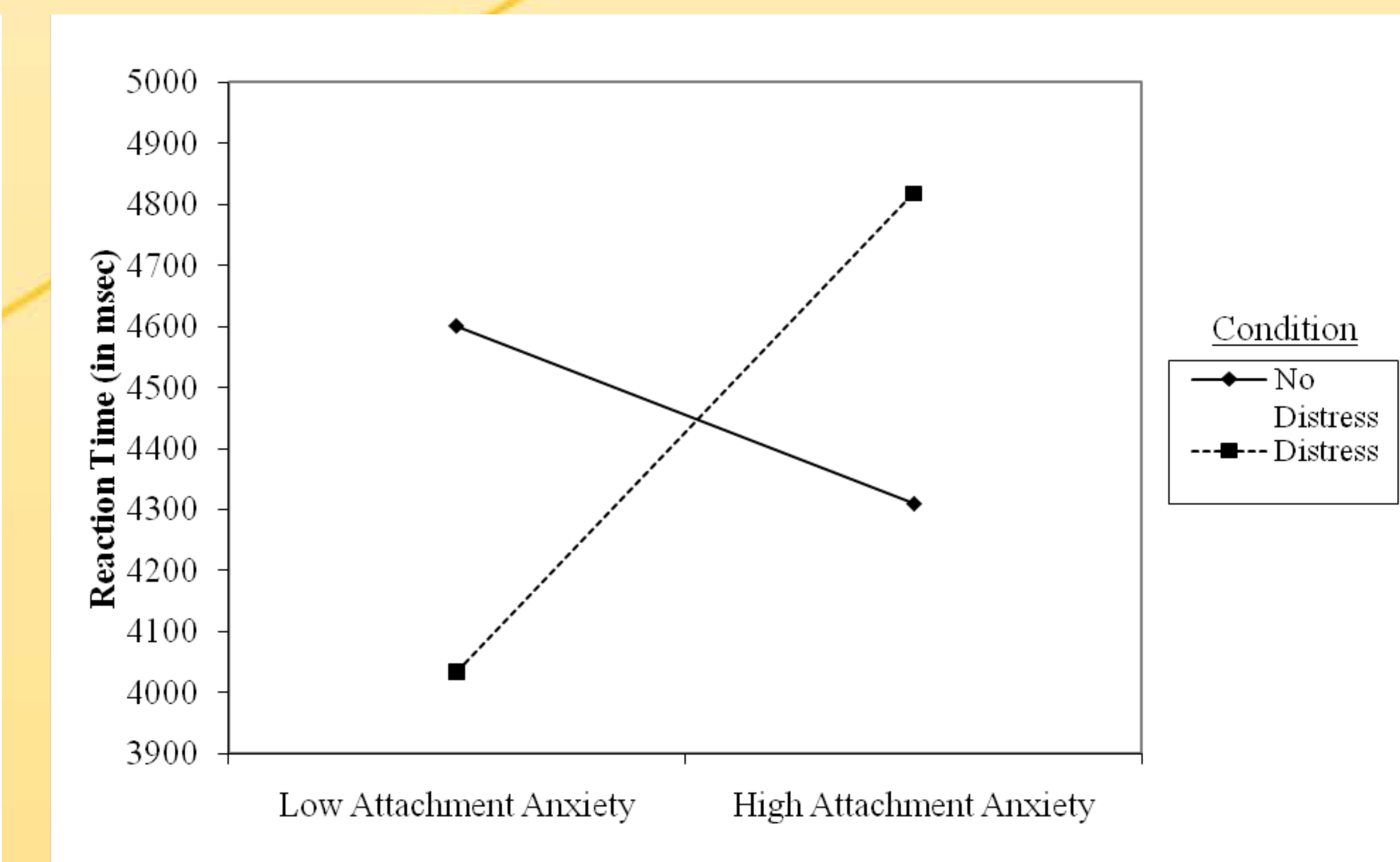


Fig 2. Offset of Happy Faces



Method cont.

Procedure

Distress condition – Darkened room with old psychophysiological equipment. Computer with dead batter placed on desk. Experimenter with white lab coat read fear induction statement from Simpson et al. (1992). When laptop did not work, participant was brought back to main room.

No-distress condition – Paper and pencil task, similar script to distress condition, in fully lighted room.

Results

- Figure 1 - Participants who scored higher in attachment anxiety in the no-distress condition perceived the offset of angry emotions *earlier* than did less anxious participants in the no-distress condition. There was no significant difference between high and low anxious participants in the distress condition
- Figure 2 – Participants who scored higher in attachment anxiety in the distress condition perceived the offset of happy emotions *later* than did less anxious participants in the distress condition. There was no significant difference between high and low anxious participants in the no-distress condition.

Discussion

- Evidence does not support a theory of general hypervigilance to changes in facial emotions
- Evidence suggests that how advantageous hypervigilance is to processing emotions in others may depend on both an individual's level of attachment anxiety *and* the level of distress that he or she feels at that time.
- Evidence suggests that the perception of the happiness emotion is informative of the accessibility and attentiveness of others when the individual feels distressed (i.e. lacks a "safe haven").



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