

# College Students' Covid-19 Attitudes & Mental Health: The Role of Empathic Concern and Social Connectedness

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# Introduction

- During the recent and ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, college students' mental health such as depressive and anxiety symptoms, has been a topic of concern (Wattick et al., 2021).
- College students' attitudes toward the Covid-19 pandemic, or how severe and serious they believe this health crisis is (or is not) may impact their mental health outcomes.
- Empathetic concern, or the concern for the wellbeing of others (Baston & Ahmad, 2009) and the desire to connect with others (i.e., social connectedness; Lee et al., 2001) may impact the attitudes that college students hold about the Covid-19 pandemic and in turn may be associated with their mental health.

# Study Aims

- Guided by the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Baston, 1998), the primary goal of the current study is to investigate how social connectedness and empathetic concern are associated with attitudes toward the Covid-19 pandemic and, in turn, associated with college students' mental health outcomes.

# Methods

## Participants

- 241 College Students living in the U.S.
- 86.3% female, 88.4% White
- Aged 18 – 25 ( $M = 20.60$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ )
- Year in College:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> year: 16.2%
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> year: 23.2%
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year: 26.6%
  - 4<sup>th</sup> year: 25.3%
  - 5<sup>th</sup> year: 7.9%
  - 6<sup>th</sup> + year: 0.8%

## Measures

- Empathetic Concern (Davis, 1983)
- Covid-19 attitudes (Diaz & Cova, 2020)
- Social Connectedness (Lee et al., 2001)
- Depressive Symptoms (Radolff, 1977)
- Anxiety Symptoms (Lowe et al., 2008)
  
- Higher values indicate higher rates of each variable
- All Cronbach's alpha were above .76

# Results

- To address our study goals, a path model was conducted in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).
- This model was a good fit to the data (Figure 1).
- Empathetic concern was positively associated with Covid-19 attitudes and depressive symptoms.
- Social connectedness was negatively associated with Covid-19 attitudes, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms.
- Covid-19 attitudes were positively associated with anxiety symptoms. There were two significant indirect effects.
- Empathetic concern ( $ab = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $CI: .01$  to  $.10$ ) was positively associated with Covid-19 attitudes, which, in turn was positively associated with anxiety symptoms.
- Social connectedness ( $ab = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $CI: -.10$  to  $-.01$ ) was negatively associated with Covid-19 attitudes, which, in turn was positively associated with anxiety symptoms.

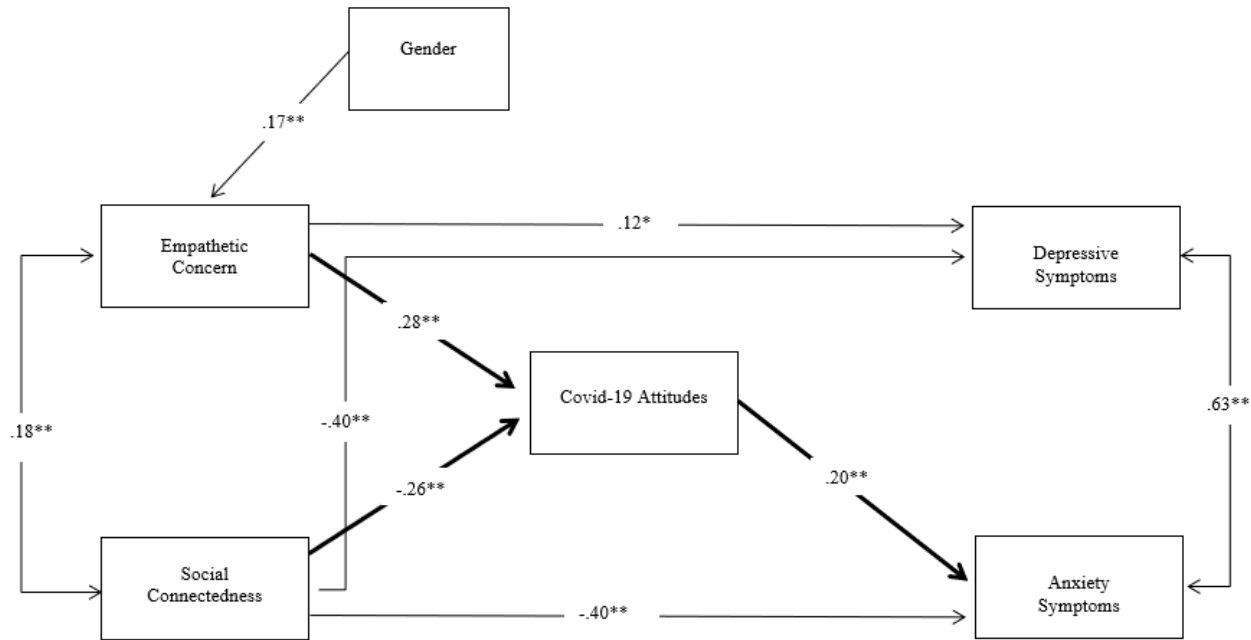


Figure 1. Path model with standardized parameter estimates.  $\chi^2(4) = 5.17, p = .27, \chi^2/df = 1.29, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .99$  \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . All direct effects from IVs to DVs were tested, but nonsignificant direct paths are not shown. Significant indirect effect is represented by bolded line.

# Discussion

- Overall, findings highlight that college students' empathetic concern and social connections were related to their attitudes surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and, in turn, their mental health outcomes.
- These findings can be used to inform practitioners and college administrators as we continue to navigate the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

# Questions?

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