

Into the Depths of Existence: An Analysis of Existential Anxiety in the Context of Attachment and Pathological Personality Traits

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Abstract

Aims: Existential anxiety is an inherent aspect of life. Individuals with maladaptive attachment styles, such as anxious-ambivalent, are particularly prone to experiencing generalised anxiety. This tendency is also associated with an intensification of pathological personality traits. The study aims to test hypotheses regarding the relationship between existential anxiety and attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant), as well as with *negative affect* and *detachment*, and to examine the associations between attachment styles and pathological personality traits.

Method: The sample consisted of 466 respondents aged 16 to 87 years with similar educational levels. Gender groups were evenly represented. Existential anxiety was measured using the SNE (Existential Anxiety Scale), attachment styles were assessed using the KSP (Attachment Styles Questionnaire), and pathological traits of the Big Five were evaluated using the PID-5 (Personality Inventory).

Results: Significant differences were observed between the studied variables based on gender. Correlations were found between existential anxiety (along with its dimensions), personality traits, and attachment styles. Regression models were presented to explain the dimensions of anxiety (fear of guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, fear of fate and death). The main explanatory variable was found to be *negative affect*.

Conclusion: Individuals with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style and higher levels of *negative affect* are more likely to experience existential anxiety. Insecure attachment styles are associated with an intensification of pathological personality traits.

Keywords: existential anxiety, attachment styles, *negative affect*, *detachment*, pathological personality traits

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Anxiety is an inherent element of human existence, manifesting as a persistent anticipation of undefined events. The issue of existential anxiety is a subject of extensive theoretical discussions among philosophers and psychologists. The precursor of inquiries into this phenomenon was Søren Kierkegaard (1844/2002), who viewed anxiety as an essential condition of being. It is experienced as unease that is not directed toward any tangible object, constituting a fear of the cessation of being and nothingness. In Paul Tillich's (1952/2016) conception, human existence is only a fragment of reality, which reduces the notion of experienced anxiety to an ontological dimension. Anxiety contributes to helplessness and maladaptive behaviours, translating into efforts to name this fear, which reduces experienced concerns. It should be accepted as an inherent element of existence. Consequently, unnamed anxiety leads to existential anxiety, encompassing three components: fear of guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, and fear of fate and death.

Through self-reflection, individuals develop strategies to cope with difficulties, but they also face thoughts of the inevitability of death (Koole et al., 2006). Existential anxiety arises with the conscious understanding of life's finiteness and ephemerality. One way to combat this dread is to transfer it onto a tangible object (Leontiev, 2018). Constructive transformation of anxiety allows adaptation to unexpected events and uncertainties of the future. Awareness of life's finiteness evokes a flow of thoughts and emotions that may lead to tension but also serve as motivation to seek meaning or build closer relationships with others (Burke et al., 2010). Sometimes, anxiety predisposes individuals to disproportionate perceptions of threat in situations where it is not warranted (Yalom, 1980/2020). This often provokes a confrontation with the nature of existence and one's direction. Those experiencing existential anxiety face these fears through acceptance or rejection (Lucas, 2004). For some, existential concerns lead to avoiding freedom and responsibility for their lives, thereby eliminating anxiety. Suppressing the fear of death contradicts remaining true to oneself (Önol & Engin, 2022). Encountering life-threatening situations or death within one's environment amplifies existential anxiety, especially in individuals with a diminished sense of life meaning (Routledge & Juhl, 2010). Existential anxiety is associated with increased depressive tendencies and general anxiety (Abdel-Khalek, 2005), as well as traumatic stress (Scott & Weems, 2013).

Individuals exhibiting an anxious-ambivalent attachment style are prone to chronic anxiety. Excessive anxiety may result in the development of maladaptive behaviours and habits that attempt to alleviate existential fears regarding life's finiteness (Fuchs, 2013). This aligns with the construct of one of the domains of the pathological personality traits model – *negative affect*. It manifests through the constant experience of negative emotions, including anxiety, and resorting to destructive behaviours to regulate emotions (Rowiński et al., 2019). Individuals with heightened pathological personality traits are more susceptible to intense feelings of anxiety related to life's transience, fragility, and impermanence (Fuchs, 2013).

The above considerations suggest a relationship between existential anxiety, attachment styles, and traits within the pathological personality model.

However, these relationships have not been thoroughly studied in this or a similar context. This study aims to verify whether the mentioned variables are interrelated according to existing theories and research findings. Specifically, the study will explore: Can the intensity of existential anxiety be predicted based on exhibited attachment style? Is there a connection between the severity of pathological personality traits and the displayed attachment style? Is there a relationship between the intensity of anxiety and the severity of *negative affect*? Do individuals who score higher in *detachment* experience more intense existential anxiety?

A review of existing studies that indirectly pertain to the topic addressed in this research highlights the significance of existential anxiety in the context of human behaviour. Experiencing anxiety manifests as realistic worries, distress, and tension. Common to both existential anxiety and general anxiety is the lack of a sense of security associated with fears of impending misfortune, threats, or death (Abdel-Khalek, 2005; Pashak et al., 2017).

Previous attempts to verify the consistency of existential anxiety with personality traits particularly emphasise its association with neuroticism (Frazier & Foss-Goodman, 1989). Women tend to experience deep concerns related to the fear of death (Russac et al., 2007). Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pradhan et al., 2022) indicate that individuals with high neuroticism are more susceptible to stress, making them more vulnerable to existential anxiety.

The personality dimension from the pathological traits model corresponding to neuroticism in the Five-Factor Model of personality is *negative affect*. This dimension manifests through mood instability and negative emotions and is noticeable in maladaptive behaviours and interpersonal relationship patterns (Rowiński et al., 2019). *Negative affect* combined with maladaptive attachment can potentially predict the development of mental health disorders (Krueger & Markon, 2014). In this context, a secure attachment style developed in earlier life stages serves as a protective function against anxiety or depressive disorders in adulthood (Green & Goldwyn, 2002), whereas insecure attachment styles (anxious-ambivalent and avoidant) may predispose individuals to psychological difficulties and reduce overall well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). The anxious style is closely associated with emotional dysregulation, which is an aspect of *negative affect* and manifests in submissiveness, generalised anxiety, and self-destructive tendencies. The avoidant style complements the *detachment* domain from the pathological personality traits model. Individuals with this attachment style avoid closeness in interpersonal relationships, withdraw from intimate relationships, and their emotional expression is less intense (Crawford et al., 2007).

People characterised by the types mentioned above of insecure attachments exhibit reduced internal coherence. Fundamentally, these styles determine experiences of loneliness, ostracism, and *detachment* (Larose & Bernier, 2001). *Detachment*, when considered in the context of loneliness, can predispose individuals to more intense experiences of existential anxiety (Crawford et al., 2007; Larose & Bernier, 2001). Maladaptive strategies may arise to regulate the emotional states they experience, manifesting in feelings of acute emptiness and

fears related to loss and failure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Consequently, there may be an increase in the intensity of experienced existential anxiety. However, a secure attachment style is not a sufficient determinant that can fully protect against such anxiety (Pyszczynski & Taylor, 2016).

The relationships presented regarding existential anxiety, pathological personality traits, and attachment styles allow for the formulation of the following research hypotheses:

1. Individuals with high scores in the anxious-ambivalent attachment style experience more intense existential anxiety (Fuchs, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010; Pyszczynski & Taylor, 2016).
2. High scores in insecure attachment styles are associated with higher intensities of pathological Big Five personality traits (Krueger & Markon, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).
3. Individuals scoring higher in the dimension of *negative affect* experience more intense existential anxiety (Crawford et al., 2007; Green & Goldwyn, 2002; Krueger & Markon, 2014).
4. Individuals scoring higher in the domain of *detachment* experience more intense existential anxiety (Crawford et al., 2007; Larose & Bernier, 2001).

The dependent variable in this study is existential anxiety, defined according to Tillich and operationalised using the Existential Anxiety Scale developed by Andrzej and Karol Juros (K. Juros, 2012). This scale includes an overall score and specific subscales for anxiety related to guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, and fear of fate and death. The explanatory variables are attachment styles and pathological personality traits. Attachment styles were identified using Plopa's Attachment Styles Questionnaire, yielding results for secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant styles (Plopa, 2008). The dimensions of pathological personality traits were measured using the PID-5 Personality Inventory, identifying five primary domains from the pathological personality traits model: *negative affect*, *detachment*, *antagonism*, *disinhibition*, and *psychoticism* (Rowiński et al., 2019).

Methods

Participants

According to a power analysis (.95), a sufficient number of participants would be 173 to detect significant relationships at a p -value of $< .05$. The study included 472 participants, of which 466 were included in the final analyses after removing six identified as outliers. The sample consisted of 279 women (59.9% of all respondents) and 181 men (38.8% of all respondents). Regarding gender identification, six participants provided alternative responses – three did not disclose their gender, and three identified as non-binary.

Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 87 years, with an overall mean age of 24.6 ($SD = 5.9$). The average age for women was 24.6 ($SD = 4.6$), and for men, it

was 24.6 ($SD = 7.5$). Among the respondents, 182 (39.1%) lived in cities with populations over 250,000; 109 (23.4%) lived in rural areas; 83 (17.8%) lived in towns with populations up to 50,000; 54 (11.6%) in cities with 101,000 to 250,000 inhabitants; and 38 (8.2%) in cities with 51,000 to 100,000 inhabitants. The majority of the sample had secondary education, with 240 (51.5%) participants indicating this level. A total of 213 participants (45.7%) declared higher education. Other responses included 9 participants (1.9%) with lower secondary education, 3 (0.6%) with vocational education, and 1 participant (0.2%) with primary education. A significant portion of the respondents were pursuing higher education, with 195 (41.0%) studying and 199 (42.7%) simultaneously employed. Among the remaining respondents, 62 (13.3%) were working, and 14 (3.0%) declared being unemployed.

Measurement Tools

The study utilised three questionnaires in addition to the demographic questions included in the survey. The tools used included the Existential Anxiety Scale (Juros, 2012), the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Plopa, 2008), and the PID-5 Personality Inventory (Rowiński et al., 2019).

Existential Anxiety Scale (SNE)

This scale was used to measure the dimensions of existential anxiety. It is a revised version of the original scale by Andrzej Juros (1988). The revised version was developed through a replication study conducted in 2011 by Karol Juros (2012). The scale consists of 38 statements that are divided into three dimensions of existential anxiety: SNE1 – fear of guilt and condemnation; SNE2 – fear of emptiness and meaninglessness; SNE3 – fear of fate and death. Additionally, the collected data allow for the calculation of an overall score for existential anxiety. Participants responded on a 7-point scale where: 1 = *never*; 2 = *very rarely*; 3 = *rarely*; 4 = *sometimes*; 5 = *often*; 6 = *very often*; 7 = *constantly*. The reliability measured by Cronbach's α coefficient for overall existential anxiety and its subscales in the current study (SNE – $\alpha = .95$; SNE1 – $\alpha = .92$; SNE2 – $\alpha = .94$; SNE3 – $\alpha = .89$) permits further statistical inferences based on the obtained data.

Attachment Style Questionnaire (KSP)

The questionnaire, authored by Mieczysław Plopa (2008), was used to identify the attachment styles presented by the participants. It allows for the measurement of three components identified according to the concept of Hazan and Shaver (1994): secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant attachment styles. The reliability, measured by Cronbach's α coefficient for the respective attachment styles in this study, was as follows: secure style – $\alpha = .88$; anxious-ambivalent style – $\alpha = .88$; avoidant style – $\alpha = .87$. This level of reliability allows the

scales to be used in group research. The Attachment Style Questionnaire consists of 24 statements (8 statements for each attachment style). Each item concerns experiences of being in a close relationship, and respondents were required to respond using a 7-point scale where 1 means *strongly disagree* and 7 means *strongly agree* (Plopa, 2008).

Personality Inventory for DSM-5 (PID-5)

This tool is based on the pathological personality traits model according to DSM-5. The original version was developed by Krueger et al. (2012). The present study used the Polish adaptation of this method by Rowiński et al. (2019). According to the applied model structure, it allows for the identification of five trait domains: *negative affect*, *detachment*, *antagonism*, *disinhibition*, and *psychoticism*. The questionnaire contains 25 statements, with respondents evaluating their responses on a 4-point Likert scale where 0 = *definitely false or very often false*; 1 = *sometimes or somewhat false*; 2 = *sometimes or somewhat true*; 3 = *definitely true or very often true* (Rowiński et al., 2019).

The reliability of the Cronbach's α coefficient for each personality trait measured by the PID-5 in the current study was as follows: *negative affect* – $\alpha = .73$; *detachment* – $\alpha = .66$; *antagonism* – $\alpha = .75$; *disinhibition* – $\alpha = .75$; *psychoticism* – $\alpha = .72$. These reliability measures are satisfactory for further inference.

Research Procedure

The study was conducted as an online survey via the LimeSurvey platform. The survey link was distributed on social media platforms within thematic groups. Additionally, a snowball sampling method was used, encouraging participants who completed the survey to share the link with their acquaintances or others interested in participating. The survey package consisted of demographic questions and three questionnaires. Before starting, participants were informed that the research was part of a pre-seminary project. The survey targeted adults, and the entire process was fully anonymous and voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. They were also informed that the data collected would be used solely for further scientific considerations.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Mean values, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values were calculated for each variable. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to estimate the relationships between the studied variables. The t-test was employed to assess the significance of differences between gender groups. Regression analysis using the

stepwise method was conducted to determine the predictive value of explanatory variables (*negative affect, detachment, antagonism, disinhibition, psychoticism, secure style, anxious-ambivalent style, avoidant style*) concerning the explained variables (fear of guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, fear of fate and death).

Results

Descriptive statistics for each variable considered in the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Variables Studied (N = 466)

| | Min. | Max. | M | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis | Normality of distribution | |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|----------|----------|---------------------------|------|
| | | | | | | | K-S | p |
| Existential anxiety | 26 | 175 | 97.75 | 27.71 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.03 | .200 |
| Fear of guilt and condemnation | 10 | 70 | 40.79 | 12.98 | -0.12 | -0.42 | 0.04 | .029 |
| Fear of emptiness and meaninglessness | 8 | 56 | 32.24 | 10.63 | 0.18 | -0.49 | 0.06 | .001 |
| Fear of fate and death | 7 | 49 | 24.71 | 9.37 | 0.34 | -0.30 | 0.06 | .001 |
| Negative affect | 0 | 15 | 7.59 | 3.36 | -0.21 | -0.59 | 0.09 | .001 |
| Detachment | 0 | 15 | 4.99 | 3.08 | 0.38 | -0.27 | 0.09 | .001 |
| Antagonism | 0 | 14 | 2.95 | 2.79 | 0.90 | 0.17 | 0.17 | .001 |
| Disinhibition | 0 | 15 | 4.28 | 3.22 | 0.75 | 0.35 | 0.12 | .001 |
| Psychoticism | 0 | 14 | 5.46 | 3.24 | 0.23 | -0.57 | 0.08 | .001 |
| Secure attachment | 8 | 56 | 39.71 | 9.89 | -0.25 | -0.67 | 0.08 | .001 |
| Anxious-ambivalent attachment | 8 | 56 | 28.88 | 11.10 | 0.29 | -0.50 | 0.05 | .011 |
| Avoidant attachment | 8 | 56 | 22.04 | 9.78 | 0.45 | -0.58 | 0.10 | .001 |

K-S – Kolmogorov-Smirnov test value

Skewness values for the variables ranged between -1 and 1, indicating that skewness was not strong enough to necessitate further analysis (George & Mallery, 2010). The distribution of variables was inconsistent with normality assumptions; however, given the large sample size of 466 participants, parametric

tests were applied according to the Central Limit Theorem, which allows for their use with sufficiently large samples (greater than 30) (Szymczak, 2018). To examine relationships between the variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. Table 2 (p. 123) presents the correlations between the studied variables.

High scores on the anxious-ambivalent style were associated with high scores on general existential anxiety as well as its subdimensions. For general existential anxiety and fear of guilt and condemnation, the correlations were moderate, while for fear of emptiness and meaninglessness and fear of fate and death, these relationships were significant but small. Increased severity of pathological personality traits correlated with increased anxious-ambivalent style scores. Although this relationship was low, it was noticeable in the cases of *negative affect*, *detachment*, *disinhibition*, and *psychoticism*. Regarding *antagonism*, this connection was minimal. Elevated scores on the avoidant style were associated with increased levels of *detachment*, *antagonism*, *disinhibition*, and *psychoticism* – these relationships were evident, albeit small. A nearly negligible correlation also appeared between the avoidant style and *negative affect*. Conversely, low secure style values corresponded with high values in variables such as *detachment*, *antagonism*, *disinhibition*, and *psychoticism*. The magnitude of these relationships was small, except for *detachment*, where it was distinct.

Negative affect positively correlated with the overall dimension of existential anxiety and each of its subdimensions—the correlations were moderate. High scores on *detachment* were associated with high scores for existential anxiety, fear of guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, and fear of fate and death. Fear of emptiness and meaninglessness moderately correlated with *detachment*. In the cases of existential anxiety and fear of guilt and condemnation, these relationships were small but noticeable. As *disinhibition* increased, so did the severity of general existential anxiety and its subdimensions—these relationships were clear for each of them. Higher scores in *psychoticism* corresponded with stronger experiences of existential anxiety and its subdimensions. For general anxiety and fear of guilt and condemnation, these correlations were moderate, while for fear of emptiness and meaninglessness and fear of fate and death, they were low but evident. The avoidant style correlated with existential anxiety and its subdimensions, except for fear of fate and death, where the correlation was negligible.

Regression analysis using the stepwise method was conducted to determine the predictive value for explained variables – fear of guilt and condemnation, fear of emptiness and meaning and meaninglessness, and fear of fate and death. The regression analysis was performed in three steps. In the first model, age and gender were added; in the second model, attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent) were included; and in the third model, personality traits (*negative affect*, *detachment*, *antagonism*, *disinhibition*, *psychoticism*) were added. To assess whether multicollinearity assumptions among predictors were not violated, the multicollinearity test was used. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was above 3 for the avoidant style, and therefore, it was not included as a predictor in the regression models (Zuur et al., 2010). Detailed results are presented in Table 3 (p. 124).

Table 2
Correlation

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1. Existential Anxiety | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Fear of guilt and condemnation | .93*** | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Fear of emptiness and meaninglessness | .83*** | .70*** | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Fear of fate and death | .74*** | .57*** | .35*** | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Negative affect | .58*** | .52*** | .49*** | .45*** | | | | | | | |
| 6. Detachment | .37*** | .37*** | .43*** | .11* | .27*** | | | | | | |
| 7. Antagonism | .07 | .10** | .02 | .04 | .04 | .20*** | | | | | |
| 8. Disinhibition | .36*** | .37*** | .30** | .22*** | .34*** | .13*** | .32*** | | | | |
| 9. Psychoticism | .42*** | .45*** | .32*** | .26*** | .35*** | .37*** | .34*** | .37*** | | | |
| 10. Secure attachment | -.27*** | -.27*** | -.30*** | -.07 | -.07 | -.40*** | -.16** | -.20*** | -.21*** | | |
| 11. Anxious-ambivalent attachment | .47*** | .44*** | .41*** | .32*** | .38*** | .30*** | .15** | .25*** | .31*** | -.31*** | |
| 12. Avoidant attachment | .33*** | .34*** | .30*** | .16*** | .10* | .40*** | .27*** | .25*** | .30*** | -.80*** | .48*** |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Stepwise Regression (in Three Steps) Explaining the Variables: Fear of Guilt and Condemnation, Fear of Emptiness and Meaninglessness, Fear of Fate and Death

| Model | Predictor | Dependent variable | | | | | | | | |
|-------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|----------|---------------------------------------|-------|----------|------------------------|-------|----------|
| | | Fear of guilt and condemnation | | | Fear of emptiness and meaninglessness | | | Fear of fate and death | | |
| | | β | R^2 | F | β | R^2 | F | β | R^2 | F |
| 1 | | | .06 | 14.73*** | | .05 | 13.90*** | | .04 | 10.53*** |
| | Age | -.23*** | | | -.22*** | | | -.14** | | |
| | Gender | -.07 | | | -.10* | | | -.16*** | | |
| 2 | | | .24 | 37.68*** | | .23 | 36.31*** | | .13 | 17.90*** |
| | Age | -.15*** | | | -.14*** | | | -.08 | | |
| | Gender | -.11** | | | -.15*** | | | -.16*** | | |
| | Secure attachment | -.18*** | | | -.23*** | | | -.01 | | |
| | Anxious-ambivalent attachment | .35*** | | | .31*** | | | .31*** | | |
| 3 | | | .43 | 40.14*** | | .40 | 34.81*** | | .24 | 16.89*** |
| | Age | -.07 | | | -.08* | | | -.03 | | |
| | Gender | -.04 | | | -.05 | | | -.08 | | |
| | Secure attachment | -.10* | | | -.13** | | | -.02 | | |
| | Anxious-ambivalent attachment | .17*** | | | .15*** | | | .17*** | | |
| | Negative affect | .28*** | | | .28*** | | | .33*** | | |
| | Detachment | .12** | | | .24*** | | | -.09 | | |
| | Antagonism | -.08* | | | -.13** | | | -.02 | | |
| | Disinhibition | .14*** | | | .13** | | | .03 | | |
| | Psychoticism | .20*** | | | .05 | | | .13* | | |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The regression analysis indicated that the proposed models explained a significant percentage of the variance in the dimensions of existential anxiety. Age and gender did not significantly explain the dimensions of existential anxiety. In the second model, fear of guilt and condemnation was explained by 24% of the variance in results. After adding personality traits in the third model, 43% of the variance in fear of guilt and condemnation was explained. Before including personality traits in the regression model, a significant relationship indicated that

high scores in the anxious-ambivalent style ($\beta = .35, p < .001$) were associated with higher levels of fear of guilt and condemnation. After including personality traits in the regression model, this relationship diminished ($\beta = .17, p < .001$). However, the third model shows that higher scores in *negative affect* ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) are associated with higher levels of fear of guilt and condemnation—a clear relationship. Regarding this fear, small relationships also emerged with *psychoticism* ($\beta = .20, p < .001$), *disinhibition* ($\beta = .14, p < .001$), and *detachment* ($\beta = .12, p = .003$). Fear of emptiness and meaninglessness was explained by the second model at 23% through the included variables and by the third model at 40% of the variance. Higher values in *negative affect* ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) and *detachment* ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) were associated with higher scores in fear of emptiness and meaninglessness—both relationships were distinct. There were also small relationships indicating that low secure style scores ($\beta = -.13, p = .002$) and high anxious-ambivalent style scores ($\beta = .15, p < .001$) were linked with a more intense fear of emptiness and meaninglessness. Fear of fate and death was explained in the second model by 13% of the variance and in the third model by 24% of the variance in results. Higher fear of fate and death was associated with increased values of *negative affect* ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), anxious-ambivalent style ($\beta = .17, p < .001$), and *psychoticism* ($\beta = .13, p = .012$).

To better understand the data, an analysis of gender differences was conducted. Differences between groups by gender were calculated using the *t*-test for independent samples. Women showed higher scores in existential anxiety ($t(379.46) = 2.69, p = .007$) and fear of fate and death ($t(395.05) = 3.96, p < .001$). The effect size for these variables was small – existential anxiety ($d = 0.26$), fear of fate and death ($d = 0.38$). Women also scored higher on *negative affect* ($t(369.09) = 6.27, p < .001$), with a moderate effect size ($d = 0.61$). Men exhibited higher levels of *antagonism* ($t(332.90) = -5.42, p < .001$) and *psychoticism* ($t(379.09) = -2.89, p = .004$). The effect size for *antagonism* was moderate ($d = 0.54$) and low for *psychoticism* ($d = 0.28$). Women scored higher on the secure style ($t(380.41) = 4.17, p < .001$), while men had higher avoidant style scores ($t(373.80) = -4.05, p < .001$). The effect sizes for the secure style ($d = 0.40$) and avoidant style ($d = 0.39$) were small. Gender differences were verified to assess their influence on the relationships between existential anxiety, attachment styles, and personality traits. Difference tests showed that the effect sizes were moderate, low, or nonexistent.

Discussion

The presented results indicate significant relationships between the studied variables. As hypothesised, it was confirmed that individuals exhibiting anxious-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles experience higher levels of existential anxiety. This relationship likely stems from the tendency to engage in maladaptive patterns due to the development of insecure attachment. These patterns may lead to chronic anxiety, including anxiety of an existential nature.

The fear of failing to harmonise the inner self within the context of the perceived duty to live appears to be an inherent element of this construct. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that the anxious-ambivalent style predisposes individuals to experience anxiety about the meaning of existence (Fuchs, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Pyszczynski & Taylor, 2016).

The hypothesis regarding the relationship between insecure attachment styles and pathological personality traits was also confirmed. Previous attempts (Green & Goldwyn, 2002) to observe these relationships suggest that the secure style serves as a protective factor against mental disorders. Conversely, maladaptive attachment styles may predispose individuals to develop mental disorders, likely due to general anxiety being inherent in *negative affect and avoidance behaviours* being closely associated with *detachment*. The anxious-ambivalent style manifests through worries that are not linked to real grounds yet cause a loss of the sense of security (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The construct of *disinhibition* involves impulsivity under the influence of emotions and experienced thoughts, while *psychoticism* is associated with eccentric behaviour (Rowiński et al., 2019). These variables, though small, show significant correlations with anxious-ambivalent and avoidant styles. A minimal connection also exists between the reluctance to form intimate relationships, prioritising one's welfare, and antipathy toward others, which are components of *antagonism*. Correlations between the secure style and pathological personality traits are negligible and negative, which is consistent with previous studies (Green & Goldwyn, 2002). These studies indicate that secure attachment styles can partially prevent the development of maladaptive personality traits.

As *negative affect* intensifies, the severity of existential anxiety also increases, confirming the third hypothesis. Correlations in this aspect are moderate, aligning with the general characteristics of this personality component, as *negative affect* correlates with neuroticism derived from the Big Five model (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Past studies have already demonstrated a link between high levels of neuroticism and the experience of worries and anxiety in daily life. The *negative affect* associated with existential anxiety dimensions varies by gender, though the observed differences are moderate. *Negative affect* is more prominent in women than in men.

The construct of *detachment* within the pathological personality traits model is defined as emotional and social loneliness, diminished capacity to experience solace, and general pleasure (Rowiński et al., 2019). Experienced ontological anxiety contributes to a sense of helplessness. The relationships presented allow us to accept the last hypothesis: higher *detachment* scores are associated with increased existential anxiety. Previous research has indicated this relationship only indirectly (Crawford et al., 2007; Larose & Bernier, 2001).

As *disinhibition* increases, so does each dimension of existential anxiety. Experienced stimuli and thoughts of fear concerning emptiness and the prospect of nonexistence trigger unconditional impulsivity. Maladaptive behaviours and beliefs about the finiteness of life are associated with *psychoticism*, as confirmed by the findings of this study, showing a relationship between *psychoticism* and existential anxiety. This aspect has not been thoroughly investigated before, suggesting an area for future research.

It turns out that each type of existential anxiety is primarily explained by *negative affect*. Although general anxiety is evidently included within this construct, its existential dimension has not been examined in this context before. Other components of the pathological personality traits model (*detachment, antagonism, disinhibition, psychoticism*) are predictors of the occurrence of fear of emptiness and meaninglessness and fear of guilt and condemnation. Attachment styles also proved significant in explaining variance in regression models, particularly the anxious-ambivalent style, which emerged as a predictor for each dimension of existential anxiety. The secure style was a minor predictor of fear of emptiness and meaninglessness. Gender proved to be an insignificant factor in explaining existential fears.

Research has not yet explored existential anxiety in relation to attachment styles and pathological personality traits. Attachment styles and pathological personality traits are areas of interpersonal and psychological functioning, while existential anxiety arises from deeper considerations about the essence and meaning of existence. Therefore, integrating these concepts requires an interpretation that combines psychology and existential theories. Future research in this area could contribute to a better understanding of human functioning and the impact of existential concerns on mental health.

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