



EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY AND THE IMPACTS ON THE LIVES OF PEOPLE: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: emotional dependency is a pattern of behavior where a person develops a strong need to be emotionally attached to another person, constantly seeking the approval, validation, and emotional security on the part of that person. This can lead to difficulty in terms of making independent decisions, low self-esteem and intense fear of abandonment. **Objective:** to conduct a systematic literature review on emotional dependency and its impacts on the lives of people. **Methodology:** this is a systematic literature review, based on descriptive research, whose articles were selected in May 2023 in the LILACS, APA PsycNet and PubMed databases, from the combination of the descriptors “Psychological dependency”; “Emotional dependency”; “Interpersonal dependency”; and “Affective dependency”. As for the selection of works, those published in English, Spanish and Portuguese were determined. A critical analysis was performed, and the articles related to the theme and made available in full were filtered. Accordingly, 16 articles were selected for this study. **Results and Discussion:** it is perceived that there is a scarcity of articles on emotional dependency and that the studies found present divergences in the used terminology. Emotional dependency can be divided into passive or active, being associated with different controlling profiles, such as natural victim, intentional victim, avenger and narcissist. **Conclusion:** emotional dependency occurs when a person is dependent on the state or actions of another person, resulting in an emotional prison that limits freedom and authenticity, leading to a lack of permission to move on.

KEYWORDS

Emotional dependency, interpersonal dependency, Dependent Personality Disorder, Affective dependency, Sentimental dependency and Love dependency.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional dependency is a theme that has received great attention from the population, being addressed in books, movies and television programs. This topic has also been gaining space in the scientific field. However, despite the growing number of investigations in the area, this matter is still little studied. In addition, studies have used a variety of terminologies, which points to a conceptual and nominal confusion about emotional dependency. However, the authors who defined emotional dependency pointed out that the person with this disorder needs the other to have emotional stability (Izquierdo Martínez & Gomes-Acosta, 2013; Sussman, 2010; Bution and Wechsler, 2016).

Some factors may contribute to the development of emotional dependency, including phylogenetic and cultural ones, as well as attachment development in childhood (Bution and Wechsler, 2016), thus characterizing it as multifactorial. Phylogenetic factors are related to the neurobiological component, which would explain emotional dependency from a fixation on neuronal overactivation (Sussman, 2010). A dysfunction in the neural mechanisms or their combination with other factors, such as family environment, attachment styles and culture, could lead the individual to establish pathological relationships (Bution and Wechsler, 2016).

Regarding prevalence, studies are inconsistent, where values ranged from 5% to 10% in a study by Sussman (2010) and 25% in the research by Lemos et al. (2012). As for gender, the data are also inconclusive, without significant relationship between gender and addiction (Lemos et al., 2012).

Studies indicate that individuals with emotional dependency are more likely to perpetrate or suffer from domestic violence (Bornstein, 2006; Guadalupe, 2021), have a higher risk of presenting self-destructive behaviors, with a higher risk of suicide and parasuicide (Bornstein, 2012), develop physical diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, as well as other psychopathologies, such as eating disorders, anxiety disorders and somatizations (Arntz, 2005; Bornstein, 2012).

Due to the consequences previously pointed out and the number of people suffering from emotional dependency, it is necessary to obtain a more comprehensive view of the theme. Accordingly, the present study has the objective of conducting a systematic literature review on emotional dependency and its impacts on the lives of people.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic review of the literature was conducted with the objective of investigating papers that addressed emotional dependency, involving only genuine dependencies, i.e., affective dependencies without the involvement of individuals making use of chemical substances, following a multi-step operational process.

Firstly, the research question was formulated: “What are the available evidence on emotional dependency?”. After that, the following descriptors were selected, in English and Portuguese, which were associated using the Boolean operators “AND” and “OR”: “Psychological dependency”; “Emotional dependency”; “Interpersonal dependency”; and “Affective dependency”. The descriptors were selected using unique identifiers from the DeCS/MeSH registry and a search was carried out for studies and bibliographic references in the literature, based on a bibliographic search in electronic databases, among which PubMed, LILACS and APA PsycNet are included.

These sources of information stand out by providing practical access, by making available, through the Internet, a wide range of scientific production. This fact promotes greater interaction between professionals and researchers from around the world, enabling the acquisition, evaluation, criticism, application and review of knowledge. Papers published in English, Portuguese and Spanish, of a qualitative or quantitative nature, were included. Research involving the validation of psychological evaluation instruments, those with underage participants, books, theses and non-scientific articles were excluded. In addition, articles dealing with mediated dependencies, such as codependency and bi-dependency, were excluded.

The association between the descriptors used and the results found here is described in Table 01. In the PubMed database, a digital file produced by the National Library of Medicine in the United States, the filters “Full text, Clinical Trial, Evaluation Study, Guideline, Meta-Analysis, Observational Study, Practice Guideline, Randomized Controlled Trial, Systematic Review, in the last 5 years”. In the LILACS database, which contains scientific and technical production on health in Latin American/Caribbean countries, the following filters were used: “Full text, Risk_Factors_Studies, Prognostic_Studies,, Observational_Studies, Qualitative_Research, Prevalence_Studies, Diagnostic_Studies, Etiology_Studies, Guideline, Clinical_Trials, Evaluation_Studies, Incidence_Studies, Systematic_Reviews, 2018

To 2023, English, Spanish And Portuguese”. In the APA PsycNet database, developed by the American Psychological Association, filters were not used due to the scarcity of results found in the initial searches.

After carefully following the established requirements, the titles and abstracts of the pre-selected papers were read in order to verify whether they were adequate to the central question. All the 12 analyzed primary articles met the established criteria and were not excluded.

A descriptive analysis of the 12 articles was carried out, which allowed us to evaluate the level and quality of the available evidence, thus classifying them according to the six levels of evidence defined by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). The need for future research on the theme in question was identified. Due to the scarcity of articles on the addressed theme, the references of the selected articles were also reviewed, and eight more articles were included. Finally, it is important to underline that this study was conducted in accordance with international and national ethical principles of research, and the authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Table 01: Associations between descriptors used in the PubMed, APA PsycNet and LILACS databases between May and June 2023.

Descriptors	Total results without filters	Total results with filters	Initially selected	Repetitions	Total selected after excluding repetitions
Pubmed					
Psychological AND Dependency	4922	51	0	0	0
Emotional AND dependency	5364	62	2	0	2
Interpersonal AND dependency	5870	77	2	2	0
Affective AND dependency	6748	158	4	2	2
LILACS					
Dependência AND Emocional	547	131	7	0	7
Dependência AND Psicológica	1170	89	6	5	1
Dependência AND Interpessoal	371	34	4	4	0

Table 2: Selected characteristics of studies on Emotional Dependency by year of publication.

Author/year/ country / language	Study type	Used ter	Sample	Title	Instrument
Arntz 2005 Holanda Inglês	Review	Emotional Dependency		Pathological Dependency: Distinguishing Functional from Emotional Dependency	
Bornstein, 2006 USA Inglês	Review	Emotional Dependency		The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence	
Bornstein, 2012 USA Inglês	Review	Interpersonal Dependency		Illuminating a Neglected Clinical Issue: Societal Costs of Interpersonal Dependency and Dependent Personality Disorder	
Bution and Wechsler, 2016 Brasil Português	Review	Dependência Emocional		Dependência emocional: uma revisão sistemática da literatura	

Dependência AND Afetiva	206	8	0	0	0
APA PsycNet					
Psychological AND Dependency	5	0	0	0	0
Emotional AND dependency	0	0	0	0	0
Interpersonal AND dependency	0	0	0	0	0
Affective AND dependency	0	0	0	0	0
Psychological AND Dependency	91	0	0	0	0

RESULTS

Initially, 12 studies found from the literature review in databases were included in this research. Due to the scarcity of results, the references cited in the analyzed articles were evaluated; and, of these, four complementary articles were selected for review, thus generating a total of 16 analyzed studies, whose results were compiled and presented in Table 2.

Of the selected articles, seven were theoretical studies focusing on literature review. The others were studies that analyzed a target population consisting of undergraduate and high school students (n=5), women who suffered aggression from their partners (n=2), couples (n=1) and people from the general population (n=1). The most used instrument to measure the dependency of participants was the Emotional Dependency Questionnaire, developed by Lemos and Londoño (2006). Most studies were developed with a Latin American population (n=6). It is also worth underlining that 63% of the included studies were published in the Spanish language.

There was a scarcity of published scientific articles on the theme of this research, emotional dependency. Nevertheless, there has been a growing interest in this theme in the last decade, with most studies involving a sample of the population being published in the last 10 years.

It was also found that, although the definition was very close from one study to another, the studies differed in terms of the used nomenclature. Emotional dependency (n=9), interpersonal dependency (n=2), affective dependency (n=4) and sentimental dependency (n=1) were the terms used by the authors.

Chaffa-Quise (2021) Ecuador Espanhol	Observational, prospective, cross-sectional, analytical	Dependência emocional	300 women aged between 18 and 65	Dependencia emocional y violencia en mujeres atendidas en la Fundación Nosotras con Equidad, de Riobamba	Questionário de Dependência Emocional, elaborado por Lemos e Londoño (2006)
Izquierd, 2013 Brasil Espanhol	Review	Dependencia afectiva		Dependencia afectiva: abordaje desde una perspectiva contextual	
Jaramillo, 2009 Colômbia Espanhol	Empírica	Dependencia emocional	569 university students	Esquemas desadaptativos tempranos en estudiantes universitários con dependencia emocional	Emotional Dependence Questionnaire (CDE) construído e validado por Lemos e Londoño (2006) e o Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire (YSQ 11F): instrumento desenvolvido por Jeffrey Young e Gary Brown em 1990
Kane, e Bornstein, 2017 USA Inglês	Meta-analytical review	Interpersonal Dependency	14 studies	Unhealthy dependency in victims and perpetrators of child maltreatment: A meta-analytic review	
Lemos, 2012 Colômbia Espanhol	Empirical	Dependencia Emocional	569 university students	Perfil cognitivo de la dependencia emocional em estudiantes universitários en Medellín, Colombia	Questionário de Dependência Emocional (CDE) Lemos & Londoño, 2006.
Moyeda, 2019 México Espanhol	Empirical	Dependencia emocional	Mexican students, 34 high school students and 61 undergraduate students	Dependencia emocional y Mitos del amor en estudiantes de dos niveles educativos	Cuestionario de Dependencia Emocional (Lemos & Londoño, 2006). Escala de Mitos, Falacias y Creencias Amorosas Erróneas del Amor Romántico. (EMFCAEAR) (Luzón, Ramos, Recio, & de la Peña, 2010).
Jimenez & Ruiz, 2008 Espanha Espanhol	Review	Dependencias sentimentales o afectivas		Dependencias sentimentales o afectivas: etiología, clasificación y evaluación	
Jimenez & Ruiz, 2009 Espanha Espanhol	Case-control	Dependencia afetiva	78 people in the case group and 311 in the control group	Dependencia Afectiva y Género: Perfil Sintomático Diferencial em Dependientes Afectivos Españoles	Teste de Dependências Emocionais (TDS-100)
Guadalupe, 2021 Ecuador Espanhol	Correlational non-experimental	Dependencia afectiva	60 women who reported having suffered some kind of violence from their partners	Dependencia afectiva y violencia intrafamiliar en una población de Chimborazo, Ecuador.	Cuestionario de Dependencia Emocional (CDE) de Lemos e Londoño.
Rubinstein, 2007 Israel Inglês	Empirical	Dependencia Emocional	University students: 601 Israeli Jewish undergraduate students	Dependencia emocional en las relaciones de pareja como Síndrome de Artemisa: modelo explicativo	A versão abreviada de Costa e McCrae (1992) do NEO-FFI
Zarate-Depraect, 2022 México Espanhol	Quantitative, non-experimental, exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional	Dependencia Emocional	332 medical students	Dependencia emocional en estudiantes de Medicina	Escala de dependência emocional de Ancima, Caballero, Cirilo e Aguirre (2013)

DISCUSSION

Initially, a brief description of the terminologies found here, as described by the included authors will be discussed. Subsequently, the concept of dependency, relational disorders with emphasis on Emotional Dependency (ED), characterization of Dependent Personality Disorder, profile of people with ED, updating the concept of ED, passive and active ED and controlling profiles will be addressed.

The greatest challenge found in this study was the large number of terminologies used by the authors, which makes it difficult to compare the results of the research included in it.

This fact highlights a difficulty in terms of defining Emotional Dependency. However, according to Bution and Wechsler (2016), the term Emotional Dependency is the most used for the clinical picture, although it is also known as interpersonal dependency, dependent

personality disorder, love dependency, pathological love, obsessive love and dependency in relationships.

It is worth underlining that “addiction” is usually associated with the use of psychoactive substances or drugs. However, dependencies on feelings, proposed by Jimenez & Ruiz, (2009) or dependencies on relationships, proposed by Sirvent (2000), also deserve to be considered. Affective or sentimental dependencies are defined as relational disorders characterized by the appearance of addictive behaviors in interpersonal relationships based on role asymmetry and a dependent attitude towards the subject (Jimenez & Ruiz, 2008).

Relational dependencies can be classified into two types: Genuine, when only one pathology related to affective dependency is involved; and Mediated, when the subject is addicted or lives with and depends on another (Sirvent, 2000). Considering this classification, the present study focused on a subtype of genuine dependency: Emotional Dependency.

Emotional dependency has been considered a pattern that involves cognitive (perception of self as vulnerable, weak and ineffective), affective (fear of abandonment and negative evaluation of the other), motivational (desire for guidance, protection, help and approval from others) and behavioral (tendency to give in to the demands of others in social interactions) aspects focused on the other as a source of satisfaction and personal security (Bornstein, 2006). This suggests that the individual who presents this pattern may conceive that life will only make sense if it is within an affective relationship, even when this causes him/her pain and dissatisfaction, which implies mistaken constructions in relation to love, life as a couple and himself/herself (Lemos, 2012). The belief that love overcomes all and that an uncomfortable or even violent situation will improve in the long run leads some people to put up with adverse conditions, or even to strive to satisfy the demands of their partners with the intention of managing or solving the problems that arise, thus putting these demands before even their own needs (Moyeda, 2019).

Jimenez & Ruiz, (2008) define Emotional Dependency as a chronic pattern of unsatisfied affective demands, which seek to be satisfied through interpersonal relationships characterized by pathological attachment. Bution and Wechsler (2016) also point out that emotional dependency is characterized by pathological attachment and represents a recurring pattern of need that can only be relieved when it is met, thus constructing “parasitic” relationships. In this context, all emotional dependency supposes a maladaptive behavior to an affective-dependent relationship (Jimenez & Ruiz, 2008) and would be characterized by addictive behaviors that would be based on interpersonal relationships (Sirvent, 2000).

In a study by Zarate-Depraet (2022), emotional dependency is pointed out as a personality disorder, which can be originated in childhood, when the child does not feel loved by people important to him/her. In the course of their lives, these people are motivated to please others in order to be accepted, protected and supported; therefore, they act to satisfy others and to avoid being abandoned.

The fifth edition of the DSM characterizes Dependent Personality Disorder as a pattern that emerges in early adulthood and is present in various contexts. The individual with this disorder has a pervasive and excessive need to be cared for, which leads to submission and attachment behaviors. Chronic physical illness or separation anxiety disorder in childhood or adolescence may predispose the individual to the development of this disorder.

The studies also found that unemployed students living with their parents were significantly more dependent than employed students who did not live with their parents and that maltreated children showed high levels of dependency in adulthood (Rubinstein, 2007; Kane e Bornstein 2017).

Bution and Wechsler (2016) argue that relational dependencies are frequent in the clinics, despite being ignored by many professionals. In addition, most patients do not seek help. Therefore, it is necessary to describe the main characteristics that affect people with this condition. According to the DSM-V, in order to qualify as an individual with Dependent Personality Disorder, he/she must exhibit at least five of the following characteristics: Difficulty in terms of making everyday decisions without advice and reassurance from others; Need for others

to take responsibility for most major areas of his/her life; Difficulties in terms of expressing disagreement with others due to fear of losing support or approval; Difficulty in terms of independently initiating projects or doing things; May be fearful of becoming or appearing more competent, as he/she may believe this will lead to abandonment; Goes to extremes to get affection and support from others, to the point of volunteering to do unpleasant things; Feels uncomfortable or helpless when alone due to exaggerated fears of being unable to care for oneself; Urgently seeks another relationship as a source of care and support soon after an intimate relationship ends; Has unrealistic worries about fears of being left to fend for themselves. These characteristics are in line with those described by the World Health Organization (WHO) (1992).

The profile of emotional dependents found in the studies reviewed in this research resembles those pointed out by DSM-V and WHO. In general, people who have emotional dependency present: Submission and subordination behaviors in relation to the partner; Fear of abandonment or relationship breakup; Need for attention and to be loved; Difficulty in terms of making decisions in their relationships; Constant search for approval from those on whom they depend; Need to take excessive care of the other, even if they neglect their activities and self-care to do so; Conditional love (giving something already with the intention of receiving something back); Pseudosymbiosis (not being complete without the other); Affective maladjustments in the form of negative feelings (guilt, emotional emptiness, fear of abandonment); Tendency to choose exploitative partners, being complacent with the inexhaustible narcissism of their partners; Tendency to self-destructive personality and low self-esteem; Excessive worries related to the anticipation of a possible separation from their partners (abstinence and desire); Tendency to endure contempt and humiliation; Tendency to emotional and/or physical abuse; Fear of negative evaluation and loneliness; and Intolerance to loneliness (Jimenez & Ruiz, 2008; Jimenez & Ruiz, 2009; Izquierdo & Gómez-Acosta, 2013; Chaffa-Quise, 2021; Jaramillo, 2009).

It is well known that human beings differ from other animals in that they are rational beings. Nevertheless, it is likely that having feelings for each other and the way in which what others feel for us is considered is another important difference. Accordingly, there is an emotional relationship among human beings and often this relationship generates an interference, which will create an ED relationship.

Given the above, it is suggested that ED can be divided into active or passive. Active ED is related to a person who has the ability to direct or influence the emotional state of another person, impacting on his/her decision-making and ability to act. In relation to passive ED, the person allows himself/herself to be directed or influenced by another individual in his/her emotional state, impacting on his/her decisions and actions. In addition, a more detailed and specific observation on this theme allows us to segment the profile of emotional dependents, pointed out in the literature, into four types of profiles of controlling patterns: the natural victim, the intentional victim, the avenger and the narcissist.

In the first type, the natural victim controlling pattern profile, the person has fragility and aims to show what he/she is going through to the other person, with the expectation of being more loved, more seen and, consequently, holding the person for longer by his/her side. Often, damage is generated in the other person as a consequence, where there is no intention to generate this damage.

In the second type, the intentional victim controlling pattern profile, just like in the natural victim controlling pattern profile, the person also has a weakness and is going through something. The difference is that the person with this controlling pattern has found a use for his/her fragility and uses it against the other, in an attempt to trap and lure them, with the intention of creating some benefit for himself/herself.

In the third type, the revengeful controller pattern profile, the person has no intention of showing what he/she is going through, even because he/she may not be going through anything, his/her objective is to generate damage to the other. In this pattern, the person does not have the ability to move on, so he/she tries to prevent the other from moving on as well.

In the fourth type, the narcissistic controlling pattern profile, here not

referring to narcissistic personality disorder, the person wants to value his/her importance, his/her image and his/her significance. His/her major objective is to generate a benefit for himself/herself. He/she has no intention of generating damage to the other, although often this damage is generated as a consequence. It is worth underlining that the person who manifests ED can move from one controlling profile to the other depending on the relationship.

The studies included participants from different continents, America, Europe, Oceania and Asia, which suggests that ED is present in all cultures. Bornstein (2011) pointed out that adults from sociocentric cultures, such as Japan and India, indicated higher levels of self-reported emotional dependency when compared to those from more individualistic cultures, such as the United States and Great Britain. In this study, it was noted that Latin Americans comprised the largest target population, thus suggesting that researchers have more interest in this theme in sociocentric cultures.

It is worth underlining that this study presented as a limitation the possible exclusion of some studies due to the diversity of nomenclatures, despite the care with the choice of the descriptors used here. In addition, the included studies differ in terms of study population, interventions, study designs, outcome measures and other factors. This heterogeneity may make it difficult to directly combine study results and may limit the generalizability of the review findings.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that emotional dependency is when the state or the action of a person depends on the state or action of another person. In this context, it is observed that emotional dependency is a real prison, which takes away from people the permission to be who they are, the permission for them to do what they want to do and the permission to get it right or to get it wrong. Finally, it is important to underline that emotional dependency can be overcome with awareness, self-knowledge and adequate support. Support groups, individual or couple therapy, as well as the development of self-esteem and emotional self-reliance skills, can be valuable resources for dealing with the impacts of emotional dependency and promoting healthier and more balanced interpersonal relationships.

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