Ignoring the Love: Attachment Avoidance and Empathic Accuracy in Romantic Conversations

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Psychology
University of Toronto

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Psychology
University of Toronto
2012

Abstract

Two studies examined the influence of attachment avoidance on accuracy in reading a romantic partner’s emotions (empathic accuracy) during positive couple interactions—conversations about love. Study 1 found that higher attachment avoidance was related to less accuracy in inferring a partner’s positive emotions during a conversation about love, but was not related to accuracy for negative emotions. Study 2 examined whether avoidant individuals’ lower empathic accuracy in love conversations could be increased by framing accuracy as unrelated to intimacy. The framing manipulation did not consistently alter avoidant individuals’ accuracy. However, there was some evidence that avoidant individuals performed worse when they believed accuracy reflected intimacy, compared to when accuracy was unrelated to intimacy. These results suggest that lower empathic accuracy may be a strategic defence avoidant individuals use to maintain emotional distance. By incorrectly reading their partner’s positive emotions, avoidant individuals may miss the relational benefits afforded by empathic accuracy.
Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank Geoff MacDonald for all of his guidance and support throughout the year. As well, I would like to thank Emily Impett for her invaluable feedback and assistance at all stages of the project. I would also like to thank Penelope Lockwood for sitting on my defence committee. I would also like to express my gratitude to Zoë Martin, Samantha Pirner and Rui Gong for their hard work in couple recruitment and data collection. Finally I would like to thank my family, friends, and labmates for their continued love and support.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Individuals high in attachment avoidance strive to maintain emotional distance and independence in their romantic relationships (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These individuals have an arsenal of strategic defences used to achieve their goal of thwarting intimacy. One such defence that has received considerable research attention is how dismissing negative cues can reduce avoidant individuals’ desire to turn to others (e.g. Edelstein & Gillath, 2008; Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000). However, avoidant individuals may also disregard positive cues as a means to maintain emotional distance (e.g., Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald & Baratta, in press; Vrticˇka, Andersson, Grandjean, Sander, & Vuilleumier, 2008). One understudied context where a defensive tendency to disregard positive cues may manifest is when avoidant individuals are tasked with inferring their partners’ positive emotions (empathic accuracy tasks). The current research examined whether individuals high in attachment avoidance exhibit lower empathic accuracy in reading a partner’s positive emotions, as a way to maintain distance in their relationships.

1.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was first proposed by Bowlby (1969) to describe the important bond between a caregiver and an infant. When an individual appraises a threat (either physically or psychologically) in her or his environment, the attachment system becomes activated, which prompts the desire to turn to an attachment figure for support (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In childhood, attachment figures are typically the child’s primary caregivers. In adulthood, romantic partners are often primary attachment figures (e.g. Doherty & Feeney, 2004).

If the individual perceives that her or his attachment figure is available and responsive, the individual will seek proximity to the attachment figure, and the attachment figure will successfully relieve the individual’s distress. Because the individual no longer feels distressed, her or his attachment system is no longer activated.

However, if an individual believes that her or his attachment figure is unresponsive, or not immediately available, the individual’s distress will perpetuate. This leaves the individual with
two main strategies to regulate distress: hyperactivation or deactivation. Hyperactivation of the attachment system occurs when an individual perceives that her or his distress could be reduced by seeking proximity to an attachment figure. Hyperactivating strategies are aimed at gaining support and attention from the attachment figure; as a result of this goal, the individual becomes hyper-attuned to any cues related to attachment and threat. On the other hand, an individual can also cope with unabated distress by deactivating the attachment system. This occurs when the individual believes that seeking proximity to an attachment figure would not reduce their distress, or would be punished. The individual copes by trying to reduce her or his own distress, so that the desire to turn to an attachment figure is removed (the attachment system is deactivated). This strategy necessitates ignoring cues of attachment and threat, in order to keep the attachment system deactivated.

Whether an individual favours hyperactivating or deactivating strategies is shaped by her or his past experiences with (un)responsive attachment figures. Unreliable and inconsistent care can prompt individuals to adopt hyperactivating strategies to capitalize on chances for closeness when they are available. Individuals high in anxious attachment tend to adopt hyperactivating strategies, becoming hypervigilant to signs of abandonment or rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994), and display clingy and needy behaviour in order to gain the attention of an attachment figure (Cassidy, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Further, because anxious individuals do not receive consistent love and support from their attachment figures, they develop a negative model of self, where they see themselves as unworthy of love and care (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). A different pattern emerges in avoidant individuals, who tend to adopt deactivating strategies. Deactivating strategies arise when attachment figures are consistently unavailable to provide comfort, leading the individual to disregard feelings of distress that would normally encourage seeking closeness to an attachment figure (e.g., Edelstein & Gillath, 2008; Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Further, because their attachment figures are unresponsive, avoidant individuals develop a negative model of others, seeing others as less caring and responsive. Avoidant individuals employ an array of defensive strategies to facilitate their goal of eliminating attachment system activation (Main & Weston, 1982).
1.2 Attachment Avoidance and Emotional Defences

One way for avoidant individuals to ensure their attachment system remains deactivated is by suppressing their experience of emotions, including restricting their conscious experience of emotions and inhibiting their outward expression of emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Negative emotions are seen as necessary to guard against, as these emotions prompt a desire to turn to others, which avoidant individuals eschew (Cassidy, 1994). Positive emotions can equally be problematic, as this would foster undesired interpersonal closeness and interdependency with a romantic partner (Cassidy, 1994), threatening avoidant individuals’ desire to be self-reliant. Another reason avoidants may guard against feelings of positivity in their relationships is because these positive feelings would remind avoidants that they are vulnerable to pain and loss if that relationship were to end (Spielmann et al., in press).

Although a significant amount of attention has been paid to how avoidant individuals guard against threat in their relationships, a growing body of evidence suggests that avoidants also attempt to eliminate attachment system activation by reducing the expression and detection of positive cues. For example, Mikulincer and Sheffi (2000) illustrated that individuals lower in avoidance showed more adaptive behaviour following a positive mood induction (compared to a negative mood induction), whereas highly avoidant individuals’ behaviour remained impervious to the positive mood induction. Further, upon viewing faces signifying positive feedback, avoidant individuals showed less activity in brain regions associated with reward (in the striatum and ventral tegmental) compared to those lower in avoidance (Vrtic’ka et al., 2008), but were not more or less sensitive to negative emotions. Research also indicates that attachment avoidance is negatively related to expecting reward in social interactions, but is not significantly related to expecting negative evaluation (MacDonald, Tackett, & Bakker, 2012). Taken together, these findings support the idea that attachment avoidance may be particularly related to reduced perceptions of positivity, but not necessarily reduced perceptions of negativity at a conscious level.

In addition to reducing perceptions of positive emotions, avoidant individuals’ attentional processes help ensure their attachment systems remain deactivated. When confronted with attachment relevant information that activates their fears of intimacy, avoidant individuals do not attend to this information (Edelstein & Gillath, 2008). Similarly, avoidant individuals are
disinterested in learning intimate knowledge about their relationship partners (Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, & Friedman, 2007), suggesting they resist fully understanding their partners to maintain distance. If attachment relevant experiences are attended to, avoidant individuals encode less information about the experiences, as a defensive way to ignore contexts that make them acknowledge their dependence on others (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007).

In sum, avoidant individuals’ reduced experience, perception, and attention to emotions, helps them maintain their goal of emotional distance. In a similar fashion, avoidant individuals may infer emotions (empathic accuracy) in a way that enables them to keep their attachment system deactivated.

1.3 Empathic Accuracy

The ability to accurately infer the content of another person’s thoughts and feelings, empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993) is fundamental to interacting successfully with others (Ickes, 1997). Empathic accuracy helps maintain social relationships (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004), and increases satisfaction in interpersonal interactions (Lun, Kesebir, & Oishi, 2008). In romantic relationships specifically, empathic accuracy promotes effective couple communication (Noller & Ruzzene, 1991), enhanced couple well-being, and cooperation during conflict (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002). As well, being more empathically accurate is related to providing more skilful and appropriate support to a romantic partner (Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, Davis, & Devoldre, 2008). Individuals who are less adept at interpreting their romantic partners’ feelings are not afforded these relationship benefits, and hence face poorer relationship functioning.

Although empathic accuracy is largely advantageous to one’s romantic relationships, there are instances where correctly inferring one’s partner’s thoughts is detrimental. In most cases, when the topics of discussion are routine and harmless, greater accuracy promotes relationship quality, and prevents misunderstandings (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001). However, in situations where a partner’s thoughts are relationship-threatening (for example, when a partner is viewing an attractive member of the opposite sex), greater accuracy reduces intimacy, and increases instability between partners (Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003). According to Ickes and Simpson’s Empathic Accuracy Model (Ickes & Simpson, 1997, 2001) every couple has domains in their relationship in which understanding a partner’s feelings is particularly painful (referred to as
‘danger zones’). What context an individual construes as a ‘danger zone’, and how an individual manages her or his accuracy in these potentially threatening situations is likely influenced by her or his attachment to their romantic partner. For example, an individual high in attachment avoidance may particularly consider signs of intimacy as ‘danger zones’, whereas for an individual high in attachment anxiety, signs of potential rejection may be ‘danger zones’.

1.4 Attachment and Empathic Accuracy

When a ‘danger zone’ is encountered, an individual’s attachment influences how accurately she or he will read her or his romantic partner’s thoughts and feelings. Secure individuals (scoring low on both the anxiety and avoidance dimension) manage their empathic accuracy in romantic relationships in an adaptive fashion. In low threat situations, lower anxiety and lower avoidance are related to higher levels of empathic accuracy (Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999; Simpson et al., 2011). Yet, individuals who score low on anxiety and low on avoidance show reduced accuracy during times of relationship threat (e.g., Ickes, 2003; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999), which enables them to remain less distressed, and more satisfied in their relationship, compared to less secure individuals (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson, Ickes, & Oriña 2003).

In contrast to these adaptive patterns, highly anxious individuals show a maladaptive pattern of empathic accuracy. Individuals high in anxiety become more accurate than their less anxious counterparts in reading their partner during times of relationship threat (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999; Simpson et al., 2011), reflecting their characteristic hypervigilance for potential signs of rejection in their relationships. Further, anxious women may actually become less empathically accurate than less anxious individuals in situations designed to reassure them (e.g., when their partner promotes their positive qualities), due to their greater tendency to focus on themselves (Dugosh, 2001, as cited in Dugosh, Cheng, & Park, 2011). These dysfunctional tendencies provide evidence that attachment systematically affects individuals’ inclination to read their partners’ emotions in a given situation.

Just as attachment anxiety influences an individual’s empathic accuracy, so too does attachment avoidance. Simpson, Ickes and Grich (1999) observed a negative association between avoidance and empathic accuracy, qualified by gender, where women (but not men) higher in avoidance were less able to infer the thoughts of their romantic partner during a relationship threatening situation, compared to women lower in avoidance. Simpson et al. (2011) observed a negative
relationship between avoidance and accuracy that was not qualified by gender. In a sample of married couples discussing conflicts related to intimacy and jealousy, both severe and minor, individuals who scored higher on avoidance were less able to read the feelings of their romantic partner during the discussion.

In sum, the evidence examining empathic accuracy and attachment avoidance suggests that higher avoidance is associated with lower accuracy. Some research found that this relationship may be moderated by gender, although this could be a function of the particular experimental context (e.g., rating attractive members of the opposite sex). A negative relationship between attachment avoidance and empathic accuracy is consistent with avoidant individuals’ tendency to disregard emotional experiences. That is, avoidant individuals may be motivated to be less accurate at reading their romantic partners, as a technique to maintain distance in their relationship. This interpretation is advocated by Simpson and colleagues (2011), who argue that avoidants automatically default to inaccuracy when reading their romantic partners, noting that in their research, lower accuracy was observed regardless of the severity and topic (intimacy or jealousy) of the conflict that a couple discussed. However, this hypothesis that lower accuracy is a defence has never been empirically tested, nor have alternative explanations been addressed. For example, Simpson and colleagues strictly examined avoidant individuals’ accuracy in relationship interactions (where defences should be activated), without testing accuracy in a non-relationship context.

To date, the majority of research examining attachment and empathic accuracy in couple interactions has been conducted in the context of relationship threat. In light of the evidence reviewed that avoidant individuals also deactivate their attachment systems by ignoring positive cues, it is important to examine accuracy in a rewarding context. If lower empathic accuracy really is a defence avoidant individuals use, it should be especially evident in situations that foster closeness, as these situations threaten avoidant individuals’ fundamental desire for emotional distance. Unlike threat situations, where inaccuracy may be beneficial, studying empathic accuracy in a rewarding context provides a case where inaccuracy has clear negative consequences to an individual’s relationship, as failing to pick up on a partner’s positive feelings toward the self can lead to lower relationship satisfaction (e.g. Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001).
1.5 Present Studies

In the present studies, I examined whether lower empathic accuracy is a motivated defence used by avoidant individuals in an intimacy-related positive context. In Study 1 I examined the empathic accuracy of avoidant individuals in a context that should particularly activate defensive strategies--a conversation about love. In Study 2, I aimed to address an alternative hypothesis by testing whether a difference in motivation contributes to the inaccuracy of avoidant individuals, or if the difference may strictly be due to a deficit in ability. Further, in Study 2 I aimed to contrast avoidant individuals’ accuracy in a relationship context with their accuracy in a non-relationship context.
Chapter 2
Study 1

Study 1 extended past research by examining the empathic accuracy of avoidant individuals in a positive relationship context--a conversation about love. In line with past research and attachment theory predictions, I hypothesized that individuals high in attachment avoidance would disregard the feelings of their romantic partner during a positive conversation about love.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Eighty-one couples from the San Francisco area completed the study (5 non-heterosexual couples). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 60 ($M = 23.84, SD = 6.37$), and were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (52% European/European-American, 18% Asian/Asian-American, 10% African/African-American, 5% Latino, and 15% other). The couples’ relationship length varied from 6 months to 30 years ($M = 2$ years, 5 months, $SD = 3$ years, 7 months), and 48% of couples lived together.

2.1.2 Procedure

Prior to entering the lab, couples completed a variety of pre-measures as part of a larger study on romantic dyads, including the Experiences in Close Relationships scale detailed below. Upon arrival in the lab, each member of the couple rated their baseline levels of the emotions specified in the emotion rating scale. The couple next engaged in several videotaped interactions. Relevant to the current study, each couple was asked to have a conversation about love. Specifically, participants were asked to share a time that they felt a great deal of love in their relationship (and how they expressed it). Following the conversation, participants then completed the emotion rating scale. The participants were instructed to switch their role as either the speaker/listener, and repeat the conversation.
2.1.3 Materials

2.1.3.1 Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

This scale measures participants’ levels of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance in their romantic relationships. Participants responded to 18 items for both the anxiety (e.g., “I worry about being rejected or abandoned”, $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.60$, $\alpha = .91$) and avoidance (e.g., “I try to avoid getting too close to others”, $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.56$, $\alpha = .91$) dimensions, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), where higher scores reflected greater anxiety/avoidance.

2.1.3.2 Emotion Rating Scale

Based on prior research (Impett et al., 2010) participants rated the extent to which they experienced 6 positive (e.g., happy/pleased/joyful, cared about/loved/connected) and 5 negative (e.g., disappointed/let down, angry/irritated/hostile) emotions during the discussion, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot). They also used this scale to rate the degree to which they perceived the same 11 emotions in their partner. The same set of emotion ratings was completed after the second discussion (where the participant’s role switched to speaker/listener). These scales were reliable (for both conversations positive emotions $\alpha$ was above .93 for own emotions, and .94 for perceptions of partner’s emotions; for negative emotions $\alpha$ was above .82 for own emotions and for perception of partner’s emotions).

2.2 Data Analysis Plan

A person’s perception accuracy can be dependent on whether the moods or behaviours she/he is inferring are positive or negatively valenced (e.g., Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003; Howland & Rafaeli, 2010; Gadassi, Mor, & Rafaeli, 2011). Thus, I conducted analyses separately for negative and positive emotions. I computed participants’ accuracy separately for each role (speaker/listener), and for each valance of emotions participants were inferring (positive/negative), yielding four separate analyses.

I assessed empathic accuracy using the Truth and Bias (T&B) Model of Judgment (West & Kenny, 2011). I measured accuracy as the extent to which the participant’s judgment of her or his partner’s emotions corresponded to the actual emotions self-reported by her or his partner.
(referred to by West & Kenny, 2011, as the degree to which the participant used the truth force). This is achieved by regressing a participant’s perception of her or his partner’s emotions on the partner’s actual self-reported emotions. On top of accuracy, I assessed the extent to which a participant’s judgment of her or his partner’s emotions was biased by her or his own personal emotional state (referred to as a ‘bias force’ by West & Kenny, 2011). The T & B model allows bias and accuracy to be independent from one another; that is, one can simultaneously accurately perceive her or his partner’s emotions, and be biased by their own emotional states. The participant’s perception of her or his partner’s emotions, her or his own emotions, and the partner’s actual emotions are all centered around the grand mean of the ‘truth’ (across all participants, the average of the partners’ actual emotion scores). Because of this centering strategy, the intercept then represents what West and Kenny refer to as ‘directional bias’, also referred to as mean-level bias by other authors (e.g. Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, & Kenny, 2012); whether overall, participants had a tendency to over or underestimate their partners’ emotions.

To illustrate, imagine Angelina and Brad are participants in this study, and Angelina is rating Brad’s positive emotions during the conversation. Angelina’s judgment of Brad’s emotions may be influenced by several factors. Firstly, Angelina’s judgment may be influenced by Brad’s actual emotions felt in the conversation (i.e., the truth force; Angelina rates Brad as very happy because Brad was very happy during the conversation). Secondly, Angelina may rate Brad based on her own emotions. That is, if Angelina was not very positive during the conversation she may project this affect onto Brad, and assume that Brad did not feel very positively (i.e., the bias force). Lastly, Angelina may systematically over-estimate Brad’s emotions, demonstrating a positive directional bias. That is, Angelina may still accurately perceive that Brad felt very positively during the conversation, yet Angelina’s judgment may be pulled towards the upper end of the rating scale (e.g. Angelina rates Brad as a 6.5/7 on the positivity scale, when Brad reported feeling a 6.25/7). Put another way, the truth force captures the extent to which Angelina’s estimation covaries with Brad’s report, whereas the bias force captures how much Angelina’s estimation covaries with her own emotions. The directional bias represents the mean difference between Angelina’s estimation and Brad’s report (if Brad felt the average level of positivity in the sample).
I performed a multi-level model analysis where the truth force and bias force were 
simultaneously estimated, along with the interaction between each of these forces and attachment 
anxiety, and the interaction between each force and attachment avoidance. All models used the 
Satterthwaite method of estimating degrees of freedom, and a compound symmetry correlation 
covariance structure. As mentioned earlier, the intercept in the model refers to directional bias. In 
this model, the main effect of attachment avoidance would represent how avoidance influences 
directional bias; that is, does higher attachment avoidance systematically lead to over or 
underestimating a partner’s emotions? To account for the dependency between couples, a 
random intercept was estimated for each couple.

In light of my hypotheses, the results of the interaction between attachment avoidance and the 
truth force were of primary interest (representing how attachment avoidance influences empathic 
accuracy), and the main effect of avoidance (representing whether avoidance systematically 
alters perceptions).

2.3 Results

Because past research has observed that the following variables influence empathic accuracy, in 
all analyses I examined whether relationship satisfaction (e.g. Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), gender 
(e.g. Klein & Hodges, 2001), or relationship length (e.g. Thomas & Fletcher, 2003) influenced 
participants’ judgments of their partners’ emotions, or moderated their accuracy. I also examined 
whether conversation length, and order of speaking (partner vs. self) affected accuracy. None of 
these variables consistently influenced perceptions, or consistently moderated the truth force.¹
Importantly, none of these variables moderated the avoidance by truth force interaction; thus, 
these variables were not included in the reported models. See Table 1 for a summary of results.

¹ Across the two studies, there were a small number of instances where one of these variables had an influence on perception, or moderated accuracy. Including the variable in the model did not change the overall pattern of results.
2.3.1 Positive Emotions

2.3.1.1 When rating the speaker

Overall, when rating their partners’ positive emotions when the partner was speaking about a love experience, there was a tendency to underestimate positive emotions, \( b = -.11, SE = .04, p = .017 \), to use the truth force (i.e., to be accurate), \( b = .12, SE = .04, p = .002 \), and to be biased by one’s own emotions, \( b = .86, SE = .04, p < .001 \). Attachment avoidance significantly interacted with the truth force to predict perceptions (see Figure 1), \( b = -.13, SE = .06, p = .022 \). Simple slopes analyses showed that at high levels of avoidance, the effect of the truth force on perceptions was not significant, \( b = .05, SE = .05, p = ns \), indicating that the participants were not accurate. At low levels of avoidance, the truth force was significant, \( b = .20, SE = .05, p < .001 \), indicating accuracy. No other effects were significant.

2.3.1.2 When rating the listener

When participants rated their partners’ positive emotions when their partner was in the role of the listener, there was a tendency to use the truth force, \( b = .08, SE = .03, p = .007 \), and be biased by one’s own positive emotions, \( b = .92, SE = .03, p < .001 \). Attachment avoidance interacted with the truth force (see Figure 2), \( b = -.14, SE = .05, p = .003 \). Simple slopes analyses revealed that, at high levels of avoidance, the effect of the truth force on judgment was not significant (i.e. participants were not being accurate), \( b = .007, SE = .04, p = ns \). However, at low levels of avoidance, the effect of the truth force on perception was significant, \( b = .16, SE = .04, p < .001 \), indicating accuracy. No other effects were significant.

2.3.1 Negative Emotions

2.3.2.1 When rating the speaker

When their partner was sharing a love experience, participants had a tendency to use the truth force in inferring their partners’ negative emotions, \( b = .18, SE = .07, p = .011 \), and to be biased by their own negative emotions, \( b = .59, SE = .07, p < .001 \). Attachment avoidance did not

2 Analyzes were repeated for each emotion separately. Across speaker and listener roles avoidance was related to less accuracy for Grateful/Appreciative/Thankful, Compassionate/Sympathetic, Cared about/Loved/Connected and Happy/Pleased/Joyful. No clear pattern of results emerged for negative emotions across speaker and listener roles.
significantly interact with the truth force (see Figure 3). However, there was a significant avoidance by bias interaction, $b = -0.17, SE = 0.07, p = 0.019$, such that individuals high in avoidance, $b = 0.49, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$, were slightly less biased by their own emotions than those with low avoidance, $b = 0.68, SE = 0.09, p < 0.001$. No other effects were significant.

### 2.3.2.1 When rating the Listener

When rating their partners’ negative emotions when their partner was in the role of the listener, there was an overall tendency to be biased by one’s own negative emotions, $b = 0.55, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$. There was a significant main effect for avoidance, $b = 0.17, SE = 0.07, p = 0.011$; suggesting that those higher in avoidance perceived their partners’ emotions as more negative compared to less avoidant individuals (see Figure 4). No other effects were significant.

### 2.4 Discussion

When listening to their partners share a time of love, and when sharing with their partner a time of love, individuals higher in attachment avoidance did not accurately perceive their partners’ positive feelings, whereas those lower in avoidance were accurate in their perceptions. However, attachment avoidance did not predict higher or lower accuracy for inferring negative emotions. The overall results of Study 1 are consistent with the notion that, during a conversation that should elicit intimacy, avoidant individuals minimize feelings of closeness by being imperceptive of their partners’ positive emotions. Hearing their partners express love would threaten avoidants’ desire to maintain a safe emotional distance from their partners, to avoid the vulnerability that is associated with emotional closeness. It may seem surprising that avoidant individuals, who have a tendency to block out negative emotions, were not less accurate for inferring negative emotions. If anything, as depicted in Figures 3 and 4, individuals higher in avoidance were trending towards greater accuracy than those lower in avoidance. This pattern fits with the overarching defensive strategy of avoidant individuals: to distance themselves from others. By attending to their partner’s negativity, but not attending to the signs that their partner is loving and accepting at a moment of great vulnerability, avoidant individuals maintain their negative model of others. This finding is consistent with the previously reviewed research regarding attachment avoidance and blunting of positive emotionality.
Importantly, the associations between avoidance and accuracy are not attributable to the participant’s own emotions. The negative association between attachment avoidance and accuracy in inferring a partner’s positive emotions was independent from the participant’s own positive emotions (i.e., the avoidance by bias force interaction was not significant). Similarly, avoidance was related to being less biased by one’s own negative emotions when making judgments of a partner’s negative emotions (when listening to partner). It is important to note that although avoidant individuals were less accurate in perceiving their partners’ positive emotions, they did not systematically underestimate them, a point to which I will return in the general discussion.

The overall negative directional bias observed when participants rated their partners’ positive emotions (when their partner was sharing a love experience) is consistent with the findings of Fletcher and Kerr (2010), whose meta-analysis results suggest a tendency for individuals to underestimate their partners’ positivity toward the self, as the costs of over-estimating a partner’s regard are detrimental (Haselton & Buss, 2000). Yet, Fletcher and Kerr also note that this underestimation is usually accompanied by accuracy in tracking a partner’s regard. Accurately inferring a partner’s feelings toward the self is important to know whether the partner is satisfied in the relationship or whether the partner may be looking to end the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 2009; Overall, Fletcher, Kenny, 2011). Thus, underestimating a partner’s negative emotions may not be problematic, but not being attuned to a partner’s positive regard (as is the case for avoidant individuals) can be.
Chapter 3
Study 2

3.1 Attachment Avoidance and Lower Accuracy: A motivated defence, or an inability?

Overall, the results of Study 1 provide preliminary evidence consistent with my hypothesis that the avoidant individuals use empathic accuracy as an emotional defence in an intimate situation. However, the lower accuracy of avoidant individuals observed in Study 1 could alternatively be interpreted as a deficit in ability; perhaps avoidants lack the skills needed to decode their partners’ positive feelings. When an infant is securely attached to their caregiver, the infant’s ability for perspective taking is improved, and the caregiver acknowledges the infant’s affective states (Arranz, Artamendi, Olbarrieta, & Martin, 2002; Bowlby, 1969). Thus, by being exposed to unresponsive attachment figures, avoidant individuals may not have developed the ability for perspective taking (necessary for empathic accuracy) and managing emotions (Cassidy 1994) to the same extent as secure individuals. Further, having fewer experiences with loving attachment figures than secure individuals may have led avoidant individuals to be less able to recognize positive emotions in caring contexts (through less exposure).

There is some research evidence consistent with the hypothesis that deficits in empathic accuracy on the part of those high in attachment avoidance is due to a lack of ability (Izhaki-Costi and Schul, 2011). In this research (Study 2), higher avoidance was related to lower accuracy in reading the feelings of two strangers in a recorded video. The participants did not expect to interact with the target they were inferring, and had no prior relationship to the target; hence, this experimental paradigm should not be perceived as threatening by avoidant individuals, because closeness to the target was not an option. Because this scenario should not particularly activate the attachment system, it is unclear why participants would have been motivated to defend themselves by being less accurate. Avoidants were less accurate in this study, in the absence of a clear motivation to do so, leaving open the possibility that they simply had insufficient skills to decode the target’s feelings.

The possibility that avoidant individuals’ inaccuracy is due to a deficit in decoding skills is consistent with some research conducted on attachment and emotion perception. For example, Niedenthal, Brauer, Robin, and Innes-Ker (2002) found that individuals higher in attachment
avoidance took longer to detect emotional change in facial expressions of happiness and anger, suggesting less sensitivity in decoding emotions (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006). On the other hand, another study found that attachment avoidance was not related to participants’ abilities to decode facial expressions (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006).

Thus, there is evidence that a deficit in motivation, ability, or both could account for lower accuracy in avoidant individuals. The purpose of Study 2 is to provide stronger support for my hypothesis that avoidant individuals are less accurate as a strategy to defend against intimacy, and not just because they may lack the skills needed to decode their partners.

Past empathic accuracy research, conducted in the context of gender differences, has illustrated the utility of distinguishing between differences in motivation and ability when explaining individual variability in empathic accuracy, as each cause suggests a different approach to improving accuracy (Klein & Hodges, 2001). If lower empathic accuracy is due to a deficit in motivation, the use of incentives (such as financial compensation for correct emotional inferences) can improve an individual’s accuracy (Klein & Hodges, 2001). Klein and Hodges illustrated that the tendency for males to perform worse than females in empathic accuracy tasks could be eliminated if participants were given financial compensation for correctly inferring a target’s thoughts. The authors note that this suggests that males do not have a lower ability to be empathically accurate than females, as the genders can be equally accurate if males are given sufficient motivation. Although this research was conducted in the context of gender differences, the same reasoning can be applied to avoidant individuals.

Employing similar logic to Klein and Hodges, if the inaccuracy of avoidant individuals is due to a lack of motivation, their accuracy should be responsive to different incentives. Thus, in Study 2 I manipulated incentives for accuracy using three different motivation conditions (competency, caring and control), which only differed in the manner in which the “thought decoding” task was presented. If presenting the task in different ways produced differing accuracy levels for avoidant individuals, this would weaken the possibility that the empathic inaccuracy of avoidant individuals is due to a lack of motivation.

3 If males are not sufficiently motivated to be accurate, females may exhibit greater accuracy in this study; however, I expect that the effect of avoidance may overpower any gender differences.
Avoidant individuals strive for self-reliance, and aim to avoid intimacy. Based on these characteristics, in the competency condition, participants were told that the decoding task (rating their partners’ emotions during a love conversation, as in Study 1) measured job performance ability, and that their performance would be an indication of future job competency. This presents the task as an exercise unrelated to relationships and intimacy, and hence avoidantly attached individuals should be motivated to perform well on the task, especially since these individuals value competency in nonsocial domains (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). In this condition, I did not expect to replicate the findings of Study 1 (where avoidance was related to lower accuracy for positive emotions) in the competency condition, as avoidant individuals should strive for accuracy. In the caring condition, participants were told the decoding task measured caring abilities, and that their performance would indicate their capacity for closeness and intimacy in romantic relationships. This explicitly links the task to intimacy—the fundamental fear of avoidant individuals—which should motivate them to defensively distance themselves from others by undermining their own performance on the task. In the control condition, participants were not given any information about what the task assessed.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

One hundred and three couples (9 same sex, 94 other sex) from the Toronto area participated in the study. Two couples were excluded from analyses due to experimental error, leaving 101 couples. I recruited both community and student couples, using online advertisements and flyers around the University of Toronto. In exchange for participation, couples were given 20$ (per couple), and eligible students were additionally given a course credit.

Participants ranged in age from 16 to 47 ($M = 22.0, SD = 4.96$). On average couples had been in their relationship for 18.37 months ($SD = 17.14$), and the majority of the couples (77.5%) indicated they were exclusively dating (4.4% casually dating, 6.4% open relationship, 2.9% engaged, 6.9% common law, 2% married).
3.2.2 Procedure

Couples visited the lab to complete a study on ‘interpersonal interactions’. They first individually completed a series of pre-discussion questionnaires as outlined in Study 1 (a measure of their attachment, and baseline level of emotions). Couples were randomly assigned to one of the three task instruction conditions. Only one member of the couple received the instructions; the other member of the couple always received no instructions. In the competency condition, participants were told that they were going to complete a task in which they must decode their partners’ feelings, and their ability to do so would indicate their job competency. To bolster the credibility of this claim, participants who received the job instructions also completed a bogus questionnaire asking about their job experience and workplace behaviours (e.g., how would your boss rate your performance relative to your colleagues?). In the caring condition, participants were told that the decoding task indicated their ability to be an effective romantic partner. In the control condition, both members received no instructions. Participants read the task instructions (embedded at the end of the questionnaires), and the experimenter also re-iterated them verbally to ensure understanding. Participants who received task instructions were asked not to disclose them to their romantic partners.

Couples proceeded to have a videotaped discussion about a time that “they experienced a lot of love in their relationship and how they expressed it.” Members of the couples were randomly assigned to the role of either the speaker or the listener. After the discussion, participants separately filled out the emotion rating scale (detailed in Study 1) with respect to their emotions during the conversation, and their perception of their partners’ emotions. Prior to starting the second conversation, the experimenter asked participants assigned to the competency or caring condition to recall what the task was important for, in order to remind participants of the experimental manipulation. Following this, the couple had a second discussion on the same topic (with the role of speaker and listener reversed) and once again completed the emotion rating scale. Participants in all conditions completed the manipulation check, prior to being debriefed.
3.2.3 Materials

3.2.3.1 Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

Attachment was assessed using the ECR-R (an updated version of the ECR completed in Study 1). Participants endorsed 18 items for both the anxiety (e.g., “I’m afraid that I will lose my partner’s love”, \( M = 2.73, SD = .92, \alpha = .89 \)) and avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners”, \( M = 2.28, SD = .84, \alpha = .91 \)) dimensions.

3.2.3.2 Emotion Rating Scale

As in Study 1, both when they were in the role of the speaker and the listener, participants rated their own positive (speaker \( \alpha = .85 \); listener \( \alpha = .84 \)) and negative emotions (speaker \( \alpha = .88 \); listener \( \alpha = .75 \)), as well as their perception of their partners’ positive (speaker \( \alpha = .92 \); listener \( \alpha = .87 \)) and negative (speaker \( \alpha = .88 \); listener \( \alpha = .87 \)) emotions.

3.2.3.3 Manipulation Check

Participants responded to two questions regarding the emotion-rating task they just completed. Participants rated how important they thought the task was for their job performance ability, and their ability to be close to their romantic partner, on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important).

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Conversation Length

The length of the conversation (\( M = 2 \text{ minutes, 12 seconds}^4, SD = 1 \text{ minute, 57 seconds} \)) did not significantly differ between the couples’ conditions. Attachment avoidance and anxiety did not affect conversation length, and these variables did not interact with condition to predict conversation length.

\[ \text{\footnotesize Footnote: } \text{For these analyses, conversation length was measured as the amount of time between when the experimenter left the videotaping room to when the couple exited the room to indicate they were finished the conversation. Thus this is an approximate measure (e.g. the couple may have waited before getting the experimenter) and should be interpreted with caution. (Videotapes of the interaction are currently being coded to gain a more precise measure of conversation length).} \]
3.3.2 Manipulation Check

The extent to which participants thought the task reflected job success significantly correlated with the extent to which they thought the task reflected romantic relationship success, \( r = .42, p < .001 \). To assess whether participants in the competency condition perceived the task as more important for job success than the other two conditions, I performed a One-Way ANOVA. Unexpectedly, the results indicated that ratings of the task’s importance for job success did not differ significantly between conditions; \( F(2, 195) = .82, ns \). Similarly, ratings of the task’s importance for romantic relationships did not differ significantly between conditions; \( F(2, 195) = 1.8, ns \). Because these findings were surprising, even though the omnibus tests were not significant, I performed Fisher LSD follow-up tests to see if any conditions differed in respect to ratings of job importance or romantic relationship importance. The only differences that emerged were that those in the competency condition (\( M = 5.26, SD = 1.62 \)) rated the task as marginally more important for romantic relationships compared to those in the caring condition (\( M = 4.56, SD = 1.74 \)) \( p = .09 \) and those in the control condition (\( M = 4.71, SD = 1.67 \)) \( p = .088 \). Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety did not significantly interact with condition to influence either importance rating.

3.3.3 Attachment and Empathic Accuracy

To assess empathic accuracy, I used the same statistical approach detailed in Study 1 (and examined the same covariates as in Study 1). However, in addition, I examined how the attachment avoidance by truth interaction was qualified by experimental condition. Because condition had three levels, it was included in the model as two effect-coded terms. I tested the significance of the three-way interaction between avoidance, accuracy, and condition (represented by two interaction terms because of effects coding), by performing a likelihood ratio test between the model including the two interaction terms, and the model without the interaction terms.

All analyses were conducted separately for positive and negative emotions, and repeated for the role of speaker and listener. All models controlled for the three-way avoidance by bias by condition interaction. Condition was coded at the level of the couple, so for example, if member A of the couple received competency instructions, member B would be coded as also being in the competency condition. This is to take into account that receiving the instructions may have
altered the person’s behaviour in the conversation (for example, believing the task was important for romantic relationships might have made some participants act awkwardly during the love conversation, making it harder for their partner to infer their feelings).

The results of the condition by avoidance by truth force interaction, representing the moderation of condition on empathic accuracy, were most central to my hypotheses, and thus will be discussed. For additional model estimates please refer to Tables 2-4.

3.3.3.1 Rating Speaker’s Positive Emotions

The three-way avoidance by truth by condition interaction was not significant. However, I nevertheless conducted follow-up tests examining the avoidance by truth force interaction in each condition, to see if my a priori hypotheses were partially confirmed, and to see if the results of the control condition replicated Study 1. In both the competency and caring conditions the avoidance by truth force interaction was marginally negative (competency; $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.07$; caring; $b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.05$), and in the control condition the interaction was significantly negative, $b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.05$. In all conditions simple slopes indicated that, at low levels of avoidance, perceptions were (marginally) influenced by the truth force (competency; $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$; caring; $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = 0.072$; control; $b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = 0.067$). On the other hand, in all conditions, at high avoidance, perceptions did not use the truth force (competency; $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = ns$; caring; $b = -0.09^{5}$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = ns$; control; $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = ns$); replicating the findings of Study 1.

3.3.3.2 Rating Listener’s Positive Emotions

The three-way avoidance by truth force by condition interaction was not significant. As above, I still conducted follow-up tests to see if my hypotheses were partially confirmed. In both the competency and control condition, the avoidance by truth force interaction was not significant (competency; $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = ns$; control; $b = 0.002$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = ns$). However, in the

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5 West & Kenny (2011) believe that when a negative coefficient is observed for the truth force, it suggests that a hidden bias exists that has not been accounted for in the model (similar to a suppression effect). That is, some unmeasured variable may be negatively moderating the truth force, but has a positive effect on perception, making it appear that the overall effect of the truth force is negative.
caring condition there was a significant negative avoidance by truth force interaction; $b = -.30$, $SE = .14$, $p = .031$; whereby at high levels of avoidance perceptions were not influenced by the truth force; $b = -.10$, $SE = .16$, $p = ns$, whereas at low levels of avoidance perceptions were influenced by the truth force $b = .35$, $SE = .15$, $p = .022$.

### 3.3.3.3 Rating Speaker’s Negative Emotions

The three-way avoidance by truth force by condition interaction was not significant. Follow-up tests (see Figure 5) indicated that, in the competency condition, there was a marginally significant positive avoidance by truth force interaction, $b = .12$, $SE = .06$, $p = .054$. At high avoidance, perceptions of partner’s feelings were influenced by the truth force, $b = .40$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, compared to low levels of avoidance, $b = .21$, $SE = .09$, $p = .026$. Conversely, in the caring condition, there was a negative avoidance by truth force interaction, $b = -.34$, $SE = .11$, $p = .003$. At high levels of avoidance, perceptions were not influenced by the truth force, $b = .09$, $SE = .19$, $p = ns$, whereas perceptions were marginally influenced by the truth force at low avoidance, $b = .23$, $SE = .13$, $p = .072$. In the control condition, the avoidance by truth force interaction was not significant, $b = .02$, $SE = .06$, $p = ns$.

### 3.3.3.4 Rating Listener’s Negative Emotions

The model including the avoidance by truth force by condition interaction fit the data significantly better than when the interaction was removed, $\chi^2(2) = 7.54$, $p = .023$. Follow-up tests (see Figure 6) indicated that, in the competency condition, there was a significant negative avoidance by truth force interaction, $b = -.30$, $SE = .12$, $p = .011$. At high levels of avoidance, perceptions were not influenced by the truth force, $b = .16$, $SE = .10$, $p = .12$, whereas perceptions were influenced by the truth force at low levels of avoidance $b = .70$, $SE = .21$, $p = .001$. Similarly, in the caring condition, there was also a significant negative avoidance by truth force interaction; $b = -.56$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$. At high levels of avoidance perceptions were not influenced by the truth force, $b = -.38$, $SE = .22$, $p = ns$, whereas at low levels of avoidance, perceptions were influenced by the truth force, $b = .76$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$. The avoidance by truth force interaction was not significant in the control condition.
3.3.3.5 Addressing Alternative Explanations

I performed a One-way ANOVA for each of the four contexts (speaker positive, listener positive, speaker negative, listener negative) to examine whether the truth force, i.e. the partner’s actual emotions, differed between conditions. This was to ensure that highly avoidant individuals’ different accuracy across conditions could not be attributed to differences in the intensity of emotions experienced (i.e. if participants in one condition experienced significantly lower negative emotions, their emotions may be harder to detect). Participants did not differ in their reported emotions across the three conditions, \( ps > .45 \). As well, paired samples t tests indicated that participants’ positive emotions did not differ between when they were the speaker and the listener, nor did their negative emotions differ, \( ps > .65 \). Participants’ attachment avoidance (controlling for their attachment anxiety) did not affect the positivity/negativity their partner reported feeling during the conversations, \( ps > .30 \). This reduces the possibility that avoidant individuals’ lower accuracy is a function of their partners’ emotions (i.e. avoidant individuals were not less accurate because they had partners who felt less intense positive emotions during the conversation).

3.4 Discussion

Individuals high in avoidance did not accurately perceive their partners’ positive emotions (when their partners shared a time of love), regardless of whether the task was framed as important for intimacy or not. This is the same pattern of results observed in Study 1. The association between empathic accuracy and attachment avoidance did not significantly vary by motivation condition for positive emotions, but motivation condition did have some influence on accuracy for negative emotions.

However, the results pertaining to the effect of the experimental condition should be interpreted with caution, due to the results of the manipulation check, which suggest that the manipulation may not have had the intended effect. It is possible that the manipulation did not make individuals believe the task was important for job success in the competency condition, or important for romantic relationships in the caring condition. However, it is also possible that the manipulation check may not have adequately captured any effectiveness of the manipulation. For example, because the manipulation check was administered after the empathic accuracy task, participants may have devalued the task’s importance if they believed they performed poorly.
The fact that those in the competency condition rated the task as more important for romantic relationships compared to participants in the caring condition may be a result of several factors. Firstly, participants came to the lab with their romantic partner, completed questionnaires about their relationship, and had a conversation about love; thus, participants in all conditions believed the task implicated romantic relationships (ratings of the task’s importance for romantic relationships were above the scale midpoint; suggesting importance). Ideally, in future studies, participants would complete questionnaires related to romantic relationships prior to entering the lab, to help reduce the salience of romantic relationship concepts (although, because participants enter the lab with their romantic partner, eliminating all cues related to romantic relationships is difficult). Further, participants may have inherently understood that interpersonal relationships are important for succeeding in the workplace, thus job and relationship success are not necessarily unrelated. Likewise, those in the relationships condition may have inferred that being able to decode another person’s feelings would be beneficial in the workplace as well. In fact, in all conditions, ratings of importance were highly correlated between both tasks, and participants in the control condition rated the task above the midpoint in importance for both job and relationship success (job; $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.58$; relationships $M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.67$). This suggests that, by default, participants thought the task was somewhat important for both abilities; so a stronger manipulation may have been needed to make participants believe the task was significantly more important for job success, or romantic relationships. Also, in the competency condition, participants could be explicitly told that the task is not important for romantic relationships, and vice versa in the caring condition.

Additionally, part of my hypothesis involved the assumption that avoidant individuals would feel motivated to be accurate on the empathic accuracy task in the competency condition, as they particularly value personal success (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In the future, having individuals respond to a pre-measure of how important job success (or being a good romantic partner) is to them would be valuable, as this would enable me to assess whether the manipulation was especially effective for individuals who value performance in those domains. As well, asking participants how motivated they were to perform well on the emotion reading task would provide a valuable check of the manipulation’s effectiveness.

Despite these problems with the manipulation, I nevertheless observed some potentially meaningful differences between conditions that were consistent with my hypotheses. My
hypothesis about the effect of incentive condition received consistent support when participants rated their partners’ negative emotions (when the partner was sharing a time of love), as avoidance was related to greater accuracy in the competency condition, lower accuracy in the caring condition, and was unrelated in the control (which replicated Study 1). Further, my hypothesis that avoidant individuals would feel especially threatened by the caring condition was supported. Across both speaker/listener and positive and negative emotions, higher avoidance was related to lower accuracy; suggesting that this condition may have successfully heightened avoidants’ need to deactivate the attachment system by ignoring their partners’ emotions.

The results for the competency condition are inconclusive. On the one hand, my hypothesis that this condition would encourage accuracy in high avoidant individuals was partially supported (high avoidance was related to greater accuracy in rating speaker’s negative emotions). However, lower accuracy was still observed when rating listener’s negative emotions, and speaker’s positive emotions. One reason why the competency condition did not eliminate avoidants’ lower accuracy in all contexts could be that the manipulation may not have been a strong enough incentive. The need to deactivate the attachment system through lower empathic accuracy in the conversation may have outweighed the desire to try to make accurate inferences because it reflected job success. Additionally, I could have increased the pressure to perform well on the task, by leading participants to believe that they would receive a report of their accuracy and a percentile rank of their employment desirability, instead of simply telling them that accuracy would reflect job success.

The findings from the control condition, which had an identical procedure to the love conversation in Study 1, partially replicated Study 1’s findings. Avoidance was related to less accuracy for inferring a partner’s positive emotions when rating their partner speaking (and this was true for all conditions), replicating Study 1. However, the relationship between avoidance and accuracy when inferring their partner listening did not reach significance, failing to replicate Study 1. There are many differences between the samples used in Study 1 and Study 2 that may contribute to this failure to replicate. For example, couples in Study 1 had been in a relationship on average for a year longer than participants in Study 2, thus the types of love experiences discussed may differ in important ways (supported by the fact that in Study 1 the conversations lasted on average 1.5 minutes longer than in Study 2). Because participants in Study 2 had been together for a shorter period of time, it is conceivable that the conversations in Study 2 may have
been less intimate than those in Study 1, reducing highly avoidant individuals’ need for motivated inaccuracy. Also, a portion of Study 2 couples completed the study for course credit, thus they may be different from the couples in Study 1, who were recruited from the community, to participate in a more involved study (e.g. the couples in Study 1 may represent couples who enjoy learning about their relationship, whereas some couples in Study 2 may have participated merely out of convenience).

Overall, despite the fact that the manipulation may not have had the intended effect, the results do provide support that highly avoidant individual’s accuracy may be manipulated experimentally. If avoidants’ lower accuracy was strictly due to an inability, this inability should affect them equally, no matter how the task was framed. Thus, there is some evidence that the lower accuracy of avoidant individuals is due to differences in motivation. Yet, because of the broad nonsignificant effects of the experimental condition on avoidants’ accuracy, it is possible that differences between conditions are spurious. Across all conditions, and in Study 1, highly avoidant individuals were less accurate at inferring the speaker’s positive emotions. This could suggest that this context is so threatening to avoidant individuals, the need to deactivate the attachment system overwhelmed the strength of the manipulation. Or, this could suggest that participants have a deficit in empathic accuracy ability when a romantic partner shows feelings of deep affection. More work is needed to more conclusively decipher whether avoidants are inaccurate due to ability, motivation, or both.
Chapter 4
General Discussion

Taken together, the results from these studies provide some support for my hypothesis that lower empathic accuracy is a motivated defence individuals high in attachment avoidance rely upon in order to maintain distance in relationships. In Study 1, higher avoidance predicted lower accuracy for inferring a partner’s positive emotions during a conversation about love in the relationship, but not lower accuracy for negative emotions. This is consistent with the notion that avoidant individuals may use lower empathic accuracy as a way to keep emotional distance from their partner, which is why their partners’ positive emotions were disregarded. In Study 2, I tested whether increasing motivation for accuracy could increase avoidant individuals’ accuracy. An unclear outcome of the manipulation check, and the broad failure of motivation condition to moderate avoidants’ accuracy, limits the ability to make strong claims about the results of Study 2. However, Study 2 replicated the tendency for highly avoidant individuals to be less accurate in inferring their partners’ positive emotions. Further, when the empathic accuracy task was stressed as important for intimacy, highly avoidant individuals performed particularly poorly, failing to accurately infer both positive and negative emotions. This supports the argument that avoidants are less accurate particularly when accuracy could lead to closeness.

This research addresses a significant limitation in past empathic accuracy and attachment research by extending the analysis to rewarding contexts, which should especially prompt avoidant individuals to try to distance themselves from others. Further, the results of the two studies suggest an important distinction overlooked in past empathic accuracy and attachment research: distinguishing between positive and negative emotions. Had accuracy been collapsed across negative and positive emotions, the divergent positive and negative effects for avoidance might have nullified the overall result for avoidance. Thus, perhaps one reason some research has observed an inconsistent relationship between avoidance and empathic accuracy is due to a failure to make this distinction. Relatedly, this research illustrates the utility of employing the Truth and Bias model over traditional approaches to analysing empathic accuracy. Instead of measuring accuracy as the number of correctly inferred thoughts as is typically done, applying the Truth and Bias model allowed for a more nuanced examination of accuracy, providing the
ability to simultaneously examine biases in over- and underestimating emotions, and biases in projecting one’s own emotions.

Surprisingly, overall, individuals high in avoidance did not underestimate their partners’ positive emotions to a greater extent than individuals lower in avoidance. However, as depicted in the graphs (Figure 1 & 2) when their partners’ exhibited high levels of positivity, highly avoidant individuals rated their partners’ as less positive than individuals lower in avoidance. This suggests that when avoidant individuals would be most likely to need to enact their defences, they do so by downplaying their partners’ positive emotions.

4.1 Limitations

These studies only examined empathic accuracy in a conversation about love, and did not test whether lower accuracy extended to other positive relationship contexts (e.g. conversations about shared positive experiences, conversations about a time of excitement). A stringent test of my hypothesis that lower accuracy is a motivated defence would be to examine the empathic accuracy of avoidant individuals in a positive conversation that was not relationship relevant. For example, if members of the couples described their favourite comedic movie (instead of a love experience), avoidant individuals should not need to defend themselves and show lower accuracy, as this conversation is not particularly intimate.

Another limitation is that my studies did not look at the consequences of lower accuracy. Conducting follow-up sessions with the couples would be valuable to see if the lower empathic accuracy of avoidant individuals contributes to subsequent relational difficulties (such as greater chance of break-up, increased conflicts, lower commitment, etc.)

One strength of the current studies is that the participant sample was varied (community sample, student sample, different geographic locations and ethnicities, etc.). However, the average relationship length across studies was fairly short (less than three years), and thus the observed results may not generalise to couples in longer-term relationships. Because past research suggests that empathic accuracy may decline over the course of a relationship (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002), I would anticipate that longer-term couples would be less accurate than the current participants overall; however, the moderating effect of attachment avoidance should still occur in long-term couples.
4.2 Future Directions

Examining the content of couples’ love conversations may allow me to further test my hypothesis that a difference in motivation drives avoidants’ lower accuracy, as conversations that are rated as more intimate should theoretically produce lower accuracy in highly avoidant individuals. Future research could also examine the non-verbal behaviour of individuals high in avoidance during an emotion-rating task, to provide valuable insight into the process of lower empathic accuracy. It could be that avoidant individuals are less accurate because they look less at their partners’ facial expressions, and make less eye contact—rendering it harder to infer the partner’s emotions.

Future research could also examine whether avoidant individuals manage their accuracy in perceiving their partners in other relationship domains, besides emotions. For instance, avoidant individuals may defensively ignore positive cues from their partners during sexual encounters, in order to minimize closeness. They may equally be less accurate in detecting romantic interest from potential partners, as this would also be a context in which avoidants should want to deactivate the attachment system.

4.3 Conclusion

By disregarding their partners’ positive emotions, avoidant individuals perpetuate their negative conceptualization of others, and ultimately create the distance they claim to desire. Past research has demonstrated that when these individuals do feel liked and validated, their defensive tendencies are reduced (Carvallo, & Gabriel, 2006; MacDonald & Borsook, 2010). But, recognizing the validating aspects of an interaction requires being attuned to a partner’s feelings. Thus, being able to accurately perceive cues that their partners are loving and accepting would help avoidant individuals lower their defences and achieve the healing connection they need. It appears that these individuals are caught in a self-defeating cycle where they are motivated to ignore the positive cues from their partner that would ultimately benefit them, and make their relationships more satisfying.
References


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*Note.***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.**
Table 2: Study 2: Model estimates for competency condition.

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</table>

*Note.* ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .10$. \[35\]
Table 3: Study 2: Model estimates for caring condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inferring Positive Emotions</th>
<th>Inferring Negative Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rating speaker</td>
<td>Rating listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directional bias</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth force</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bias force</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance x truth interaction</td>
<td>-.22†</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ***p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, † p < .10.
Table 4: Study 2: Model estimates for control condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inferring Positive Emotions</th>
<th>Inferring Negative Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rating speaker</td>
<td>Rating listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directional bias</td>
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<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth force</td>
<td>.13†</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bias force</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance x truth interaction</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .10$. 
Figure 1. Study 1. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s positive emotions (when the partner was the speaker in the conversation).

Note. The y axis is centered around the average of all partners’ self-reported positive emotions, so 0 represents rating one’s partner as average positivity, positive numbers indicate rating the partner as more positive than the true average, and negative numbers indicate rating the partner as less positive than the true average. A larger gap between the lines on the graph indicates greater accuracy (as the gap between the two lines indicates a greater differentiation in emotion ratings between high and low levels of positive emotions).
Figure 2. Study 1. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s positive emotions (when the partner was the listener in the conversation).
Figure 3. Study 1. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s negative emotions (when the partner was the speaker in the conversation).
Figure 4. Study 1. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s negative emotions (when the partner was the listener in the conversation).
Figure 5. Study 2. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s negative emotions (when the partner was the speaker in the conversation) as a function of condition.
Figure 6. Study 2. The influence of attachment avoidance on empathic accuracy for inferring a partner’s negative emotions (when the partner was the listener in the conversation) as a function of condition.

**Competency**

- Low negativity
- High negativity

**Caring**

- Low negativity
- High negativity

**Control**

- Low negativity
- High negativity