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Emotional dependency based on the gender of young adolescents in Almeria, Spain

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Abstract

In this article we present a study carried out in Almeria (Spain) with 238 students for the purpose of determining if they possess an Emotional Dependency and establish differences based on gender. For this purpose we have used the Emotional Dependency questionnaire (CDE) devised by Lemos and Lendoño (2008), which is comprised of five factors. The main results of this survey indicate that no Emotional Dependency exists based on gender and that the most significant factors in order of frequency are: “Affective expression of the partner”, “Modification of plans”, “Fear of loneliness” and “Anxiety due to separation”.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays Emotional Dependency is considered a persistent pattern of unsatisfied emotional needs that are tried to be met in a maladaptive manner with other persons (Castelló, 2000). Along the same line, May (2000) & Sannuti (2006) define it as an insane relationship based on pain, anger and fear, in an abusive, possessive and inaccessible environment, which is based on imbalance and inequality, since one person is subjected by another; this is possible because their company becomes more important than feeling love. On many occasions, it can be considered as “obsessive love”, which occurs when love becomes addictive and one begins to depend on the person that is loved (Brenlla, Brizzio & Carreras, 2009).

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Sirvent (2000) further defines Emotional Dependency as rational disorders characterized by a manifestation of addictive behaviour in the interpersonal relationship, based on a role asymmetry and a dependent attitude as it relates with the subject who is depended on. This same author points out that persons with this disorder are typically emotionally vulnerable and manifest a sort of blindness towards the other person, which could be explained by the fusion of illusions and/or attributions, hedonism and expectations: The other person gives you what you want and in turn you forgive them everything. They tend to choose partners that exploit them, are narcissists and manipulative; lack empathy and affection, they believe that they have privileges and abilities that are extraordinary and in summary, seek a dominant position in the relationship; persons that are extremely sure of themselves, which results in the dependent person being fascinated with them. Dependent persons usually suffer rejections and humiliations by part of their partners, do not receive true affection, tend to feel somewhat dysphoric and/or feel empty and emotionally unstable and regarding the family history, they may be experiencing or have experienced emotional and/or physical abuse, as primary descriptive criteria.

Schaeffer (1998) & Castelló (2000, 2002) suggest that these types of persons lose their identity and assume subordinate positions for the purpose of not losing the affection and approval of their romantic partner. These subjects can be described as having a low self esteem, being fearful of loneliness, display excessive attachment behaviour, idealize the partner and submission is prevalent in their relationships, even though in those aspects of life other than their romantic relationships, they behave efficiently and do not depend on other persons for protection.

According to a study by Sirvent (2000), a certain level of psychosocial affective dependency is present in all of us, in a manner that many people need people and vice versa.

Likewise, we can relatively easily detect our emotions, which provide us with a reference and intimate information, so we feel and experience primary emotions that tie us and force us to confront ourselves and others. The problem becomes significant when the subject is controlled by this affective need. According to the findings of this study, fear of loss, of loneliness and/or abandonment contaminates the emotional bond, turning it highly vulnerable and pathological. The mystification, self-deceit or the mechanisms of denial cognitively restructure our perception of relationships. Drives the subject to be a victim of their own passion, to experience an inner emptiness that is never filled, to dissatisfaction when feeling unease caused by a feeling that they are never whole; intolerance and fear of being lonely becomes a maxim that acts as a burden to the relationships, maybe reliving the feelings of affective alienation experienced during infancy (Moral & Sirvent, 2008). Early affective shortages are suggested as one of the possible factors linked with the origin of the emotional dependency (Castelló, 2005 & Schaeffer, 1998).

2. Areas of Emotional Dependency

In light of the above, Emotional Dependence is defined as an addiction to romantic relationships; however, it encompasses more than a simple addiction. Six areas of emotional dependence have been identified (Castelló, 2005, Lynch, Robins & Morse, 2001 & Schaeffer, 1998; Villa & Sirvent, 2008):

1. Separation anxiety: a terrible fear of abandonment, separation or isolation is expressed. This is going to generate the interpersonal guidelines for dependence, where the person clings to their romantic partner; they deem it necessary in order to be happy, the other person is the key to not feel the anguish of being alone. This separation anxiety may be triggered by temporary isolation involving every day life; any separation creates distrust that your romantic partner will return, which results in thoughts related with loss and loneliness (Castelló, 2005; Schaeffer, 1998).

2. Affective expression: the emotionally dependent person has a constant feeling of insecurity and mistrust regarding the other person's love, which is only calmed by the other person constantly expressing the love they feel in order to assure them that they are loved (Lynch, Robins & Morse, 2001). This is similar to substance dependency due to that insatiable need.

3. Modification of plans: these persons usually change their plans or the activities they intended to carry out just to spend more time with their romantic partner. Thus the other person becomes the centre of their lives and

everything else is excluded. Their attention is centred on satisfying the other person's needs, desires or even indulgences. Refers to the desire for exclusivity by the emotionally dependent person, as in the desire of their romantic partner to feel the same way (Castelló, 2005).

4. Fear of loneliness: it is the fear of not having a romantic partner; needs a partner to feel balanced and secure; by the contrary, feels that being alone as something very scary.

5. Borderline expression: The possible breaking up of a relationship for the emotionally dependent person is something so catastrophic that in many cases drives that person to commit actions and express a desire to harm themselves, which is related with the characteristics of a person with borderline personality disorder. This behaviour may be viewed as a strategy to cling on to the relationship; the dependent person is capable of doing anything, even harm themselves to prevent the relationship from breaking up.

6. Seeking attention: the dependent person has a psychological need for attention from their partner to strengthen their relationship in an attempt to become the centre of their lives (Castelló, 2005). Seeking attention can be viewed as a historic tendency that manifests in some emotional dependent persons.

From a gender point of view, standard emotional dependency occurs more frequently in women due to a combination of cultural and biological factors. Women due to social conventions and possibly due to their own nature have a more pronounced tendency to feel empathy and have affective ties. On the other hand men are more prone to detach themselves from the affection towards others and consequently from hostility and individualism (although preserving their self esteem, unlike the pattern manifested by emotional dependency).

Some studies like those conducted by Simón & Nath (2004) & Soriano & González (2013) indicate that there are differences in the frequency with which men and women express positive and negative emotions. For example men express anger and in turn women express other emotions like happiness, sadness and fear. Although we believe it depends on the person, in this study we have generalized according to the conclusions reached in the reviewed studies.

The difference in the incidence in men and women is going to in a large measure depend on social-cultural factors by which men learn to exclude their emotions while women tend to express them; the expression of emotion is more difficult for men than the emotional experience itself (Brody, 1993).

Nowadays the female identity continues to be represented by emotional dependency, empathy and care for others while the male identity is represented by self sufficiency, rationality, emotional control, competitiveness and control over violence, ideals that act as normal group configurations and affect the subjectivity and inter-subjectivity (Martínez et al. 2008).

3. Objectives

We have two basic objectives: 1) Find out what are the early maladaptive schemas in youths in Almeria and establish the possible differences in emotional dependency based on gender.

4. Methodology

We have based our study on the survey method and for the population that is the object of the study we have focused on students from Secondary Schools (IES)[†] located in the province of Almeria. The subjects have been selected through voluntary sampling. The sample was comprised of 238 students from both centres (110 students from the subsidized IES and 128 students from the public IES). The average age of the students was 17 (50.8%) with ages ranging between 16 and 19.

[†] From now on Secondary Schools will be referred to as IES.

Relative to the students that have a romantic partner, 36.1% (86) of them currently do and 72.3% (172) of them have been in a relationship in the past. This value is very important because emotional dependency develops while in a relationship and this is what is going to define our sample regarding the issues we are interested in.

5. Instruments for collecting data

We have used the “Emotional Dependency Questionnaire (EDQ)”, which was designed and validated by Lemos & Londoño (2006). It is comprised of 23 items, has a high degree of reliability (Cronbach Alpha of 0.927) and a variance explanation of 64.7%. The instrument evaluates six factors of emotional dependency (Separation anxiety, Affective expression of the partner, Modification of plans, Fear of loneliness, Borderline expression, Seeking of attention), with Cronbach Alpha’s between 0.62 and 0.87.

6. Data analysis

A database was created using the data collected in the surveys, which was then processed through the statistics package SPSS version 20 for Windows. A descriptive analysis of the population subject of the study was carried out, to include central tendency and dispersion measurements for the quantitative variables. Regarding the results of who suffers emotional dependency, our work shows that a total of 18.1% (43 students) of the total sample suffer emotional dependency, of which 16 are female and 27 are male. We analyzed the results based on the factors included in the Emotional Dependency questionnaire used in our sample:

Factor 1 “Separation anxiety”: When analyzing factor 1, we identified that 18.5% (44 students; 22 female and 22 male). Therefore, this factor is equal among genders.

Factor 2 “Affective expression of the partner”: When we conducted the overall analysis of all the items of this second factor, we observed that 21% (51 students) display this factor "Affective expression of the partner", where 29 of the total sample were female and 22 male.

Factor 3 “Modification of plans”: Like in the previous case, in this factor we find that 21% (50 students) of the sample has this condition, just like in the previous factor, the gender difference is 18 female and 32 male. In one of the items; number 23 “I only have fun when I am with my partner”, we noticed a statistically significant difference according to gender of $p = 0.001$.

Factor 4 “Fear of loneliness”: When we conducted the analysis of this factor we identified 18.5% (44 students) possessing this factor, where 15 were female and 29 were male.

Factor 5 “Borderline Expression”. As in the previous factor, males are more likely to display this factor. 18.1% were identified (43 students; 30 male and 13 female). In this factor we find that in item 20 "I am capable of doing dangerous things, even risk my own life in order to not lose the other person's love", there is a clear significance of $p = 0.000$ with regards to gender.

Factor 6 “Seeking of attention”: This last factor “Seeking of attention” we have identified 12.6% (30 students) of the total sample; 10 females and 20 males.

Table 1. Predominant factors of Emotional Dependency in adolescents in Almeria, Spain (Own preparation).

Affective expression of the partner	21% (44 students; 22 females and 22 males)
Modification of plans	21% (50 students; 18 females and 32 males)
Fear of loneliness	18.5 (44 students; 15 females and 29 males)
Separation anxiety	18.5 (44 students; 22 females and 22 males)
Borderline expression	18.1% (43 students; 13 females and 30 males)
Seeking of attention	12.6% (30 students; 10 females and 20 males)

7. Conclusions

With this study we reach the conclusion that there is no significant difference based on gender and whether or not a person is going to experience emotional dependency. Our data leads us to believe that there is a greater percentage of males than females suffering from emotional dependency; therefore we contest the preconceived idea that this pathology is exclusively suffered by females and we venture to say, based on the data obtained, that emotional dependency occurs in those individuals that are prone with no distinction made based on gender.

On the other hand, in our total sample, independent of whether or not they suffer from emotional dependency, we see that the predominant characteristic is “Affective expression of the partner”, which leads us to believe that these adolescents display insecurity and mistrust regarding the feelings their partners have towards them and need for these feelings to be constantly expressed in order to feel secure. This factor is mostly present in females. Subsequently, factors “Modification of plans”, “Fear of loneliness” and “Anxiety due to separation” are displayed.

Outlining the profile of a student with Emotional Dependency in females as well as males, it is surprising that these adolescents are capable of engaging in dangerous behaviour, even risk their own lives in order to not lose the other person's love and are not capable of engaging in any activity without the other person. Additionally, they manifest an extreme fear of losing their partners and need a constant affective expression from their partners in order to feel secure. Their romantic partner is the centre of their lives. In order to experience these emotions and feelings, they display impulsive or self-aggressive (in extreme cases) behaviour in order to get attention from their partners. In this situation, emotional competencies such as resilience should be learned (González-Jiménez, 2013).

Moral & Sirvent (2008), state that a good set of social and interpersonal abilities, a good self-concept and self-esteem, along with an efficient emotional intelligence, with a social identity developed through socializing concepts inside the family and the peer group, a demystifying vision of the idealization of the couple and emotional fortitude are factors that provide protection against relational dependency disorders. Likewise, Soriano & González-Jiménez (2013) propose an early education based on emotional competencies.

Based on the results of this study we can conclude that emotional dependency is present in our youths and that the best way to become emotionally stable is through learning how to gain emotional intelligence. We recommend that in the early childhood development stage (kindergarten) emphasis is made regarding this issue. This way in the future we will obtain healthy and stable social relationships in adolescence and adulthood (González-Jiménez, 2011).

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