

ARE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES MEDIATORS BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN YOUNG COUPLES?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the relationship between attachment and satisfaction with the partner relationship, considering the mediating role of emotional competences, and taking into account the influence of gender, age, and duration of the relationship. 265 Spanish youths (59.2% women) between 18 and 36 years of age with a current partner participated in the study. The most relevant results indicate that subjects with a dismissive avoidant style show less relationship satisfaction. Along with the fearful style, they are the ones with the poorest emotional skills. Attachment anxiety and avoidance are negatively related to relationship satisfaction, being mediated by emotional regulation. The importance of developing emotional education programs in youths as a way of mitigating the effect an insecure attachment style is discussed.

KEY WORDS: *attachment, emotional competences, relationship satisfaction, youth, couple.*

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es estudiar la relación entre el apego y la satisfacción con la relación de pareja, considerando el papel mediador de las competencias emocionales, y controlando la influencia del género, la edad y la duración de la relación. En el estudio participaron 265 jóvenes españoles (59,2% mujeres) de entre 18 y 36 años con pareja actual. Los resultados más relevantes indican que el estilo evitativo alejado presenta una menor satisfacción en la relación. Junto con el estilo temeroso son los que tienen las habilidades emocionales más pobres. La ansiedad y la evitación del apego se relacionan negativamente con la satisfacción en la relación, siendo mediadas por la regulación emocional. Se discute la importancia de desarrollar programas de educación emocional en los jóvenes como forma de mitigar el efecto de un estilo de apego inseguro.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: *apego, competencias emocionales, satisfacción en la relación, jóvenes, pareja.*

Introduction

What do we mean by a satisfactory relationship? There are probably individual differences in the nuances of the definition, depending on the characteristics of whoever is defining it: their cultural, ethnic and/or religious context, the historical era in which they live, their socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender and/or socio-economic level), and the personal, psychological and situational factors that have affected their life experience, among various other determining factors (Mahar et al., 2020).

From our western perspective, we may define a partner relationship as a relatively stable sentimental bond between two people who share emotional and intellectual intimacy, establish a commitment by planning shared projects, define a joint identity as a couple, and present it to those around them as such (Roberson et al., 2018). Although not everyone has or wants a partner relationship, in our society the partner is considered one of the most important social bonds (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). At the beginning of adulthood, one of the tasks in which young people invest a large proportion of their personal resources is establishing and maintaining a satisfactory relationship (Shoop, 2019).

Relationship satisfaction is defined as the overall subjective assessment of the quality of their relationship, which should not be confused with commitment (long-term relationships), or with stability (temporary persistence of the relationship) (Li & Fung, 2011). According to previous studies, people's assessment of satisfaction with their relationship has a strong influence on their well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019), their quality of life (Molero et al., 2017; Roberson et al., 2018), their happiness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013) and their overall health (Cotter & Kerschner, 2018; Ditzen et al., 2019).

It is therefore important to study the factors that influence the quality of relationships, and to determine the personal and circumstantial conditions that lead young people to feel satisfied with their relationship (Vater & Schröder-Abé, 2015). This will give psychology professionals a map of variables which they can use to intervene to help people to maintain healthy and violence-free relationships (Exner-Cortens et al., 2019).

One of the factors that has been found to be a consistent predictor of relationship satisfaction is the attachment style of each partner (Diamond et al., 2018). Attachment is the capacity that leads people to build and maintain emotional ties with other human beings throughout their life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The main functions of attachment are the search for security and protection, provided by primary caregivers in early childhood, and later by interpersonal relationships — such as the intimate partner — in adulthood (Manning et al., 2017).

A model of four categories of adult attachment was proposed, being one style secure and three insecure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). (a) Secure attachment

is a style able to recognise own negative emotional reactions and use appropriate strategies in interpersonal conflict or other stressful situations. They express their emotions appropriately and ask others for help when they need it. (b) Dismissive avoidant is a style which tend to minimize or deny their negative emotional reactions, hiding their feelings from others. As a result, they are not able to ask for help or show any level of dependence, and value their independence above all else (Andriopoulos & Kafetsios, 2015). (c) Fearful avoidant style has mixed feelings about intimate relationships: although they desire them, they tend to be uncomfortable with emotional closeness due to fear of rejection; they do not believe they are enough for others, and they do not trust their intentions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). (d) Preoccupied style has a strong need for approval and they often need outside help to regulate their emotions. People with preoccupied attachment generally have lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Valikhani et al., 2018).

Brennan et al. (1998) subsequently proposed that it is possible to arrive at the different categories of attachment by combining two underlying attachment dimensions: attachment anxiety (worries about affective bonds not being available, fear of being abandoned, rejected, or not being enough for others) and attachment avoidance (distrust of others, need of independence and emotional distance, avoidance of intimacy). Secure has low anxiety and low avoidance, dismissive avoidant has low anxiety and high avoidance, fearful avoidant has high anxiety and high avoidance, and preoccupied has high anxiety and low avoidance (Drake, 2014). Previous studies suggest that high levels of anxiety and avoidance in attachment are associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017; Vollmann et al., 2019). Anxiety is associated with pessimistic and negative attributions of the relationship, higher levels of conflict, and negative affect (Kimmes et al., 2015; Molero et al., 2017). Avoidance is associated with a lack of trust in the partner and less perceived support from the partner (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017).

One of the variables related both with attachment and relationship satisfaction are emotional competences. These are defined as emotional skills that are developed in the immediate social context, in response to personal needs and the demands of the environment (Takšić et al., 2009). People with well-developed emotional competences have better social and communication skills and cope better with conflict, leading to more positive and healthy social interactions (Levenson et al., 2014).

Emotional competences are positively related to interpersonal variables, such as relationship satisfaction (Abbasi et al., 2016; Belus et al., 2019; Eslami et al., 2014; Pollock et al., 2017; Wollny et al., 2019). Well-developed emotional competences foster the ability to perceive and consider one's partner's feelings, as well as to understand, name, and adequately express one's emotional states (LeBlanc et al., 2019). All this leads to a better management of emotions, resolving relationship conflicts in a constructive way, without resorting to aggressiveness (Megías et al., 2018). A high emotional competence therefore not only increases relationship

satisfaction, but also prevents situations of violence in the relationship, increases the quality of the bond and the adjustment in the relationship (Blázquez-Alonso et al., 2012; Rusu et al., 2019).

Emotional competences are closely related to attachment theory (Ben-Naim et al., 2013). Internal working models (mental schemes through which a person understands others and herself according to attachment style) are related with the set of rules that guide emotional reactions to stressful situations. Previous studies suggest that insecure attachment is associated with greater difficulties in understanding one's own and others' emotional states, identifying and describing emotions, and regulating them (Constant et al., 2018; del Aguilar-Luzón et al., 2012).

Is a person with insecure attachment style conditioned to experience less satisfaction in his or her adult relationships? Previous studies suggest that emotional competences, and emotional regulation in particular, mediates the attachment's relationship with other similar variables as subjective well-being (Karremman & Vingerhoets, 2012; Mónaco et al., 2021) and health (Marks et al., 2016; Nielsen et al., 2017). However, this mediation has not been studied with relationship satisfaction (Abbasi et al., 2016; Steele & Steele, 2017).

Given the influence that relationships' quality has on people's mental health, we consider that attend sentimental bonds it is a matter of public health and social responsibility (Keller, 2019). This paper focuses on Spanish young people, considering youth a vital period of change and adaptation to adult roles (Sánchez-Queija et al., 2018). Spanish young people are a population with specific difficulties arising from a complex historical, social and economic context, so the results from other parts of the world cannot be generalized to them (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Research about encouraging young people to establish healthy and satisfying relationships is a way of promoting health of all the population and future families (Baggio et al., 2017; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Furthermore, the effects of gender, age and relationship duration have been controlled in the present study. Some research has pointed out that emotional competences increase as age increases (Kafetsios, 2004). Others suggest that women have higher emotional competences than men, and especially for managing emotions (Geng, 2018). According to the Temporal Adult Romantic Attachment (TARA) model, the association between insecure attachment and low relationship satisfaction becomes stronger and more negative the longer a relationship lasts (Hadden et al., 2014). However, there seems to be no previous literature that considers the influence of these demographic variables on the relationship between attachment, emotional competences and partner satisfaction in youth.

The aim of this paper was to analyse the relationship between attachment and satisfaction with the partner relationship, considering the mediating role of emotional competences, and controlling for the influence of gender, age and relationship duration. The hypotheses are: (H1) anxiety and avoidance in attachment will be negatively related to emotional competences and to relationship satisfaction; (H2) emotional competences will be positively related to relationship satisfaction;

(H3) people with secure attachment will have higher emotional competences and higher relationship satisfaction than people with insecure attachment; (H4) emotional competences will mediate this relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction; and (H5) gender, age and duration of the relationship will be influential variables in this mediation.

Method

Participants

A total of 265 Spanish young people (157 women) between the ages of 18 and 36 years ($M= 23.81$; $SD= 3.79$), who are currently in a relationship, participated in the study. The duration of their relationships was between 3 months and 11 years ($M= 40.58$ months; $SD= 27.36$).

Instruments

- a) *Experience in Close Relationship Scale* (ECR-S; Brennan et al., 1998), validated version in Spanish by Alonso-Arbiol et al. (2008). The ECR-S was used to measure attachment. This instrument consists of 36 items with a seven-point Likert scale (1= Totally disagree; 7= Totally agree). It assesses two dimensions of attachment: anxiety (fear of rejection and abandonment by romantic partners) and avoidance (the degree to which the person feels uncomfortable maintaining emotional intimacy with others). The reliability of our sample was very good ($\alpha_{\text{anxiety}}= .83$; $\alpha_{\text{avoidance}}= .88$).
- b) *Emotional Skills and Competences Questionnaire* (ESCQ-21; Takšić et al., 2009), Spanish validation by Schoeps et al. (2019). The ESCQ-21 consists of 21 items with a 6-point Likert scale (1= Never; 6= Always). It evaluates emotional intelligence based on competences on three scales: "perception and understanding", "labelling and expression" and "management and regulation". The reliability of the scales in the short version of 21 items is good, with Cronbach's alpha being .84, .90 and .79 respectively for all three scales. The reliability for the sample in this study was very good ($\alpha_{\text{perception}}= .85$; $\alpha_{\text{labelling}}= .93$; $\alpha_{\text{management}}= .73$).
- c) *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS; Hendrick et al., 1998), Spanish validation by Lozano et al. (2010). The RAS consists of seven items in a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree). The questions refer to the degree of satisfaction, quality of the relationship, the coverage of needs and difficulties in the relationship. This instrument provides an overall score that indicates the degree of general relationship satisfaction, with Cronbach's alpha of .86. The reliability for this study was very good ($\alpha= .83$).

Procedure

First, the project and the evaluation battery were drawn up and approved by the University of Valencia's ethics committee (H152846236674), ensuring that the fundamental principles set out in the Helsinki Declaration and the Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights were respected. The requirements established in Spanish legislation concerning biomedical research, personal data protection and bioethics were met, as confidentiality and anonymity. The data were collected online using the software LimeSurvey during year 2019. Finally, data were statistically analysed.

Data analysis

For statistical analysis we used SPSS version 24.0 and PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), a tool that integrates functions for mediation and moderation analysis. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were performed. Finally, two mediation models produced with PROCESS (model number 4) were tested. The variables gender, age and duration of the relationship were controlled in both models. The bootstrapping for the indirect effects was determined to be 10.000, and the confidence level for the confidence intervals was 95%. The estimation for the confidence intervals was performed using the ordinary least squares (OLS) and maximum likelihood (ML) method. The total effects and direct effects of the partial mediation model were also calculated.

Results

Descriptive statistics

As seen in the descriptive statistics (Table 1), values of asymmetry below 2 and values of kurtosis below 7 indicate a normal distribution, and as such the variables in this study can be handled as a normal distribution.

Table 1

Descriptive analysis of attachment, emotional competences and relationship satisfaction

Variable	Rank	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Asymmetry	Kurtosis
Anxiety (Attachment)	5.50	1.28	6.78	3.46 (1.04)	0.39	-0.12
Avoidance (Attachment)	3.78	1.06	4.83	2.14 (0.67)	0.99	1.14
Perception & Understanding	27.00	15.00	42.00	31.64 (4.47)	-0.49	0.67
Expression & Labelling	31.00	11.00	42.00	31.50 (6.49)	-0.82	0.52
Manage & Regulation	30.00	12.00	42.00	31.37 (4.78)	-0.65	1.20
Satisfaction with relationship	20.00	15.00	35.00	31.02 (3.87)	-1.37	2.02

Relationships between variables

In the bivariate correlations (Table 2), both dimensions of insecure attachment (both attachment anxiety and avoidance of intimacy) correlated negatively and significantly with relationship satisfaction. Anxiety correlated negatively and significantly with two of the emotional competences assessed: expression and labelling of emotions, and emotional management and regulation. Avoidance correlated with all three emotional competences, since apart from the two mentioned above, it also correlated negatively and significantly with emotional perception and understanding. Interestingly, avoidance was more strongly related than anxiety to difficulty in expressing and labelling emotions. In addition, we observed that relationship satisfaction was only related to emotional competence of emotional management and regulation in a positive and significant way.

Table 2
Pearson correlations between variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Anxiety (Attachment)	--				
2. Avoidance (Attachment)	.18**	--			
3. Perception & Understanding	.01	-.16**	--		
4. Expression & Labelling	-.18**	-.34**	.47**	--	
5. Manage & Regulation	-.21**	-.23**	.49**	.45**	--
6. Satisfaction with relationship	-.34**	-.39**	.06	.11	.21**

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Analysis of attachment styles

After classifying the study participants according to their attachment style using the two dimensions of attachment and anxiety, following the indications and scales provided by the Spanish adaptation of the instrument (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2008), a frequency study of the number of people with each attachment style in our sample was carried out ($N = 265$). We observed that 165 people had secure attachment (61.1%) and 100 people had insecure attachment (38.9%). Within the insecure attachment group, 33 people were classified as having dismissive-avoidant attachment (12.5%), 54 people as having preoccupied attachment (20.4%) and 16 people as having fearful-avoidant attachment (6%).

The results of the multivariate test indicated a Wilks' Lambda value of .653 with 12 degrees of freedom, and an F of 9.96 significant at $p \leq .001$. Regarding the inter-subject effects, there were significant differences according to the type of attachment in the three emotional competences and in the relationship satisfaction. In the *post hoc* tests (Table 3), the results indicated that people with secure attachment score significantly higher than people with dismissive-avoidant attachment in all three emotional competences studied, as well as in relationship

satisfaction. In addition, people with secure attachment scored significantly higher for expression and labelling of emotions, and for emotional management and regulation than people with fearful-avoidant attachment. Secure people also felt more relationship satisfaction than those with a preoccupied attachment. Finally, despite insecure styles, people with preoccupied attachment had a significantly greater ability to express and label their emotions than people with dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachments.

Table 3
Post hoc tests (Bonferroni)

Emotional competence	Attachment style		Mean differ. (I - J)	Error	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Perception & Understanding	Secure	Dismissive	2.53*	.84	.28	4.77
		Fearful	-.39	1.16	-3.47	2.68
		Preoccupied	-.04	.69	-1.89	1.80
	Dismissive	Fearful	-2.92	1.34	-6.49	.66
		Preoccupied	-2.57	.98	-5.16	.024
	Fearful	Preoccupied	.35	1.26	-2.99	3.69
Expression & Labelling	Secure	Dismissive	6.74*	1.14	3.70	9.78
		Fearful	6.98*	1.57	2.81	11.15
		Preoccupied	1.09	.94	-1.40	3.59
	Dismissive	Fearful	.24	1.82	-4.60	5.09
		Preoccupied	-5.65*	1.32	-9.16	-2.13
	Fearful	Preoccupied	-5.89*	1.70	-10.42	-1.36
Manage & Regulation	Secure	Dismissive	3.48*	.88	1.15	5.81
		Fearful	3.98*	1.20	.78	7.19
		Preoccupied	1.52	.72	-.40	3.45
	Dismissive	Fearful	.50	1.40	-3.22	4.23
		Preoccupied	-1.95	1.02	-4.66	.75
	Fearful	Preoccupied	-2.46	1.31	-5.94	1.02
Satisfaction with relationship	Secure	Dismissive	4.64*	.67	2.87	6.42
		Fearful	2.09	.92	-.34	4.52
		Preoccupied	2.70*	.55	1.24	4.16
	Dismissive	Fearful	-2.55	1.06	-5.38	.28
		Preoccupied	-1.94	.77	-3.99	.12
	Fearful	Preoccupied	.61	.99	-2.03	3.26

Notes: differ.= differences; LLCI= Lower limit; ULCI= Upper limit. * $p < .05$.

Mediation analysis

The first analysis of mediation (Figure 1) showed that attachment anxiety significantly and negatively influences the ability to express and label emotions, as well as the ability to manage and regulate them. At the same time, attachment anxiety continued to have a significant negative direct effect on relationship satisfaction, and as such its mediation was partial rather than complete. Emotional management and regulation mediated the relationship between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction. Anxiety and emotional regulation explained 15.09% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. Table 4 shows the total effect, direct effect and indirect effects of this mediation. The total indirect effect had a coefficient= .11; Boot SE= .08; BootLLCI= -.30; BootULCI= .03.

Figure 1
Mediation model with attachment anxiety

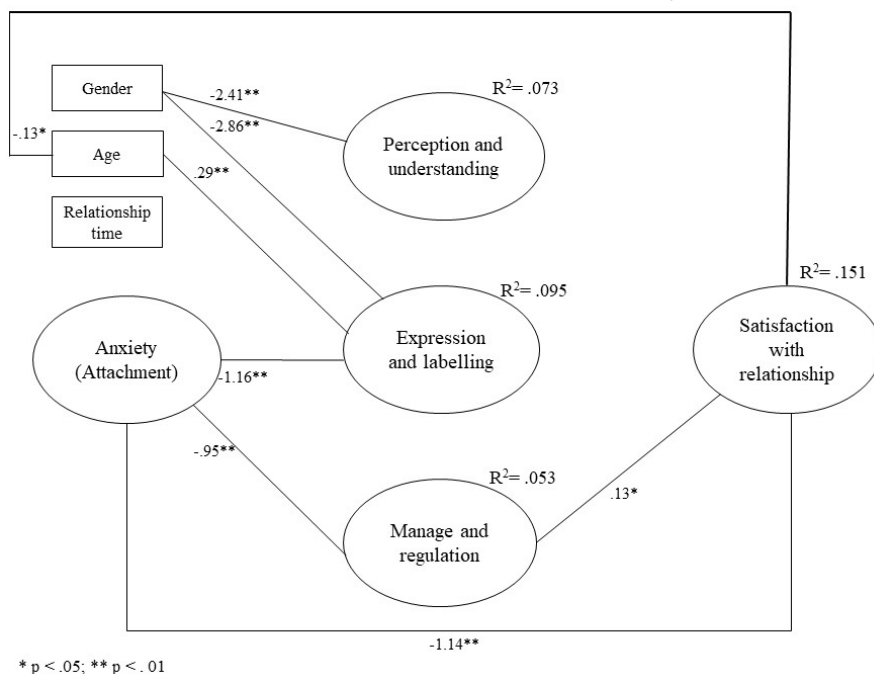


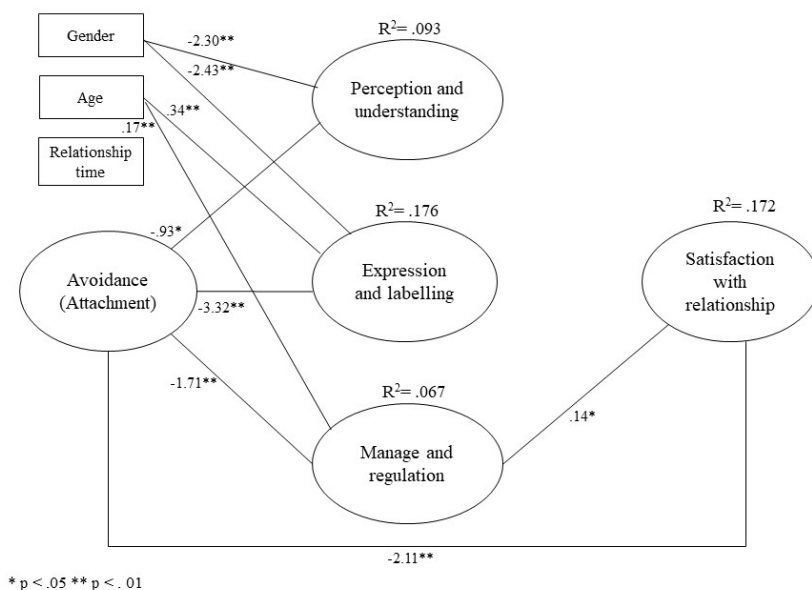
Table 4
Path coefficients and confidence intervals of mediational analyses

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Mediating variable	Total effect		Direct effect		Indirect effect					
			Effect	t	95% CI	Effect	t	95% CI	Effect	LL	UL	
Avoidance (Attachment)	Satisfaction with relationship	Perception and understanding						.03		-0.06	.20	
		Expression and labelling	-2.22*	-6.69	-2.87 - -1.56	-2.11**	-5.98	-2.81 - -1.41	.11		-0.16	.44
		Manage and regulation							-.25		-.57	-.05
Anxiety (Attachment)	relationship	Perception and understanding						.00		-0.04	.03	
		Expression and labelling	-1.27**	-5.90	-1.69 - -0.84	-1.14**	-5.11	-1.58 - -0.70	-.01		-.11	.10
		Manage and regulation							-.12		-.29	-.02

Notes: LL= Lower limit; UL= Upper limit; *p< .01.

The second mediation analysis (Figure 2) showed that avoidance of intimacy significantly influences negatively all three emotional competences. As with anxiety, avoidant attachment continued to have a significant negative effect on relationship satisfaction, and as such its mediation is partial rather than complete. Emotional management and regulation mediated the relationship between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction. Avoidance and emotional regulation explained 17.24% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. Table 4 shows the total effect, direct effect and indirect effects of this mediation. The total indirect effect had a coefficient= $-.05$; Boot SE= $.02$; BootLLCI= $-.40$; BootULCI= $.26$.

Figure 2
Mediation model with attachment avoidance



As regards the controlled variables (gender, age and relationship time), gender significantly influenced the perception and understanding of emotions and emotional expression and labelling in both mediation models. This means that men with higher anxiety or avoidance scores had greater difficulties in developing these two skills. However, gender may did not have a significant influence on levels of relationship satisfaction. The duration of the partner relationship had no significant influence on emotional competences, or on relationship satisfaction. Finally, there were differences between the two proposed mediation models with respect to age. In the first mediation model (Figure 1) in the case of people with high attachment anxiety scores, age significantly influenced positively the ability to express and label emotions. Among these people, age also had a negative influence on relationship satisfaction. In the second mediation model (Figure 2), age has a significant

influence: the older the person, the greater their capacity to express and label emotions, as well as to manage and regulate them. This influence of age on emotional competences only occurred among people with high avoidance, but not among people with high attachment anxiety.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to analyse the relationship between attachment and satisfaction with the partner relationship, considering the mediating role of emotional competences, and controlling the influence of gender, age and relationship duration. The first hypothesis indicated that anxiety and avoidance in attachment will be negatively related to emotional competences and to relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis is fully confirmed in the case of avoidance, but not in the case of anxiety. Avoidance of attachment is associated with a lower degree of emotional competences (perception and understanding, expression and labelling, and management and regulation) and a lower degree of relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, bonding anxiety is also associated with less emotional competence and less satisfaction. However, the ability to perceive and understand emotions is not related to anxiety. In other words, people with high levels of anxiety maintain the ability to detect different emotions in themselves and in others. This is consistent with the tendency of individuals with high anxiety to pay attention to their own and others' emotions, to adjust to the needs of others and to gain their approval, making sure that they are not abandoned (Kimmes et al., 2015).

The second hypothesis stated that emotional competences will be positively related to relationship satisfaction. This is only confirmed in the case of emotional regulation. However, contrary to expectations according to the literature (Megias et al., 2018), according to our results having a greater capacity to perceive and understand emotions, as well as to express and label them, is not associated with greater relationship satisfaction. One possible explanation for this is that these two skills are more internal and individual in nature, and are in a phase prior to the capacity for regulation, which could be the more externalized and directly affects the quality of relationships established with others, and with the partner in this case (Ben-Naim et al., 2013).

The results obtained partially confirm our third hypothesis: people with secure attachment will have greater emotional competence and greater relationship satisfaction than people with some styles of insecure attachment. In specific terms, people with secure attachment have more emotional competences than those with dismissive-avoidant attachment, i.e., more capacity to perceive and understand emotions, to express and label them, and to manage and regulate them. This could be due to the fact that people with dismissive-avoidant attachment have greater difficulty in accessing, identifying and communicating their emotions to the outside world (Li & Chan, 2012). Their strategy of emotional regulation is called "emotional deactivation", i.e. distancing themselves from emotions (Andriopoulos & Kafetsios, 2015).

We also observed that people with secure attachment score significantly higher for expression and labelling of emotions, and for emotional management and regulation, than people with fearful-avoidant attachment. This means that people with fearful-avoidant attachment do have the capacity to perceive their own and others' emotions but have greater difficulty in expressing and regulating them. These difficulties in naming and externally manifesting their emotions are probably due to the fear of being rejected by others if they express socially undesirable emotions such as anger, fear or sadness (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). In addition, it is possible that emotional regulation is more complicated for these people since they simultaneously use apparently contradictory regulation strategies, involving both hyperactivation (typical of high attachment anxiety) and deactivation (typical of high avoidance of intimacy) (Kivlighan et al., 2017).

The results indicate that among people with insecure attachment, those with preoccupied attachment have a greater capacity to express and name their emotions than people with dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment. While people with a preoccupied attachment regulate themselves by externalizing their emotions to seek support from others, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant people prefer to keep their emotions to themselves rather than involve others in their internal world, since this makes them uncomfortable (Candel & Turliuc, 2019). As regards relationship satisfaction, people with concerned attachment show significantly less satisfaction with their relationship than people with secure attachment. We believe that attachment anxiety also negatively affects a person's ability to have positive emotional experiences (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). Accordingly, in the same way as they report lower levels of satisfaction with life in general, they also report less satisfaction with their relationship with their partner in particular (Mónaco et al., in press).

However, people with avoidant attachment (both dismissive and fearful) do not manifest less satisfaction with their partner than confident people. This could be explained in different ways. First, it is possible that levels of relationship satisfaction are not really affected by having avoidant attachment compared to having secure attachment (Givertz et al., 2013). Another possibility is that as discussed above, avoidant people are more reluctant to express their inner world (Andriopoulos & Kafetsios, 2015). As they are self-reporting questionnaires, they may therefore be reporting unrealistic levels of relationship satisfaction, since one of their usual mechanisms is to defend themselves from stress by excluding negative emotions from their consciousness and presenting themselves as positive or neutral. This does not happen to people with preoccupied attachment, who tend to use the strategy of emotional ventilation to cope with their negative emotions and dissatisfaction, which is consistent with their higher levels of relationship dissatisfaction (Valikhani et al., 2018).

The fourth hypothesis of our study stated that emotional competences will mediate the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis is partially confirmed, since the only emotional competence that mediates the relationship between both dimensions of attachment and relationship

satisfaction is emotional regulation. This means that people with tendencies towards anxious and avoidant attachment have less emotional regulation, which in turn leads to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. This is because they are less able to regulate their impulsivity, tolerate frustration, persevere with goals despite difficulties, defer immediate rewards in favour of others in the long run, and deal with conflict situations (Ben-Naim et al., 2013). They are also people who are less able to self-generate and voluntarily and consciously experience positive emotions (e.g., joy, love and humour) (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013), which is naturally related to greater well-being in the relationship (Rusu et al., 2019).

The final hypothesis stated that gender, age and duration of the relationship will be influential variables in the mediation mentioned above. Again, this hypothesis is partially confirmed. In the case of people with greater anxiety and avoidance in attachment, being a woman positively influences the ability to perceive and understand emotions. In addition, being a woman and being older positively influences the capacity to express and label emotions. Among people with greater avoidance of attachment, being older also positively influences the capacity to regulate and manage their emotions. However, age is a factor that negatively influences the relationship satisfaction of people with anxious attachment tendencies. It is possible that as the years go by, these people accumulate more painful memories and negative experiences, intensifying their dissatisfaction with relationships in general (Kivlighan et al., 2017).

These results are consistent with the results reported in the literature, which indicate that gender and age are influential variables to be taken into account for the variables studied (del Aguilar-Luzón et al., 2012). First, women tend to have higher scores than men for emotional competences (Geng, 2018), although this tendency does not apply in the case of emotional regulation. Second, as age increases, some of the emotional competences increase (Kafetsios, 2004): with age, people with anxious attachments learn to express them adequately, and people with avoidant attachments learn to express and manage them better.

Finally, in our results, the duration of the partner relationship does not affect the emotional competences, or the relationship satisfaction. These results are not consistent with those reported by other authors (e.g. Candell & Turliuc, 2019), or with the Temporal Adult Romantic Attachment (TARA) model, which states that the association between insecure attachment and low relationship satisfaction becomes stronger and more negative in longer-lasting relationships (Hadden et al., 2014). This relationship maybe is not apparent in this research because these are young people whose relationships are short-lived because of their age. The duration of the relationships in this study ranges from 3 months to 11 years, with the average duration being just over three years. Longer relationships would be necessary duration in order to check whether the relationship time really influences the relationship satisfaction of people with insecure attachment. For the moment, the results might allow us to state that the duration of the relationship is not an influential variable on the relationship satisfaction in relationships that are in the first stages of consolidation.

Our work is not free of limitations, such as the choice of the sample for convenience, and the cross-sectional nature of the data. In future research, it would be advisable to randomize the selection of participants, and to study the variables at different points in time, to analyse whether attachment and emotional competences predict relationship satisfaction in the future (Roberson et al., 2018). Finally, we believe that our study could be enriched by including assessment in dyad format, e.g., by adding self-report measures by the other partner to relate the attachment and emotional competences of one partner with the relationship satisfaction of the other partner (Wollny et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the main message of this paper is that insecurity in an individual's attachment style has a negative influence on satisfaction with adult relationships, but this influence is not decisive: emotional regulation buffers this effect. One way to increase the quality of relationships of people with high levels of attachment anxiety and/or avoidance of intimacy would therefore be for them to learn to regulate their own emotions.

Emotional regulation is an emotional competence that can be learned and trained (Levenson et al., 2014). This study therefore highlights the importance of teaching people to regulate their emotions, not only in childhood and adolescence, but also at a more advanced age (Nielsen et al., 2017). As a result, one of the main challenges for professionals in psychology and research is to invest resources in the development of emotional education programmes for young people (LeBlanc et al., 2019), and especially detecting and dealing with young people with more vulnerable personal characteristics, such as those with an insecure attachment style. These young people will benefit above all from learning strategies for regulating their emotions, which will cushion the negative effects of anxiety and avoidance on attachment, which are established from early childhood (Steele & Steele, 2017).

As a result, whatever their attachment style, young people with a good emotional education will be better able to establish satisfactory relationships. According to the extensive empirical evidence, these healthy, high quality relationships will promote the health and well-being of young people, and prevent the development of violent behaviour in the relationship (Exner-Cortens et al., 2019). Emotional education is therefore a way to increase the well-being of society as a whole (Huang et al., 2018).

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