Attachment Styles in Older European American and African American Adults

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Objectives. Differential attachment styles have been linked to differential emotion regulation and ability to cope with stress in samples of young adults. There are few data on attachment styles in older adults despite the fact that attachment relationships are said to play a significant role in psychological well-being throughout the life span. The goal of the study was to examine attachment patterns in older adults.

Methods. Participants were 800 community-dwelling older European Americans and African Americans (M = 74 years) living in a large urban community. Attachment measures included the family and friend intimacy subscales from the Network Analysis Profile and the Relationship Scales Questionnaire.

Results. In contrast to findings with younger individuals, where the majority of respondents have been found to be secure (i.e., comfortable with closeness and dependency), the majority of the present sample were found to be dismissing/avoidant (i.e., uncomfortable with closeness, compulsively self-reliant). European Americans scored higher than African Americans on attachment security, whereas African Americans scored higher than European Americans on dismissing attachment. However, the assessment of relatedness based on the Network Analysis Profile, where respondents named their closest kin, indicated that African Americans had higher scores than European Americans, though their networks were smaller.

Discussion. Age and ethnicity differences appear to reflect cohort effects related to the impact of economic hardship on families earlier this century and racial prejudice. The high rates of dismissing attachment and low rates of secure attachment in this large urban population suggest that these individuals may be at risk for social isolation and poor health as they become older and more frail.

A TTACHMENT theory, as formulated by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), represents a body of work that attempts to explain the pervasiveness of human social bonds and reactions to their disruptions. Early attachment research focused on the bond between children and their caregivers and documented qualitative differences in attachment patterns; three patterns were discriminated: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent. Following Bowlby's (1979) formulation that attachment relationships are important throughout the life span, researchers soon turned their attention to adult attachment (Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Adult analogues of children’s attachment styles have since been identified.

The literature on adult attachment, which has grown to more than 800 articles and chapters since 1987 (Crowell, Fraley & Shaver, 1999), has shown that differential attachment styles are linked to different emotion traits and dispositions, emotion regulation patterns, and coping patterns and with a variety of interpersonal processes (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). There are two gaps in the literature, however, that are somewhat surprising and that are the focus of the present study: namely, attachments in old age and attachments in different ethnic groups. We hypothesized differential distributions of the various attachment styles as a function of age and ethnicity, on the basis of extrapolation from attachment theory’s formulations concerning (a) the functions of attachment, (b) stages of human development, and (c) the effect of environmental perturbations on family structures and attachment bonds.

Attachment Over the First Part of the Adult Life Span

Despite the large and growing literature on adult attachment relationships, the vast majority of studies are based on a restricted age range. Although Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) original study of adult romantic attachment was based on a community sample with participants ranging in age from 14 to 82 (M = 36 years), most of the work on adult attachment since that time has been limited to samples of young adults, primarily of college age; few studies involve adults in the later years and there are no studies expressly devoted to attachment patterns, as framed by Bowlby, in later life, although there is a substantial literature on family relationships in the later years (Antonucci, 1994; Carstensen, 1992; Cicirelli, 1991). The focus of the present investigation on later life naturally provokes consideration of cohort membership in the context of a generation exposed to greater adverse socioeconomic circumstances and raises the issue of the role played by adverse life circumstances in shaping attachment patterns.
Attachment styles and adverse life events.— Although attachment styles are thought to be relatively stable in infancy and childhood, considerable change also occurs. For example, a review of the child development literature by Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith, and Stenberg (1983) indicated that, on average, 30% of samples showed a change in classification over time. Similar rates have been reported in adult samples (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). In both child and adult studies, attachment style instability is linked to contextual factors such as family instability and other forms of adversity (Campos et al., 1983; Grossmann, Grossmann, & Zimmermann, 1999; Shaw & Vondra, 1993). Given that older cohorts, and especially specific subsamples of the older population, may have experienced greater adversity, we might anticipate attachment style distributions that differ from those obtained in younger cohorts.

Attachment style distributions.— Preliminary evidence indicates that attachment patterns of older adults may not conform to those found in younger samples. In the majority of studies involving predominantly young adults, the distribution of attachment styles resembles that found in the infant studies. That is, in samples using self-report measures about 55–65% of respondents have been found to be secure, 22–30% avoidant, and 15–20% ambivalent (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In three studies using an interview-based assessment, 52–62% have been found to be secure, 22–28% avoidant, and 16–20% ambivalent (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

In contrast, in the four studies identified in the literature that included a significant number of older adults, each indicated that avoidant attachment is more prominent at this age than it is with younger adults. For example, in a sample of 63 predominantly European American adults ranging in age from young adulthood to old age, Magai, Hunziker, Mesias, and Culver (2000) found that security of attachment, as assessed in an adult attachment interview, was negatively correlated with age and that dismissing attachment (a form of avoidant attachment that devalues relatedness and attachment) was positively correlated with age. Three other studies also suggested that there may be a higher proportion of avoidant individuals at the upper end of the life span. Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeasu, and Labovitch-Vief (1998), using a self-report measure of attachment in a moderately affluent suburban sample, found that whereas 16% of the young adult sample were dismissing, the figure for the oldest sample was 37%. Similarly, Magai and Cohen (1998) found the same rate of avoidant attachment in a sample of African American and European American patients at a memory disorders clinic as rated by the patients’ caregivers before the onset of illness. Finally, in a study of older Caucasian and Asian adults (M = 68 years) by Webster (1997), 52% of adults were classified as dismissing and 33% were classified as secure. All of these studies reported low base rates for the other attachment classifications.

The previously mentioned findings of high rates of avoidance and low rates of security in older samples, if replicated in a larger, population-based study, warrant some concern, given the fact that avoidant attachment is associated with compulsive self-reliance under conditions where it is often not adaptive. Some degree of dependency is developmentally normative in older persons, given the physical decline that comes with age, thus those with avoidant attachment may become isolated when most in need, with consequent health risks. Attachment style mediates a number of factors related to health, including degree of social support, healthy lifestyles, and the ability to cope with stress. Indeed, a German study involving a small sample of grandparents found that individuals with an avoidant attachment had lower scores on both social integration and physical health than secure individuals (Wensauer & Grossmann, 1995).

Ethnic Considerations

Another limitation of the existing literature is the lack of attention to ethnic background as a factor in attachment style differences. This is surprising, because the population of the United States is so ethnically diverse and because meta-analyses of attachment style data collected cross-culturally indicate that the distribution of attachment styles can vary by culture. For example, Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988), working with data on infant attachment, aggregated the data from nearly 2,000 assessments spanning eight different countries. They found that avoidant classifications were relatively more prevalent in Western European countries and ambivalent classifications more frequent in Israel and Japan. Despite the likelihood that ethnicity or race may influence how attachment patterns are expressed, or the distribution of attachment types, in most of the studies on adult attachment information on ethnicity is either omitted or the samples are described as predominantly Caucasian.

There has been very little research on attachment patterns among African Americans, despite the facts that African Americans constitute the largest ethnic minority group in the United States and that the family structure of African Americans departs from the nuclear family that has been the focus of attachment research since Bowlby’s time. The African American family is typically characterized as extended, and children often have multiple caregivers (Coll, 1990; Howes, 1999; J. F. Jackson, 1986; Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985). Despite the emphasis on the extended family as an economic adaptation and a strength of African American communities, there has been almost no research on how the existence of nonparental figures and multiple caregivers affects attachment relationships among members in extended families, either by enhancing or diluting the intensity of relationships. Howes (1999) suggested that in assessing attachment figures in families outside the dominant culture, researchers consider criteria other than those that have been typically used in attachment studies. Specifically, she suggested that in evaluating attachments in children from nonnuclear families researchers follow the strategy Ainsworth (1967) employed in her original study in Uganda: that is, identify individual attachment figures for individual children who provide physical and emotional care, are consistently available, and are emotionally invested in the child. In the same way, it may be more appropriate to evaluate adult attachment in nonmajority cultures on a more individualistic basis. Thus, in the present study we explored the use of the Network Analysis Profile (NAP; Cohen & Sokolovsky, 1979), which asks respondents to name the
people in their family and friend social networks and indicate the strength of their interpersonal relationships.

The Present Study

We designed the current study to address the existing gaps in the literature on attachment patterns in older adults and in particular, African Americans. On the basis of the literature indicating that adverse family circumstances can affect the development of attachment bonds, and the limited existing literature on close relationships in older individuals, we expected that a cohort of individuals who came of age during the sociologically and economically turbulent second and third decades of the 20th century would show a different distribution of attachment styles than had been found in samples of young adults. During these decades, there were several large waves of immigration, families were faced with the devastations of the first world war, and Americans experienced the ravages of the Great Depression.

We also expected that the attachment patterns of African Americans born during the early decades might be even more adversely affected than those of European Americans, because in addition to the hardships on families imposed by the war and the Great Depression, African Americans had fewer economic resources and opportunities; moreover, prejudice and discrimination were pervasive experiences and Jim Crow laws were still in existence. On the other hand, marginalization by the dominant racial majority and limited resources may be partially responsible for the extended kinship network that is characteristic of African American families.

In summary, given the above literature and the rearing circumstances of persons born during the opening decades of this century, we predicted that older adults would evidence a greater degree of avoidant (dismissing) attachment style. We also predicted that older African Americans would score higher on avoidant attachment than European Americans because of generally harsher economic circumstances during their childhood years and greater cultural mistrust stemming from racism and discrimination (Biafora, Taylor, Warheit, & Zimmerman, 1993). Moreover, racism is still a dominant factor in the Black experience in America (Durant & Sparrow, 1997; Willie, 1989), and several writers have suggested that exposure to racism results in heightened suspiciousness, distrust, and avoidance symptoms (Bullock & Houston, 1987; Burke, 1984; Chavira & Phinney, 1991; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Thompson, 1996). At the same time, because of the existence of a strong racial identity and the existence of extended social networks (Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1985, 1986), we also expected that African Americans would score higher than European Americans on other measures of relatedness such as solidarity with kin and friends.

Attachment and relatedness measures of the study.—We measured relatedness in two ways—using an adult attachment scale and through an analysis of affiliative patterns in social networks. As our measure of adult attachment we selected the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a well validated and widely used self-report measure. Unlike most paper-and-pencil measures of attachment, which show little correspondence with ratings based on interviews, individual differences assessed by the RSQ correspond moderately well with patterns assessed by interview (Crowell et al., 1999). Given the striking differences in the rate of secure and avoidant/dismissing classifications in cross-age comparisons noted in the few studies mentioned earlier, and given the low base rates of preoccupation and fearful attachment in these samples (confirmed in the present study), in this article we focus on secure and dismissing attachment patterns only. Security of attachment is associated with self-confidence, trust in others, and a history of warm and responsive parental involvement. Dismissing attachment is associated with compulsive self-reliance, a tendency to route negative emotion from consciousness, a tendency to value achievement and devalue attachments, and a history of remote or nonemotional parents.

Social networks are also presumed to index attachment relationships. In the most relevant study, Wensauer and Grossmann (1995) found that grandparents with a secure attachment (in contrast to those with an avoidant attachment) had larger social networks, named more supportive family members, and received and gave more help; avoidant individuals were significantly more self-reliant. A second reason for using a social network analysis to index relatedness concerns the importance of extended social networks in African American communities. Previous research with inner city and minority older adults (e.g., Cohen & Sokolovsky, 1979; Johnson & Barer, 1990; Sokolovsky & Cohen, 1981) found that there was a wide range of social contacts and that the quality of interaction varied along a number of dimensions. The instrument used in two of these studies—NAP—was also employed in the present study.

Hypotheses of the study.—Based on the previous review of the literature, we made the following predictions:

H1: Our sample of older respondents would show a greater proportion of dismissing attachment and a reduced proportion of secure attachment than found in earlier studies with younger respondents.

H2: Older African Americans would show higher scores on dismissing attachment and lower scores on secure attachment than older European Americans; however, they would also show higher scores on affiliation with kin and friends.

H3: Dismissingness and security would be correlated with background variables indexing early adversity. Given that economic hardship affects how long children remain in school, the stability of family structure, and later earning power, we hypothesized that adult attachment style scores would be correlated with education, stability of the family of origin, and current income. Given the destabilizing effects that immigration has on family structure, we hypothesized that immigrant status would also influence attachment patterns.

METHODS

Participants

The participants of this study were 800 older European Americans and African Americans, ranging in age from 65 to
86, who were part of a larger community-based sample of older adults living in Brooklyn, NY. Respondents were recruited on the basis of a stratified cluster sampling plan. At the initial stage, data on census blocks were gathered from the Household Income and Race Summary Tape File 3A of the 1990 Census files. Blocks were then stratified by ethnic group and by income (high, medium, and low). We used random selection without replacement to choose samples of block groups from each stratum. Trained interviewers were sent to conduct interviews with respondents who lived within the selected blocks. Respondents were recruited for a “study of stress and coping in older Americans” and were paid $20 for their participation. The response rate was 39%; this rate is admittedly low, but it may be typical of studies involving the recruitment of older populations living in urban areas (McGraw, McKinlay, Crawford, Costa, & Cohen, 1992); the response rate did not differ between African Americans and European Americans. Recruitment problems were exacerbated by the fact that the study began shortly after the enactment of new restrictive welfare and immigration legislation. Seventy-one percent of the sample participants were African American, and 63% were female. The mean age was 74 years ($SD = 6.0$). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample broken down by ethnicity. As indicated, there were significant differences on age, household income and education.

### Procedures

Data were collected during face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately 1.5 h and were conducted in the respondents’ home or another location of their choice, such as a senior center or church. The measures were administered in a standard order for all respondents.

### Measures

**RSQ (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).—**This 30-item scale measures four styles of attachment (secure, fearful, avoidant, dismissing, and preoccupied), on the basis of phrases drawn from the paragraph descriptors in Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) attachment measure. Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) Relationship Questionnaire, and Collins and Read’s (1990) Adult Attachment Scale. Respondents rate how well each item describes their characteristic style in close relationships using 5-point scales. Because the internal consistency of the four subscales is often quite low, we conducted principal components analysis to verify the underlying structure in these data. This analysis revealed a three-factor solution that is more convergent with the three-factor model of Hazan and Shaver (1987), on which the Bartholomew and Horowitz measure was originally based, and that discriminates secure, avoidant (dismissing), and ambivalent attachment patterns. In the present data, the ambivalent subscale consisted of RSQ Items 3, 4, 14, 15, 27, and 30; the secure subscale consisted of RSQ Items 1, 2, 19, 22, and 26. The alpha coefficients for these three subscales were .83, .64, and .65. Subscale scores for secure and dismissing attachment based on the factor loadings of the principal components analysis were positively correlated with the factor loadings of the Bartholomew and Horowitz scales (.74 and .81, $p < .0001$, respectively). However, because the alphas for the attachment scales based on the present three-factor solution were higher than those based on Bartholomew and Horowitz’s loadings, we used the subscale scores from the present analysis.

**Social networks.—**The strength and quality of social networks were measured by the NAP (Cohen & Sokolovsky, 1979; Sokolovsky & Cohen, 1981). This is a semi-structured interview that assesses three domains of social relatedness, two of which were of interest in the present study: kin (including extended kinship network) and non-kin (e.g., friends and neighbors). Respondents indicate the total number of persons in each of these networks with whom they have had at least a 15-min conversation within the past 3 months and/or with whom they have engaged in other activities or material exchanges. Within each domain there is a set of affective/affiliative dimensions, which include ratings of the extent to which the respondent can share intimate thoughts with the identified kin (or non-kin), can count on them, and have them understand him- or herself. The items that make up the three affective dimensions in each network domain are highly correlated ($p < .0001$) and can be combined to generate a general affiliative rating for kin and a similar one for friends. These affiliation ratings are ratios of scores based on number of kin or friends named in the social network. The internal reliability alphas in both scales were .81 for the present sample.

**Perceived Prejudice.—**Prejudice was measured by the perceived prejudice subscale of the Ethnic Identity Scale (Birnbaum, 1991); it contains two items: “There is much prejudice against my ethnic group in this country” and “My ethnic group is discriminated against in this society.” Scores range from 1 to 5 (1 = “strongly disagree,” 5 = “strongly disagree”). The alpha for this two-item scale in the present study was .49. Because these items did not scale well in these data, they were treated as separate items in the analysis.

### RESULTS

#### Distribution of Attachment Styles in the Overall Sample

We calculated each respondent’s main classification based on his or her highest score on the three attachment di-

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**Table 1. Comparison of African Americans and European Americans on Demographic Variables and Results of ANOVA or Chi Square Tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>African Americans (n = 572)</th>
<th>European Americans (n = 228)</th>
<th>F or $\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age, years</td>
<td>73.42 ($5.77^a$)</td>
<td>75.68 (6.13$^a$)</td>
<td>24.10$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean household income ($)</td>
<td>15,192 (13,690$^a$)</td>
<td>21,695 (21,833$^a$)</td>
<td>25.57$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (%)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest degree (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;=High school</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;=High school</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67.8$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aSD in parentheses.*

*$^{***}p < .0001.$
mensions; no respondents were classified as fearful/ambivalent. The present distribution (22% secure, 78% dismissing) was compared to Scharfe and Bartholomew’s (1994) data from a younger, predominantly Caucasian, middle-class sample (55% secure, 13% dismissing). A chi square test indicated that the samples were significantly different, with the present sample having a higher proportion of respondents classified as dismissive and a lower proportion classified as secure than in the Scharfe and Bartholomew study, \( \chi^2(1, N = 928) = 57.81, p < .0001 \). We also compared the distribution of attachment styles of African Americans with that of European Americans; African Americans had a greater proportion of dismissing attachments (83%) than European Americans (65%). \( \chi^2(1, N = 784) = 21.93, p < .0001 \).

**Intercorrelation Among the Attachment Style Dimensions and Network Analysis Scales**

Security of attachment was negatively associated with dismissiveness, \( r = -.10, p < .004 \), and positively with family affiliation, \( r = .11, p < .003 \), and friend affiliation, \( r = .14, p < .0001 \); dismissiveness was negatively associated with family affiliation, \( r = -.10, p < .006 \), and with friend affiliation, \( r = -.13, p < .0001 \).

**Analysis of Ethnic Differences on Relationship Variables**

We first conducted two one-way multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) with ethnicity (African American, European American) as the independent variable and age, income, and education as covariates. In one MANCOVA, attachment style dimensions were the dependent variables; in the second, affiliation variables were the dependent measures.

For attachment style scores, the MANCOVA for ethnicity was significant, \( \Lambda = 20.24, p < .0001 \); follow-up univariate analyses indicated that the mean score for security was greater for European Americans than African Americans, \( F(1,795) = 37.95, p < .0001 \). The score on dismissing attachment was greater for African Americans, \( F(1,795) = 4.51, p < .05 \).

For affiliation scores, the MANCOVA for ethnicity was significant, \( \Lambda = 11.50, p < .000 \). Follow-up univariate analyses indicated that African Americans, compared with European Americans, had higher scores on affiliation with family, \( F(1,796) = 22.94, p < .0001 \), and affiliation with friends, \( F(1,796) = 19.36, p < .0001 \).

**Ethnic Differences in Network Size and Relation Between Network Size and Attachment Patterns**

We conducted a MANCOVA with ethnicity as the independent variable and age, income, and education as covariates to assess group differences in network size. Ethnicity was significant, \( \Lambda = 17.51, p < .0001 \). Follow-up univariate tests indicated that whereas there was no significant difference for non-kin network, there was a significant effect for number of kin, \( F(1,797) = 33.84, p < .0001 \), with European Americans having a larger kinship network than African Americans, \( M(\text{European Americans}) = 5.05, SD = 2.45, M(\text{African Americans}) = 3.98, SD = 1.82 \). The correlation between size of social networks and attachment was computed. The dismissiveness scale score was negatively correlated with size of kinship (family) network, \( r = -.08, p < .03 \), and security was positively associated, \( r = .24, p < .0001 \). Security of attachment was also positively associated with size of non-kin network, \( r = .25, p < .0001 \); dismissiveness and size of friendship network did not reach significance, \( r = -.05, p = .16 \).

In light of the finding that African Americans had smaller kinship networks than European Americans, which was unanticipated and in direct contradiction to the literature, we undertook further analyses. Because there was a large proportion of immigrants among the African American sample, and because immigration tends to fragment families, we examined network size among U.S.-born African Americans versus those born in the Caribbean. Those born in the Caribbean had significantly smaller kinship as well as non-kin networks, \( F(1,568) = 6.94, p < .009 \), and \( F(1,568) = 7.58, p < .009 \); moreover, size of the family and non-kin networks was negatively associated with dismissiveness, \( r = -.13, p = .01 \), in both cases and was positively associated with security, \( r = .26, p < .0001 \) and \( r = .20, p < .0001 \).

**Relation Between Background Variables Indexing Adverse Conditions and Attachment Dimensions**

Eight variables were examined for their contribution to attachment security and dismissiveness: immigration status (immigrant, nonimmigrant), primary caregiver (mother, other), family status during first 5 years (intact two-parent family, other configuration), education, income, perceived prejudice (two items), and gender. Two sets of multiple regressions were conducted, one with security and one with dismissiveness as the dependent variables. The multiple correlation for secure attachment was \( R = .13, F(8,790) = 1.77, p = .08 \). The multiple correlation for dismissing attachment was \( R = .24, F(8,790) = 6.07, p < .0001 \). Only immigration status \( (t = 3.60, p < .0001) \), income \( (t = -2.04, p < .04) \), and perceived prejudice Item 22 (“My ethnic group is discriminated against in this society”; \( t = 4.59, p < .0001 \)) contributed significant independent effects, with status as an immigrant, low income, and experiences with prejudice being associated with greater dismissiveness.

Because immigration status was the one factor most strongly associated with attachment dimensions, we examined this variable more closely. Among the 800 respondents, 26% were U.S.-born African Americans, 46% were immigrant African Americans from the Caribbean, 24% were U.S.-born European Americans, and 5% were immigrant European Americans. ANOVAs and chi squares were conducted to compare the four groups on age, gender, marital status, education, and income indicating that there were significant differences for age, marital status, education, and income. The variables were treated as covariates in a subsequent MANCOVA in which the four ethnic groups constituted the independent variable and security and dismissiveness the dependent variables. Because both ethnicity and marital status were significant, they were subsequently treated as independent variables in a MANOVA. The main effect for ethnicity was significant, \( \Lambda = 6.31, p < .0001 \), as was the main effect for marital status, \( \Lambda = 3.21, p < .05 \). Follow-up ANOVAs indicated a significant effect for marri-
tal status for dismissingness, \( F(1,792) = 5.01, p < .03 \), with single persons scoring higher on dismissingness than married persons. The ethnic effect for dismissingness was significant, \( F(7,792) = 3.42, p < .02 \), as it was for security, \( F(7,792) = 9.98, p < .0001 \). Games-Howell tests were used for post-hoc comparison of groups. U.S.-born and immigrant African Americans had lower scores on security than U.S.-born or immigrant European Americans, and immigrant African Americans had higher scores on dismissing attachment than did U.S.-born European Americans.

**Discussion**

We designed this study to address the lack of data on attachment patterns in older adults and in adults of two different ethnic backgrounds. We found that dismissingness—which is negatively correlated with security and affiliation with family and friends—appears to characterize the attachment profile of older adults, much in contrast to the profile for younger adults. This was as predicted and is in keeping with findings from a few other studies (Diehl et al., 1998; Magai & Cohen, 1998; Magai et al., in press; Webster, 1997). In the most comparable study, Diehl and colleagues, who used the same attachment measure as we did in the present study, found that whereas 16% of their younger participants were dismissing, 37% of their older participants were. Diehl’s sample was a suburban, moderately affluent one. We found a much higher rate of dismissing attachment, 78%, but this was in an urban sample of older adults of much more strained economic circumstances, with a mean household income of only $17,000.

However, none of the above studies, including the present study, can be characterized as representative. Though we used a stratified random cluster sampling plan in the current study, the response rate of 39% was quite low, which challenges the generalizability of its findings. Conceivably, the response rate was lower than most survey studies because the respondents were exclusively older adults—who may be more anxious about their safety and wary of interviewers. The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA; J. S. Jackson, 1991), the most well known study of African Americans, attained an overall response rate of 67%. However, the response rate for older African Americans was not reported, and conceivably it may also have been quite low. In the present study, we had no younger respondents with which to compare the response rates of our older adults. Another reason for the low response rate may be the fact that the participants all lived in what can be described as an inner city; in contrast, respondents in the NSBA were drawn from diverse neighborhoods across the United States. Thus, our sample differs from the NSBA in that it comprised an exclusively older population living in an inner city. Both factors conceivably were at the heart of low response rates. In fact, our response rate is consistent with the response rate of 40% reported by Cohen, Teresi, and Holmes (1985) in their sample of older adults also living in New York. The percentage of men and women within each race in the present study is not significantly different from the figures reported for this population in the 1990 Census, \( \chi^2(3) = 1.16, p = .77 \), which leads us to believe that our sample may be as representative as the census data for this city. Indeed, the latest figures on the 2000 Census returns indicate a response rate of 53% for New York City as a whole, including the affluent neighborhoods of midtown Manhattan, and less than 40% in predominantly Black neighborhoods; New York City has one of the lowest response rates nationally (Kershaw, 2000). These considerations notwithstanding, the low response rate must be acknowledged as a substantive limitation of the present study.

We tested the hypothesis that the elevated rate of dismissing attachment in older adults, now found in a number of studies, is related to adverse background circumstances during the years that they came to maturity. The regression model, which included family structure, caregiver status, education, income, gender, and immigration, was significant, with income, immigration, and prejudice contributing significant independent effects, although the effects were not large.

We also predicted that African American respondents would score higher on dismissingness than European Americans because of the likelihood of greater adversity in their families of origin owing to economic hardships and racial discrimination. We did find that there were differences in terms of main attachment classification, with the rate of dismissing attachment being 83% for African Americans and 65% for European Americans. The continuous scores for security and dismissingness reflected essentially the same pattern; in addition, dismissingness was higher among immigrant African Americans from the Caribbean. An explanation of the higher scores on dismissing attachment in the case of the latter group may lie in the cultural values placed on independence and achievement among immigrants from the English-speaking West Indies (Allen, 1988; Brice, 1982). In addition, the higher rate of avoidant attachment may reflect the impact of immigration, which tends to fragment families.

We also predicted that African Americans would score higher on affiliation with family and non-kin because of the existence of a strong racial identity and of extended social networks. Although we confirmed that African Americans scored higher on affiliation with family members and non-kin than did European Americans, we found that the size of social networks differed. Despite the many references in the literature regarding extended social networks among African Americans (e.g., Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1985, 1986; J. S. Jackson, 1991), in our sample of older individuals we found that African Americans had smaller kinship networks than European Americans. Further analysis of the data indicated that this was largely a function of smaller kin and non-kin networks among African Americans who had immigrated from the Caribbean. Whether this within-groups difference is due to immigration per se and associated family fragmentation or due to a self-selection effect in which more self-reliant and less attached individuals chose to immigrate is not known.

The fact that older African Americans, especially those from the Caribbean, appear to have smaller social networks than European Americans might help explain why their scores on affiliation with friends and family—measures of the emotional significance of those in the network—are higher than those of European Americans: Their emotional investments are more highly concentrated on fewer persons. These findings lead us to speculate that the weaker attachment security and greater dismissingness among African Americans, which in part is linked to experiences with economic adversity, immigration,
and prejudice, may produce attachment patterns in which there is greater mistrust of close relationships, with a consequent reduction in the number of close relationships. Nevertheless, because social attachments are historically linked with greater survival value (Grossmann, 1996), there is cause for concern, especially in older individuals. The strikingly high rates of dismissing attachment among urban elders may help account for ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in health status and mortality rates that cannot be explained by other sources of variance such as obesity, alcohol consumption, and smoking.

The low response rate obtained in the present study limits the confidence with which one can generalize the results, and there is a clear need for replication. However, the fact that several independent studies found higher rates of avoidant attachment in older adults increases our confidence that these results are not just due to sampling artifact. In fact, it could be argued that because those who declined to participate in the study may have been even more distrustful and dismissing than those who participated, these figures may represent an underestimation of dismissing and overestimation of secure attachment in this population.

In summary, we confirmed what several other small-scale studies had noted about the attachment patterns of older adults: that attachments are less secure and more dismissing than has been found in samples of younger adults. Moreover, the percentage of dismissing and secure attachments we found among urban older adults was considerably higher than that found in samples from more affluent suburban settings (e.g., Dielh et al., 1998). Given the hypothesized importance of attachment relationships in the preservation of psychological and physical well-being across the life span (Grossmann, 1996), there may be considerable cause for concern as this cohort of older adults continues to age. With more advanced age, illness and infirmity are inevitable. How will those who devalue close relationships in favor of self-reliance come to terms with their increased dependency? How will those who care for them either in the community or in nursing home facilities contend with care recipients who may be less than receptive to their ministrations? Insecure attachment, including dismissing attachment—which is linked to hostility (Kobak & Scery, 1988; Magai & Passman, 1998)—is associated with greater caregiver burden (Magai & Cohen, 1998). Thus, advanced old age may be a particularly difficult phase of life for a large percentage of older adults and for those who would care for them. Future research will need to explore this issue and its implications more thoroughly.

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Editor Nominations

Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences

The Gerontological Society of America’s Publications Committee is seeking nominations for the position of Editor of the Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences.

The position will become effective January 1, 2002. The Editor makes appointments to the journal’s editorial board and develops policies in accord with the scope statement prepared by the Publications Committee and approved by Council (see the journal’s masthead page). The Editor works with reviewers and has the final responsibility for the acceptance of articles for his/her journal. The editorship is a voluntary position. Candidates must be members of The Gerontological Society of America and dedicated to developing a premier scientific journal.

Nominations and applications may be made by self or others, but must be accompanied by the candidate’s curriculum vitae and a statement of willingness to accept the position. The deadline for all nominations and applications is March 1, 2001. Nominations and applications should be sent to the GSA Publications Committee, Attn: Jennifer Campi, The Gerontological Society of America, 1030 15th Street, NW, Suite 250, Washington, DC 20005-1503.