Social, Political, & Psychodynamic Predictors
of COVID Distress and Gravity

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between attachment style and fear of contamination during the COVID-19 pandemic, hypothesizing that the anxiously attached would be more distressed when their safe space was threatened by someone leaving and returning, or by the arrival of a package. During May 2020, $n = 355$ participants provided data on their demographic variables, health anxiety, attachment styles, and attitudes towards the pandemic. While there was a small relationship between anxious attachment and COVID distress, the larger predictor - even holding healthy anxiety constant – turned out to be political ideology.

Harlow's seminal (1958) research

found that rhesus monkeys were less likely to leave their safe base to explore novel and frightening situations without the presence of a good attachment object. What if people saw their partners and homes during the pandemic the same way?

Anxiously attached adults

Worry if their partner will be responsive to their needs (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

Have an increased perception of stress (Ditzen, Schmidt, Strauss, Nater, Ehlert, Heinrichs, 2008)

Have an increased reactivity to stress (Powers, Pietromonarco, Gunlicks, Sayer, 2006; Quirin, Pruessner, Kuhl, 2008 ; Rifkin-Graboi, 2008)

But other factors may include:

Health anxiety, which can directly impact virus concern (Jungman & Witthöft, 2020)

Neuroticism, which causes worry even in 'normal' situations (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Wagerman, 2007)

Political Ideology, at least here in the United States (Beer, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Martina, Renshaw, & Reed, 2020)

METHOD
participants

N$_{tot}$ = 355

M_{age} = 38 years

(60% F / 39% M)

81% Caucasian
5% Asian/Pac Islander
5% Latinx
2% Black
7% Other

N$_{ListServ}$ = 72

M_{age} = 51 years

(82% F / 18% M)

90% Caucasian
3% Asian/Pac Islander
3% Latinx
1% Black
3% Other

N$_{SocMed}$ = 136

M_{age} = 38 years

(70% F / 30% M)

81% Caucasian
5% Asian/Pac Islander
5% Black
2% Latinx
7% Other

N$_{Mturk}$ = 147

M_{age} = 37 years

(40% F / 60% M)

54% Caucasian
33% Asian/Pac Islander
2% Latinx
5% Black
6% Other

Health Anxiety

Short Health Anxiety Survey (SHAI)
Salkovskis, Rimes, Warwick, & Clark (2002)

Personality

Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI)
Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann (2003)

Attachment Style

Adult Attachment Survey (AAS)
Collins & Read (1990)

Political Ideology
Single Item (scaled 1 [liberal] – 5 [conservative])

Composite: Safehaven Anxiety (2 items); r = 0.58
"When my partner leaves the home and returns, it makes me anxious"
"I sometimes argue with my partner over their leaving the home"

Composite: COVID Gravity (5 items); α = 0.82
"COVID is a serious threat"
"I see people outside as a threat"
"I'm likely to wear a mask outside"
"I'm anxious when I go outside"
"I disinfect packages I receive"

Composite: COVID Political Outlook (2 items); r = 0.47
"My government is doing a good job handling the pandemic"
"I'd be especially worried to receive a package from China right now"

Zero-Order Correlations: Safehaven Anxiety

Item	MTurk	Social Media	ListServ
SHAI Total Score	0.37**	0.37**	0.12
Anxious (AAS Subscale)	0.32**	0.21*	0.00
Neuroticism	0.22*	0.33**	0.10
Political Ideology	-0.22*	-0.20*	-0.06
Extraversion	0.09	-0.09	0.01
Agreeableness	-0.07	-0.04	-0.02
Openness to Experience	-0.12	0.05	0.00
Conscientiousness	-0.16	-0.10	-0.19
Close (AAS Subscale)	-0.29**	-0.01	-0.01
Depend (AAS Subscale)	-0.22*	-0.08	-0.17

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

N_{MTurk} = 112; $N_{SocMedia}$ = 110; $N_{ListServ}$ = 64

Those who scored higher on health anxiety, neuroticism, liberal political ideology, and anxious attachment were more likely to endorse concern about their partner/roommate/family member leaving the home and returning during the pandemic.

NOTE: MANOVA indicated significant differences between groups by subsample; all analyses completed individually.

Zero-Order Correlations: Political COVID Outlook

Item	MTurk	Social Media	ListServ
Political Ideology	0.30**	0.35**	0.54**
Extraversion	0.15	0.21*	0.16
Agreeableness	0.19*	0.19**	0.05
Conscientiousness	0.00	0.09	0.10
Neuroticism	-0.02	-0.04	-0.02
Openness to Experience	-0.00	-0.22**	-0.25**
SHAI Total Score	-0.01	0.08	0.27**
Close (AAS Subscale)	-0.08	-0.08	0.03
Depend (AAS Subscale)	-0.02	-0.20*	0.07
Anxious (AAS Subscale)	-0.31*	-0.08	0.03

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05 $N_{MTurk} = 136; N_{SocMedia} = 147; N_{ListServ} = 71$

Those who scored higher on conservative political ideology, agreeableness, and who were lower on openness to experience and (in one subsample) anxious attachment were more likely to endorse fear of packages from China and the belief that their government is handling the pandemic appropriately.

RESULTS
regression: predicting Safehaven Anxiety

Variable (by subsample)	R^2	$R^2\ \Delta$	b	SEb	β	F
MTurk						
(1) SHAI Total Score	0.16		0.06	0.02	0.32*	F(3,109) = 6.7*
Neuroticism			0.055	0.12	0.05	
Political Ideology			-0.14	0.09	-0.13	
(2) SHAI Total Score	0.20	4.6%	0.05	0.02	0.26*	F(4,108) = 6.9*
Neuroticism			-0.02	0.12	-0.12	
Political Ideology			-0.15	0.09	-0.15	
Anxious Attachment (AAS)			0.34	0.14	0.24*	
Social Media						
(1) SHAI Total Score	0.18		0.05	0.02	0.24*	F(3.104) = 7.8*
Neuroticism			0.20	0.12	0.18	
Political Ideology			-0.21	0.10	-0.18*	
(2) SHAI Total Score	0.21	3.1%	0.06	0.02	0.29*	F(4,103) = 7.0*
Neuroticism			0.29	0.12	0.26*	
Political Ideology			-0.19	0.10	-0.17	
Anxious Attachment (AAS)			-0.27	0.13	-0.21*	

*p < 0.05

model and variables nonsiginificant for ListServ subsample

For two of the three subsamples, anxious attachment was a significant predictor of Safehaven Anxiety (fear of a partner leaving the home and returning), contributing variance above and beyond even health anxiety, personality, and political ideology.

RESULTS
regression: predicting COVID Gravity

Variable (by subsample)	R^2	$R^2 \Delta$	b	SEb	β	F
MTurk						
(1) SHAI Total Score	0.11		0.03	0.01	0.23*	F(4,141) = 5.3*
Neuroticism			0.10	0.11	0.11	
Anxious Attachment (AAS)			0.18	0.10	0.15	
(2) ADD Political Ideology	0.20	10%	-0.26	0.06	-0.32*	F(5,140) = 6.6*
Social Media						
(1) SHAI Total Score	0.22		0.09	0.02	0.32*	F(4.128) = 10.4*
Neuroticism			0.05	0.09	0.05	
Anxious Attachment (AAS)			-0.31	0.10	-0.28*	
(2) ADD Political Ideology	0.31	9%	-0.28	0.07	-0.33*	F(5,127) = 12.7*
ListServ						
(1) SHAI Total Score	0.10		0.03	0.02	0.21	F(4,66) = 3.0*
Neuroticism			-0.09	0.12	-0.12	
Anxious Attachment (AAS)			-0.13	0.16	-0.13	
(2) ADD Political Ideology	0.21	11%	-0.24	0.07	-0.34*	F(5,65) = 4.8*

*p < 0.05   *model and variables nonsiginificant for ListServ subsample*

Across all subsamples, the strongest predictor of how seriously one takes the pandemic is political ideology.

Conservative ideology predicts lower scores on the COVID Gravity composite.

DISCUSSION
limitations

Only 2 of the 3 subsamples returned results in line with our hypotheses.
- The ListServ subsample differed significantly in age (*Mage* = 51 years), education level (42% holding doctorates), expression of attachment anxiety, and scores on the criterion variable (safehaven anxiety). *This subsample of professional psychologists may simply be exhibiting restricted range.*

Self-report data are often unreliable.
- Follow-up research using behavioral or informant-report data is advisable.

The AAS may not be optimal for recovering the classic attachment dimensions.
- A different scale such as Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1988) Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) might provide clearer results.

Results may have differed had we controlled for pre-existing conditions.
- Factors such as pre-existing mental or general health conditions, as well as the participant or their loved ones having a COVID diagnosis should be screened for in future studies.

How might anxious attachment be a risk factor for other stressful situations?
- Does an anxious attachment style affect symptomology/recovery from COVID itself?
- Are anxiously attached people at higher risk for mental health issues during other national/global events, and even personal ones?

These data lend themselves to time series.
- How has this trend changed as the pandemic has lengthened and evolved?

Implications for tribal psychology.
- Political ideology appears to supersede (or at least be as impactful as) personality, attachment, and health anxiety. Can this be levied in a positive way to affect other difficult-to-change behaviors?

Implications for clinical psychology.
- Past research has demonstrated the value of cognitive strategies to deal with anxiety and PTSD during and post-pandemic; this research suggests interventions aimed at assessing and building attachment bonds as well.

Questions?
Comments?
Like a copy of our slides?

Feel free to contact us:

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