

EMOTION REGULATION AS A MEDIATOR IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EARLY DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHEMAS AND EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCE IN YOUNG SPANIARDS

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Abstract

Several studies show that emotional dependence is a relevant problem because of its consequences in all areas of life. Early cognitive schemas and difficulties in emotional regulation are some of the factors involved in its aetiology. The aims of the present study were to analyse the relationship between these variables, hypothesising that difficulties in emotional regulation mediate the relationship between early dysfunctional schemas and emotional dependence. The sample consisted of 711 young Spanish participants aged between 18-30 years, with an average age of 21.32 years ($SD= 2.94$). The results showed a positive correlation between the three variables and that difficulties in emotional regulation mediated the relationship between early dysfunctional schemas and emotional dependence in the case of Abandonment, Dependence, Subjugation, Emotional inhibition, Insufficient self-control, Defectiveness and Self-sacrifice. This study gives us a clearer picture of how these variables are related and provides information that could be of great use in assisting people with emotional dependence.

KEY WORDS: *emotional dependence, early dysfunctional schemas, emotion regulation, youth.*

Resumen

Diversos estudios demuestran que la dependencia emocional es un problema relevante por sus consecuencias en todos los ámbitos de la vida. Los esquemas cognitivos tempranos y las dificultades en la regulación emocional son unos de los factores implicados en su etiología. El objetivo del presente estudio fue analizar la relación entre estas variables, hipotetizando que las dificultades en la regulación emocional median la relación entre los esquemas disfuncionales tempranos y la dependencia emocional. Participaron 711 españoles jóvenes, de entre 18 y 30 años, con una edad media de 21,32 años ($DT= 2,94$). Los resultados mostraron una correlación positiva entre las tres variables y que las dificultades en la regulación emocional mediaban la relación entre los esquemas disfuncionales tempranos y la dependencia emocional en el caso del Abandono, la Dependencia, la Subyugación, la Inhibición emocional, el Autocontrol

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insuficiente, la Defectuosiad y el Autosacrificio. Este estudio muestra cómo se pueden relacionar estas variables y proporciona información útil para ayudar a las personas con dependencia emocional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: dependencia emocional, esquemas disfuncionales tempranos, regulación emocional, jóvenes.

Introduction

Emotional dependence refers to a chronic pattern of unmet affective demands that people desperately seek to satisfy through close interpersonal relationships (Castelló, 2005). It involves cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioural components associated with each other (Camarillo et al., 2020). There is strong fear of loneliness and abandonment, and strategies such as plan modification, complacency, or control strategies may be implemented to avoid them (Lemos & Londoño, 2006; Urbiola et al., 2014). The behaviour of a person with emotional dependence is similar to that of an individual with substance dependence, revealing an irresistible longing to be with the object of dependence, a compulsive need for their presence, and negative reactions in their absence. These factors lead the individual to accommodate to the partner's desires, to suffer an emotional void, to be unaware of the problem, and to feel tied to the relationship (de la Villa & Sirvent, 2009). It is a critical problem, given its association with different issues such as intimate partner violence (Amor et al., 2022), suicidal ideation (Siabato & Salamanca, 2015), anxious and depressive symptoms (Urbiola et al., 2017), substance use (Momeñe et al., 2021a), and Internet and mobile phone addiction (Estévez et al., 2017), among others. In general, emotional dependence affects all life areas of the person (Serebrisky, 2021).

The origin of emotional dependence could be found in early affective deficiencies during childhood, and these deficiencies also generate early dysfunctional schemas (Castelló, 2005). That is why different studies have found higher rates of dysfunctional schemas in people with emotional dependence (Momeñe et al., 2021b; Patsi & Requena, 2020). Momeñe and Estévez (2018) found that early dysfunctional schemas could predict emotional dependence.

Dysfunctional schemas are defined as internalised and stable patterns acquired through early affective experiences or negative interactions with representative figures in childhood (Estévez, 2013). These schemas influence how we feel, think, act and relate to others throughout life, including adulthood (Young et al., 2013). The 15 schemas can be classified into five domains: 1) Disconnection/Rejection which includes schemas involving the belief that one's own needs for security, acceptance and respect will not be satisfied (abandonment, mistrust, emotional deprivation, defectiveness, and social isolation). 2) Autonomy consists of expectations that interfere with one's perceived capacity to function independently or perform successfully (dependence, vulnerability to harm, enmeshment, and failure). 3) Other-orientation, examines extreme attention to the wishes of others, prioritising these over one's own needs (subjugation and self-sacrifice). 4) Excessive Vigilance includes schemas that, in

order to avoid making mistakes, show an overemphasis on controlling one's own feelings and spontaneous behaviours (emotional inhibition and unrelenting high standards). 5) Impaired Limits includes schemas reflecting a deficiency in internal limits and responsibility toward others (entitlement and insufficient self-control). (Young, 1990).

It has also been shown that there is a relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and emotional dependence. Moreover, some research (Momeñe et al., 2017) found that difficulties in emotion regulation predicted emotional dependence and were positively correlated with it. Emotion regulation encompasses people's processes to influence the emotions they feel, when they feel them, and how they experience or express them (Gross, 1998). It aims at the successful combination of being aware of and understanding one's emotions, accepting them, controlling behaviour and acting in a goal-consistent way when negative emotions arise, and using relevant emotion-regulation strategies to overcome situational demands and achieve one's goals (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). As with early dysfunctional schemas, the ability to express and regulate emotions is also acquired through the relationship with attachment figures in childhood, and stimulation and good treatment are crucial for developing good emotion regulation (Iruarrizaga et al., 2019). In the last decade, psychology research has become increasingly interested in studying the role of emotion regulation (Cludius et al., 2020). Findings show that psychological disorders are related to deficits in emotion regulation. Thus, it has been assumed that deficits in emotion regulation may lead to an increased risk for the development and/or maintenance of psychopathology (Dryman & Heimberg, 2018).

Significant gender differences have been found in all three variables. Some studies show higher levels of emotional dependence (Etxaburu et al., 2023), higher averages in some of the dysfunctional schemas (Cámara & Calvete, 2012) and greater difficulties in emotional regulation (Goubet & Chryssikou, 2019) in men. Similarly, age differences have also been found in emotional dependence (Marín-Ocmin, 2019; Momeñe et al., 2021a) and emotional regulation (Livingstone & Isaacowitz, 2021).

Although it is known that emotional dependence, dysfunctional schemas and emotion regulation are related, the details of this relationship are unknown. Understanding how they are related could be of great help in the treatment and prevention of emotional dependence. Therefore, this study aims to find out how these three variables are related. We expect to find a positive correlation between them and that emotion regulation will mediate the relationship between early dysfunctional schemas and emotional dependence.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 711 Spanish participants aged between 18-30 years, with an average age of 21.32 years ($SD= 2.94$). As displayed in Table 1, most of the participants were women, students with university degrees and single.

Table 1
Sociodemographic data of the sample ($n= 711$)

Variable	n (%)
Sex	
Men	167 (23.5)
Women	544 (76.5)
Educational level	
No studies	1 (0.1)
Primary studies	4 (0.5)
Secondary studies	4 (0.5)
High school	20 (2.8)
University studies	682 (95.9)
Occupational status	
Working	144 (20.3)
Unemployed	5 (0.7)
Student	561 (78.9)
Other	1 (0.1)
Civil status	
Single	685 (96.3)
Married	4 (0.6)
Other	22 (3.1)

Instruments

- a) *Schema Questionnaire-Short Form* (SQ-SF; Young & Brown, 1994). The SQ-SF measures 15 dysfunctional schemas. Each scale is composed of 5 items to be rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (totally false) to 6 (describes me perfectly). For this study, 13 scales were used to assess the following dysfunctional schemas: Emotional deprivation, Abandonment, Mistrust, Failure, Dependence, Enmeshment, Subjugation, Emotional inhibition, Unrealizable standards, Entitlement, Insufficient self-control, Defectiveness and Self-sacrifice. Social isolation and Vulnerability to harm were excluded in order to shorten the questionnaire and make it easier to apply, and also because their items were not closely related to emotional dependence. The Spanish version of this questionnaire presents good psychometric properties, confirming its factor structure and with good internal consistency for the factors, with a Cronbach's alpha between .61 and .85

(Calvete et al., 2005). In this study, the internal consistency of this questionnaire was between .73 and .93.

- b) *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), Spanish adaptation by Hervás and Jódar (2008). The scale consists of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type format, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), and assessing five emotion-regulation deficits: Lack of emotional awareness, Non-acceptance of emotional responses, Lack of emotional clarity, Difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviour, and Lack of emotional control. After recoding the inverse items, higher scores indicate a greater deficit in emotion regulation. The scale presented good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .93 for the total scale (Hervás & Jódar, 2008). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .93.
- c) *Emotional Dependence Questionnaire* (*Cuestionario de Dependencia Emocional*, CDE; Lemos & Londoño, 2006). This instrument presents 23 items rated on a 6-point Likert-type format, ranging from 1 (Completely untrue of me) to 5 (Describes me perfectly) and distributed in six scales: Separation anxiety, Affective expression towards the partner, Modification of plans, Fear of loneliness, Borderline expression and Attention seeking. This questionnaire was initially created following the theoretical basis of Beck's cognitive therapy model (Beck & Freeman, 1990), considering a distinctive and specific cognitive profile of people with emotional dependence. It has good psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .92 (Lemos & Londoño, 2006). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .94.

Procedure

Students from the Complutense University of Madrid were asked to collaborate in the study in person and pencil-and-paper format. The snowball methodology was used to collect the sample. Before applying the assessment instruments, participants were given an informed consent form. The document also provided information about anonymity and confidentiality, dropping out of the study, and requested their sincerity. This study was conducted following the ethical principles of the latest version of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013).

Data analysis

The analyses were carried out with SPSS v. 28. First, descriptive statistics and the normality of the study variables were explored. Normality was assumed when the asymmetry was $< |3|$ and the kurtosis $< |7|$ (Kline, 2011).

Second, bivariate Pearson correlations were calculated to test the relationships between the early dysfunctional schemas, difficulties in emotion regulation and emotional dependence. Third, a linear regression model was computed with the macro PROCESS v 4.0 (Hayes, 2017). Model 4 was applied. The early dysfunctional schemas were modelled as independent variables, the difficulties in emotion regulation as mediators, and emotional dependence as the

dependent variable. This model allows observing which dysfunctional schemas have stronger relationships with the dependent variables and testing the indirect effects of early dysfunctional schemas in emotional dependence mediated by the difficulties in emotion regulation. The indirect effects were computed with 5,000 bootstrap samples to reduce estimation bias (Hayes, 2017). As the macro PROCESS only allows testing the indirect effect of one independent variable at a time, the same model was estimated 13 times, one per each early dysfunctional schema. In each permutation, one schema was established as the independent variable, and the rest of the schemas were maintained as covariates (which is mathematically equivalent to including all of them as independent variables). Sex and age were controlled for as covariates.

Results

The descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 2. The asymmetry values were below $|3|$ and the kurtosis values below $|7|$ for all the variables. Therefore, normality was assumed for all study variables.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the study variables ($n= 711$)

Variables	Scores range	Descriptive statistics			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Asymmetry	kurtosis
Early dysfunctional schemas					
1. Emotional deprivation	5-30	9.42	5.16	1.47	2.04
2. Abandonment	5-30	12.39	5.88	0.69	-0.17
3. Mistrust	5-30	10.42	5.33	1.10	0.67
4. Failure	5-30	9.70	5.24	1.37	1.77
5. Dependence	5-30	7.75	3.44	1.45	1.95
6. Enmeshment	5-30	8.35	3.63	1.46	2.44
7. Subjugation	5-30	9.20	4.26	1.40	2.12
8. Emotional inhibition	5-30	11.17	5.73	0.95	0.15
9. Unrelenting standards	5-30	14.93	5.84	0.31	-0.47
10. Entitlement	5-30	12.99	5.15	0.44	-0.27
11. Insufficient self-control	5-30	12.14	4.71	0.51	-0.01
12. Defectiveness	5-30	8.32	4.32	1.88	4.11
13. Self-sacrifice	5-30	17.17	6.00	0.15	-0.74
Difficulties in emotion regulation	28-140	62.03	18.75	0.77	0.14
Emotional dependence	23-138	46.41	18.08	0.95	0.70

The bivariate Pearson correlations between study variables (Table 3) showed that early dysfunctional schemas were significantly and positively correlated except for Unrelenting Standards, which showed the lowest correlations with the rest of the schemas and even a non-significant correlation with Failure. All the dysfunctional schemas were positively and significantly related to difficulties in emotion regulation and emotional dependence. In turn, difficulties in emotion

Table 3
Bivariate Pearson correlations of the study variables (n= 711)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Early dysfunctional schemas														
1. Emotional deprivation														
2. Abandonment	.38**													
3. Mistrust	.45**	.49**												
4. Failure	.44**	.41**	.37**											
5. Dependence	.28**	.43**	.43**	.49**										
6. Enmeshment	.22**	.34**	.39**	.29**	.44**									
7. Subjugation	.50**	.49**	.55**	.52**	.51**	.46**								
8. Emotional inhibition	.38**	.24**	.36**	.29**	.19**	.23**	.36**							
9. Unrelenting standards	.13**	.19**	.27**	.05	.10*	.16**	.20**	.19**						
10. Entitlement	.19**	.31**	.34**	.16**	.23**	.21**	.27**	.19**	.31**					
11. Insufficient self-control	.32**	.37**	.35**	.46**	.38**	.28**	.43**	.28**	.06	.41**				
12. Defectiveness	.53**	.40**	.44**	.49**	.35**	.26**	.50**	.37**	.20**	.14**	.32**			
13. Self-sacrifice	.23**	.32**	.36**	.21**	.18**	.27**	.31**	.11**	.26**	.20**	.14**	.21**		
14. Diffic. emotion regulation	.42**	.46**	.43**	.47**	.42**	.28**	.50**	.35**	.10**	.21**	.42**	.49**	.28**	
15. Emotional dependence	.33**	.60**	.45**	.33**	.39**	.33**	.51**	.16**	.26**	.27**	.32**	.35**	.19**	.41**

Note: *p<.05; **p<.01.

regulation were also significantly and positively correlated with emotional dependence.

PROCESS v. 4.0 was used to calculate the models to test the effects of early dysfunctional schemas on emotional dependence through difficulties in emotion regulation. Regarding the direct effects (Table 4), the results indicated that higher abandonment, failure, dependence, subjugation, emotional inhibition, insufficient self-control, defectiveness and self-sacrifice were significantly related to greater difficulties in emotion regulation. However, emotional deprivation, mistrust, enmeshment and unrelenting standards were not significantly related to difficulties in emotion regulation.

Difficulties in emotion regulation had a direct significant and positive effect on emotional dependence. Among the early dysfunctional schemas, Abandonment, Mistrust, Subjugation and Unrelenting standards had a direct significant and positive effect on emotional dependence, whereas Emotional inhibition and Self-sacrifice had a significant negative effect. The rest of the early dysfunctional schemas (i.e., Emotional deprivation, Failure, Dependence, Enmeshment, Entitlement, Insufficient self-control, and Defectiveness) showed no significant direct effects on emotional dependence.

Table 4
Regression model coefficients

Independent variable	Dependent variable					
	Difficulties in emotion regulation			Emotional dependence		
	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI
Early dysfunctional schemas						
Emotional deprivation	0.17	0.13	[-0.08, 0.44]	0.01	0.12	[-0.23, 0.25]
Abandonment	0.43***	0.11	[0.20, 0.66]	1.28***	0.10	[1.07, 1.49]
Mistrust	0.15	0.13	[-0.11, 0.42]	0.34**	0.12	[0.09, 0.59]
Failure	0.29*	0.13	[0.01, 0.56]	-0.02	0.12	[-0.27, 0.22]
Dependence	0.53**	0.20	[0.14, 0.93]	0.14	0.18	[-0.22, 0.51]
Enmeshment	-0.15	0.17	[-0.50, 0.19]	0.16	0.16	[-0.15, 0.48]
Subjugation	0.46*	0.18	[0.10, 0.82]	0.90***	0.17	[0.56, 1.23]
Emotional inhibition	0.32**	0.10	[0.11, 0.53]	-0.34***	0.09	[-0.54, -0.14]
Unrelenting standards	-0.17	0.10	[-0.37, 0.02]	0.39***	0.09	[0.21, 0.58]
Entitlement	0.08	0.12	[-0.32, 0.16]	0.05	0.11	[-0.16, 0.27]
Insufficient self-control	0.57***	0.14	[0.29, 0.85]	-0.01	0.13	[-0.26, 0.25]
Defectiveness	0.80***	0.16	[0.48, 1.12]	-0.04	0.15	[-0.34, 0.25]
Self-sacrifice	0.27**	0.10	[0.07, 0.47]	-0.26**	0.09	[-0.44, -0.08]
Difficulties in emotion regulation				0.11***	0.03	[0.04, 0.18]

Nota: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Regarding the indirect effects, results showed that seven out of the 13 potential indirect effects were significant. Concretely, higher levels of Abandonment, Dependence, Subjugation, Emotional inhibition, Insufficient self-control, Defectiveness and Self-sacrifice were significantly related to higher emotional dependence through the positive effects of these dysfunctional schemas on difficulties in emotion regulation.

The model explained 44% of the variance of difficulties in emotion regulation and 49% of the variance of emotional dependence.

Table 5

Indirect effects of early dysfunctional schemas on emotional dependence through difficulties in emotion regulation

Independent variable	Indirect effect		
	Effect	Bootstrap SE	95% Bootstrap CI
Emotional deprivation	0.02	0.02	[-0.010, 0.069]
Abandonment	0.05	0.02	[0.014, 0.107]
Mistrust	0.01	0.01	[-0.017, 0.062]
Failure	0.03	0.02	[-0.001, 0.086]
Dependence	0.06	0.03	[0.006, 0.140]
Enmeshment	-0.01	0.02	[-0.071, 0.024]
Subjugation	0.05	0.03	[0.004, 0.126]
Emotional inhibition	0.03	0.01	[0.007, 0.079]
Unrelenting standards	-0.02	0.01	[-0.050, 0.006]
Entitlement	-0.01	0.01	[-0.013, 0.006]
Insufficient self-control	0.06	0.02	[0.020, 0.130]
Defectiveness	0.09	0.03	[0.033, 0.174]
Self-sacrifice	0.03	0.01	[0.005, 0.066]

Discussion

The first hypothesis of the study, predicting a positive relationship between dysfunctional schemas, emotion-regulation difficulties and emotional dependence, was confirmed. These results are aligned with other studies that had also found a positive relationship between early dysfunctional schemas, emotion-regulation difficulties (Yakin et al., 2019) and emotional dependence (Momeñe et al., 2021b; Patsi & Requena, 2020), as well as between emotion-regulation difficulties and emotional dependence (Iruarrizaga et al., 2019).

The second hypothesis (emotion regulation will mediate the relationship between early dysfunctional schemas and emotional dependence) was partially confirmed. As expected, the schemas of Abandonment, Dependence, Subjugation, Emotional inhibition, Insufficient self-control, Defectiveness and Self-sacrifice do have an indirect effect on emotional dependence through emotion regulation. These results are congruent with the theoretical explanation suggesting that the origin of emotional dependence and early dysfunctional schemas lies in the affective deficits present during childhood (Castelló, 2005), with early dysfunctional schemas being the predictors of emotional dependence (Momeñe & Estévez, 2018). As is the ability to regulate emotions, which is acquired through the relationship with attachment figures in childhood (Iruarrizaga et al., 2019).

In contrast, the schemas of Emotional deprivation, Mistrust, Failure, Enmeshment, Unrelenting standards and Entitlement do not show this mediation. This could be explained by the fact that people who believe that their needs for love will never be satisfied (Young & Brown, 1994) will not try to satisfy their needs through relationships with others. Also, people who believe they are superior to others and deserve privileges (Young & Brown, 1994) will not depend on others or fear being abandoned or disliked. Failure is more closely related to

beliefs about academic/work abilities and less to social relationships. The Enmeshment items refer to attachment to parents (Young & Brown, 1994); people who are dependent on their partners will not be dependent on their parents. This is because people with emotional dependence put the focus on their partner and their partner becomes the centre of their life, giving him or her greater importance, in every way, than other people (including family and him or herself) (Castelló, 2005). However, in the case of Unrelenting standards and Mistrust, maladaptive schemas do predict emotional dependence, although this relationship is not mediated by emotion regulation. As Unrelenting standards refer to the pursuit of impeccable behaviour and performance (Young & Brown, 1994), these individuals are expected to control their emotions to prevent them from hindering their goal achievement. Thus, Unrelenting standards are not related to emotion-regulation difficulties. Finally, Mistrust, is not closely related to emotion regulation, although its content does have a direct relationship with emotional dependence. For example, it has been shown that dependence may be a risk factor for staying in abusive and violent relationships (Hilario Ramos et al., 2020). However, these relationships could be mediated by other variables. Therefore, in future research, it would be interesting to complement the quantitative information from the instruments with interviews to gain a deeper understanding of these individuals' life histories and schemas. It would also be interesting to study the relationship of the variables in clinical population with emotional dependence (those who come to treatment centres seeking assistance, for example).

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, it is a cross-sectional study, so causal relationships cannot be concluded and the predictive validity and temporary stability of the measures cannot be tested. Secondly, most of the participants were university students, which may have biased the results. Finally, the phenomenon of social desirability should be noted, as participants may have answered the questionnaires to provide a positive image of themselves rather than answering honestly.

In conclusion, thageis study could confirm the relationship between dysfunctional schemas, emotion regulation and emotional dependence. It also provides evidence that emotion regulation often mediates the relationship between dysfunctional schemas and emotional dependence. Therefore, it would be beneficial to work on emotion regulation to prevent emotional dependence, among many other disorders. For example, if we wish to prevent emotional dependence in a population with dysfunctional schemas, or even in the general population, it could be very efficient to address emotion regulation (which has been widely studied and for which there are already several guidelines and programmes). At the same time, a questionnaire could be applied to people in treatment who suffer from emotional dependence to determine their dysfunctional schemas and decide whether to address emotion regulation, the beliefs of those schemas or both issues.

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