



## Self-criticism, dependency, and adolescents' externalising and internalising problems

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### Key words

dependency, Depressive Experiences Questionnaire for adolescents, externalising problems, internalising problems, self-criticism.

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The present study examines the role of dependency (interpersonal relatedness) and self-criticism (self-definition) in internalising and externalising problems.

**Methods:** Three hundred forty-six suburban Portuguese high-school students age 14–18 (mean = 16.14, standard deviation = 1.19) responded to the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire and the Youth Self-Report. The impact of depression, measured by the Children's Depression Inventory, on the relationship of dependency and self-criticism on internalising and externalising problem behaviours was examined.

**Results:** Both self-criticism and dependency, controlled for level of depression, were associated with internalising behaviour problems in both girls and boys. Gender differences, however, were observed in externalising problems. Externalising problems in boys were also associated with self-criticism. But externalising problems in girls were not associated with psychological variables and thus may be more a function of environmental rather than psychological factors.

**Conclusions:** Implications of these findings for intervention are discussed.

### Key Points

- 1 Clinical interventions with adolescents should focus on the personality qualities of dependency and self-criticism as the motivational force behind the disturbed internalising and externalising behaviour. Internal representations of worthlessness or inferiority that are part of self-criticism could be amenable to change in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy can also be helpful in addressing issues of loneliness, and feelings and fears of abandonment typical of the anaclitic personality configuration.
- 2 Observed differences between girls and boys have important therapeutic implications and suggest that externalising symptoms in girls may be the consequence of factors other than personality dimensions, possibly socio-economic factors and peer relationships.
- 3 The Depressive Experiences Questionnaire for adolescents appears to make important contributions to the assessment of these personality dimensions.

Blatt (1974, 1990, 2004, 2008) identified two central personality dimensions, interpersonal relatedness, and

self-definition as central psychological dimensions in adaptive and maladaptive personality organisation. Optimal personality development is characterised by the integration of the capacity for self-definition and interpersonal relatedness in a coordinated sense of self in relation to others (Blatt, 2008). Such integration is essential for physical and psychological well-being as well as the reduction of vulnerability to distress (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992).

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