



The role of attachment style and anthropomorphism in predicting hoarding behaviours in a non-clinical sample



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ABSTRACT

Hoarding behaviours are characterised by the acquisition of and failure to discard possessions, which leads to excessive and often dangerous clutter and significant psychological/emotional distress. The cognitive behavioural-model posits that a key aspect in the expression of hoarding tendencies is an excessive attachment to objects. Research indicates that attachment style and anthropomorphic tendencies are associated with excessive object attachment and subsequent hoarding. In this study, a non-clinical sample of 283 participants (210 female) completed questionnaires measuring adult attachment styles, attachment to objects, anthropomorphic tendencies, and hoarding severity and behaviours. Females displayed significantly higher scores on hoarding severity, anxious and avoidant attachments, and on anthropomorphism. Strong positive correlations were found between measures of inanimate object attachment, adult attachment style, and anthropomorphism, with hoarding behaviours and cognitions. Subsequent regression analyses revealed that one measure of adult attachment (degree of anxious attachment) and object attachment was significant predictors of hoarding behaviours and cognitions.

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1. Introduction

Hoarding behaviour is defined as the process of acquiring and failing to discard possessions of potentially limited value (Frost & Gross, 1993). In severe cases hoarding can lead to the significant cluttering of living spaces, which may pose serious health-risks and cause considerable distress and impairment of daily functioning for both hoarding individuals and their families (Samuels et al., 2008; Tolin, 2011). Though often expressed as a symptom-dimension of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), previous research has shown that up to 83% of patients exhibiting hoarding as a primary symptom do not meet the criteria for OCD (Tolin, Meunier, Frost, & Steketee, 2011). This is also reflected in interventions utilised in hoarding treatments, as the current, most efficacious interventions employed in OCD treatment, are largely ineffective when applied to hoarding (Rufer, Fricke, Moritz, Kloss, & Hand, 2006). It is therefore clear that there is an overwhelming need to identify other predictive factors of hoarding behaviours, most prominently, those which may be targeted to increase intervention effectiveness (Timpano & Schmidt, 2010).

Frost and Hartl (1996) proposed a cognitive-behavioural model of hoarding, comprising four key attributes that largely contribute to the aetiology and expression of hoarding tendencies; these are as follows: poor executive functioning, erroneous beliefs about the nature of

possessions and the self, attachment to objects, and behavioural avoidance. Subsequent research has identified a number of sub-factors associated with the prediction of hoarding tendencies, such as perfectionism (Frost & Gross, 1993), intolerance of uncertainty (Luchian, McNally, & Hooley, 2007), low self-control (Timpano & Schmidt, 2010), and anxiety sensitivity (Reid et al., 2011). However, the aspect which has arguably accumulated the strongest supporting evidence is the tendency to exhibit excessive attachments to objects (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Grisham et al., 2009).

Hoarders often report feeling intense anxiety and discomfort when a stranger touches their belongings, describing this as feeling as if they have lost control over their environment (Frost, Hartl, Christian, & Williams, 1995; Grisham et al., 2009). Furthermore, Frost and Gross (1993) report that participants self-identifying as hoarders demonstrated higher levels of object attachment than non-hoarders. Additionally, in a sample of community volunteers and college students, Frost et al. (1995) found ratings of hoarding severity to be significantly associated with greater emotional attachment to objects. Initial object attachment was the best indicator of subsequent attachments, and acquisitional behaviours, and greater levels of hoarding beliefs related to possessions providing emotional comfort, were uniquely predictive of the initial baseline attachment (Grisham et al., 2009).

While attachment to objects is important, the role of interpersonal attachment in the expression of hoarding tendencies is an area that has been somewhat under-researched. Therefore, the consideration of attachment theory may be useful in understanding hoarders' relationships to both people and objects. Theoretical

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and methodological advances in adult attachment research have shown that the attachment system remains active well into adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and has been shown to strongly affect the way adults construct their close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson, 1990).

Attachment can be measured on two independent dimensions, namely, anxious attachment and attachment avoidance (Bretherton, 1992). High scorers on either dimension demonstrate an 'insecure' or 'fearful' interpersonal attachment style. Those who score highly on anxious attachment demonstrate high levels of anxiety toward abandonment, or feeling unloved within their close relationships. High scores on the avoidant attachment dimension indicate high levels of anxiety toward closeness in interpersonal relationships, and a tendency to maintain emotional independence (Collins & Read, 1990). Research has suggested that those displaying insecure attachment may utilise alternative strategies to promote substitute attachments, predominately, attachment to objects (Norris, Lambert, DeWall, & Fincham, 2012). Keefer, Landau, Rothschild, and Sullivan (2012) reinforced this finding, stating that when attachment security is threatened, a compensatory response is to attach to non-human targets, specifically inanimate objects, as a neutral target to avoid rejection. Despite the apparent connection between an individual's attachment style and their subsequent attachment to objects, little research has explored the relationship of both interpersonal attachment and attachment to objects, toward the prediction of hoarding tendencies. A study by Nedelisky and Steele (2009) however has revealed that hoarders diagnosed with OCD reported high levels of emotional involvement with inanimate objects in comparison to low levels of emotional attachment to other people.

An additional potential factor to consider, again substantially under-researched, is anthropomorphism. Defined as the tendency to attribute human characteristics and mental states to a non-human target (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), anthropomorphism has been strongly associated with Frost and Hartl's (1996) cognitive-behavioural model of hoarding. Timpano and Shaw (2013) revealed that anthropomorphic tendencies were significantly associated with greater hoarding symptoms, with anthropomorphic tendency scores most strongly associated with emotional attachment, as a measure of hoarding cognitions. Neave, Jackson, Saxton, and Hönekopp (2015) also demonstrated that anthropomorphising was a significant predictor of hoarding behaviours in a non-clinical sample.

As the majority of previous studies have focussed on clinical populations, there remains a lack of knowledge relating to hoarding tendencies in non-clinical samples. The aim of this current study was thus to investigate the roles of attachment styles, attachment to objects, and anthropomorphism in predicting hoarding tendencies in a non-clinical population. As research has revealed sex differences in hoarding behaviours (Grisham et al., 2009; Hartl et al., 2004), anthropomorphism (Neave et al., 2015) and in attachment styles (Del Giudice, 2011), the sample comprised males and females.

It was hypothesised that object attachment, anxious and avoidant attachment styles, and anthropomorphic tendencies would be significantly positively associated with hoarding severity and associated behaviours, but such relationships may differ slightly between males and females. A further aim was to discover, which, if any, of these factors predict hoarding behaviours and cognitions.

2. Method

2.1. Design

As the primary aim of the current study was to determine the best predictor of hoarding tendencies from a number of factors (anthropomorphic tendencies, attachment styles, object attachment, age and sex), the current sample employed a quantitative correlational design.

2.2. Participants

To carry out the current study, we recruited an opportunity sample with the sole eligibility criterion being that participants were over the age of eighteen. The initial total sample consisted of 424 participants. A total of 186 participants were removed from the study due to incomplete data. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 283 participants comprising 210 females, mean age 22.41 ($sd = 8.025$), range 18–62 years, and 73 males, mean age 27.86 ($sd = 13.943$), range 18–68 years.

2.3. Materials

To measure hoarding, we used two validated measures, one assessing hoarding behaviours (Saving Inventory Revised: SI-R) and one assessing thoughts and beliefs relating to hoarding behaviours (Saving Cognitions Inventory: SCI). The SI-R contains 23 items and has previously demonstrated high internal consistency for all subscales ($\alpha \geq .87$) and good test-retest reliability across four studies (Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004). In our sample $\alpha = .94$. The SCI is a 24 item self-report measure, with good internal consistency on each subscale and the total score ($\alpha = .96$) and has demonstrated both good convergent and discriminant validity (Steketee, Frost, & Kyrios, 2003). In our sample $\alpha = .95$.

To measure attachment to other individuals we used two validated measures the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) and the Experiences of Close Relationships – Relationship Structures (ECR-RS). The RAAS is an 18 item self-report measure of attachment style in close relationships. It is an adaption of Collins and Read's (1990) original scale, which measured attachment style in romantic relationships. The RAAS consists of two subscales measuring 'avoidant' and 'anxious' attachments. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency on both subscales: avoidance $\alpha = .78$, anxiety $\alpha = .85$ (Collins & Read, 1990). In our sample $\alpha = .69$.

The ECR-RS is a 9-item measure designed to assess attachment patterns in a variety of relationships, giving scores on 'avoidance-related attachment' and 'anxiety-related attachment' for maternal and paternal targets. The scale has a test-retest reliability when applied to parent-specific relationships of .80, and its internal consistency is high on both the avoidance ($\alpha = > .81$) and anxiety subscales ($\alpha > .86$); (Fraleigh, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011). In our sample $\alpha = .91$.

To measure attachment to objects, we used the Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire—Adapted (RAQ-A), which consists of 38 items; 17 items in 4 subscales (feared loss, proximity seeking, secure bases and separation protest) assess 'inanimate object attachment security' (IOAS); 20 items in four subscales (angry withdrawal, compulsive care-giving, compulsive care-seeking and compulsive self-reliance) assess 'attachment patterns' (AP), and one item measures 'attachment relationship to inanimate objects' (ARIO). The RAQ-A has previously demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$; Nedelisky & Steele, 2009). In our sample $\alpha = .84$.

Finally, to measure anthropomorphism we used the Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (AQ), which contains 20 items comprising two subscales ('childhood items' and 'general items'), which can be summed to obtain a total score. Both subscales have demonstrated high internal consistency (childhood items, $\alpha = .91$; general items, $\alpha = .86$) (Neave et al., 2015). In our sample $\alpha = .93$ for the total score.

2.4. Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, prospective participants were directed to an online survey tool (SurveyMonkey), where they received information about the study. After indicating their informed consent, they were asked to provide basic demographic data (age and sex). They were then asked to complete the questionnaires in their own time. The questionnaires were all presented in the same order as described in Section 2.3. Upon completion, all participants were fully debriefed.

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