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The influence of anthropomorphic tendencies on human hoarding behaviours



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ABSTRACT

Hoarding is the excessive acquisition of and failure to discard possessions. Previous research has shown a link between anthropomorphism (the tendency to ascribe human characteristics to non-human objects) and hoarding. Here we assess the psychometric properties of a new Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (AQ) in a nonclinical sample of 264 adults. A further sample of 93 participants was then recruited to assess relationships between hoarding behaviours and cognitions, scores on the AQ, an existing anthropomorphism questionnaire (Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism Questionnaire: IDAQ), and a measure of social anxiety. Regression analyses revealed the AQ but not the IDAQ to be a significant predictor for hoarding behaviours. Women showed stronger childhood anthropomorphising behaviours than men, and younger participants showed stronger anthropomorphising and hoarding cognitions and behaviours. We conclude that the AQ better supports the predicted relationship between anthropomorphism and hoarding than the IDAQ. We also suggest that age and sex need to be more carefully considered in future studies on anthropomorphism and hoarding.

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1. Introduction

Hoarding is a disorder characterised by: the acquisition of and subsequent failure to discard possessions; the prevention of living spaces being used for their designed purposes due to excessive clutter; and significant distress or impairment in functioning as a result of hoarding (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Mataix-Cols, de la Cruz, Nakao, & Pertusa, 2011). In this study we aim to identify possible associations between hoarding behaviours and cognitions and the tendency to ‘anthropomorphise’ in a non-clinical sample. We firstly devise a new scale to measure anthropomorphism, and then in a different sample assess relationships between hoarding, anthropomorphism and social anxiety whilst controlling for age and gender.

Hoarding may be associated with information-processing deficits and erroneous beliefs about one’s possessions (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Hartl et al., 2004; Steketee, Frost, & Kyrios, 2003). Excessive attachment to possessions may drive some hoarding behaviours (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996). Frost, Hartl, Christian, and Williams (1995) found that a greater emotional attachment to possessions, a higher level of emotional comfort derived from objects, and a greater sense of responsibility towards objects was

associated with hoarding severity. This has been labelled ‘hyper-sentimentality’ (Frost & Hartl, 1996), and may relate to individual differences in the tendency to anthropomorphise (Frost, Krause, & Steketee, 1996).

Anthropomorphism is the tendency to apply human characteristics (i.e. emotions, motivations and goals) to non-human animals, objects and natural entities. Timpano and Shaw (2013) found a relationship between the tendency to anthropomorphise and increased saving and acquisition of free things. Furthermore, the relationship between specific hoarding beliefs and tendency to acquire was moderated by anthropomorphism levels and emotional attachments towards a novel item. Individuals may anthropomorphise if they have a high desire for control (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008) or in order to help explain and understand their surroundings (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008; Waytz et al., 2010). Hoarders are often socially isolated and less likely than the general population to be married or cohabit (Steketee, Frost, & Kim, 2001). Because of this, individuals may anthropomorphise due to a need for social contact (Epley et al., 2008) or to fulfil a need for social affiliation (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2007). Case studies of severe hoarding also provide support for a relationship between anthropomorphism and hoarding. Hoarding patients may display anthropomorphic ideas regarding discarding possessions and state a wish that discarded possessions are not harmed, and are given to a good home (Kellet, Greenhalgh, Beail, & Ridgway, 2010; Tolin, 2011).

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Currently, anthropomorphism is measured by the Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (IDAQ), devised by Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley (2010). However, this questionnaire requires reflection on abstract constructs such as ‘consciousness’ (question 29: “To what extent does the average reptile have consciousness?”) and ‘free will’ (question 4: “To what extent does the average fish have free will?”). The questions are philosophical in nature, requiring high-level deductive thinking, and may not directly tap into intuitive thoughts or behaviours that people might commonly display that might be better indicators of anthropomorphic tendencies. The IDAQ asks about common objects, but anthropomorphism tendencies might be better tapped by asking individuals to consider their own possessions (Timpano & Shaw, 2013). In addition, the IDAQ does not consider developmental issues in anthropomorphism; research has shown that attachment to objects in childhood and subsequent anthropomorphic tendencies coupled with this, extend into later life (Shaffi, 1986).

The aim of our study was thus twofold: (a) To develop a new questionnaire which assesses more relevant beliefs and behaviours associated with anthropomorphism, and test its psychometric properties in a non-clinical sample (phase 1); and (b) to determine the predictive capabilities of our new questionnaire and the IDAQ on hoarding beliefs and behaviours in a non-clinical sample (phase 2). To measure hoarding we employed two validated measures, one assessing hoarding behaviours: the Saving Inventory Revised (Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004), and one assessing thoughts and beliefs relating to hoarding behaviours: the Saving Cognitions Inventory (Steketee, Frost, & Kyrios, 2003). We included both because there is a strong rationale for differentiating between hoarding behaviours (to what extent someone hoards possessions) and the cognitive aspects related to hoarding (how someone feels about their possessions) (Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004; Steketee et al., 2003). In addition, previous research has reported significant associations between anthropomorphism and both aspects of hoarding (Timpano & Shaw, 2013).

As social anxiety has been shown to be associated with hoarding behaviours (Coles, Frost, Heimberg, & Steketee, 2003; Frost, Steketee, Williams, & Warren, 2000) we included a measure of social anxiety in phase 2 in order to check if potential associations between anthropomorphism and hoarding are independent of anxiety. While there have been no studies explicitly assessing the role of sex in hoarding behaviours, most of the studies describing clinical samples note that a significant proportion of hoarders are female (e.g. Grisham et al., 2009; Hartl et al., 2004; Steketee, Frost, & Kyrios, 2003). However, studies assessing hoarding in non-clinical samples either do not state the sex split in hoarding prevalence (e.g. Coles et al., 2003) or report that hoarders are more likely to be male (e.g. Samuels et al., 2008). In phase 2 we therefore also explored possible sex differences in anthropomorphism and hoarding behaviours. Finally, previous studies have not typically considered age in relation to hoarding, though hoarders recruited into such studies appear to be older rather than younger. In one community-based sample it has been suggested that hoarders are likely to be older (Samuels et al., 2008) and again in phase 2 we explored the possible relation between age and hoarding behaviours.

2. Phase 1

2.1. Participants and method

Following institutional ethical approval, 107 males aged 18–70 (mean = 26.9, SD = 11.3) and 157 females aged 18–58

(mean = 25.9, SD = 9.4) were recruited in the North East of England during March 2013, via email, posters and social networking sites. They did not receive any reward for participation. After giving their informed consent, each was asked to complete our new questionnaire by rating the extent to which they agreed with 25 statements using a Likert-type scale of 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much so). Contrary to the belief that anthropomorphism declines with age, the seeming decline in adults may be an automatic correction of anthropomorphic interpretations, rather than a reduction in the actual tendency to anthropomorphise (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2007). Thus, our questionnaire contained items intended to tap into anthropomorphic beliefs and behaviours in childhood (10 items). As the IDAQ included items associated with technology and the natural world, we also included items assessing generic beliefs and behaviours covering technology, the natural world, and feelings about possessions (15 items).

2.2. Results

In order to check if our data showed the intended two-factor structure, we conducted a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin criterion of sampling adequacy was .91, indicating “marvellous” (Keiser & Rice, 1974) factorability. The scree-plot suggested a two factor solution, which we enforced; the two factors accounted for 49.9% of the variance in the items. The factor loadings are presented in Table 1. Based on the highest loadings for each factor, one referred to childhood beliefs and behaviours and the other to current cognitions associated with anthropomorphising. We maximised Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale and discarded 5 items which did not quite fit with either factor in terms of their factor loading or their conceptualisation. This resulted in two final scales comprising 10 childhood items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$) which we call AQ_{child} and 10 current items ($\alpha = .86$) which we call AQ_{current}. Both scales correlated substantially ($r = .42$). The revised version, we called the Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (AQ) (see Appendix for the final version of the AQ and its scoring instructions).

In order to assess the test–retest reliability of the AQ, a different sample of 36 psychology undergraduates (10 males, 26 females) aged 19–41 (mean = 21.4, SD = 4.5) completed the questionnaire twice, separated by 4–6 weeks. The test–retest interval is broadly in line with that used in test–retests of similar questionnaires (e.g. the SI-R, Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004; and the SIAS, Mattick & Clarke, 1998). Analysis revealed high significant positive correlations between test and re-test: AQ_{child}: $r = .86$, $p < 0.001$; AQ_{current}: $r = .95$, $p < 0.001$.

3. Phase 2

The key aim of phase 2 was to determine the predictive capabilities of both anthropomorphism questionnaires on hoarding beliefs and behaviours.

3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 93 adults: 52 males aged 20–65 (mean = 31.3, SD = 11.8) and 42 females aged 19–61 (mean = 33.5, SD = 13.6) recruited in July 2013 in the North East of England via email, posters and social networking sites. They did not receive any reward for participation.

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