

ATTACHMENT AND EMOTION REGULATION IN THE COUPLE



EXTENDED SUMMARY

Author: Arantxa Ripollés Gil (53787606-J)

Tutor: Azucena García Palacios

TFG- Psychology 2017/2018

ABSTRACT

Our present study aims to measure the relationship between the types of difficulties of emotion regulation and the two dimensions of attachment in adulthood: anxiety for abandonment and avoidance of intimacy in the couple. For this purpose, a sample of 50 people was recruited and the questionnaire of Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR-R) and the Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS) were used.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment is the affective bond created between two people. According to Bowlby and his theory of attachment, the quality of the affective bond between the child and his or her figure of attachment will have a fundamental role in the future of the child. During the eighties, some studies on the adult attachment appeared such as those by Hazan and Shaver (1987). They classified the type of attachment bond according to two dimensions: anxiety due to an abandonment and avoidance of intimacy. The theory of attachment is very important in order to understand the emotion regulation since depending on the characteristics of the person and the quality of the bond of attachment with the couple, the individual develops different strategies of emotional regulation when confronting stressful situations (Mikulincer, Shaver and Pereg, 2003). In 1994, Thompson defined “emotion regulation” as the set of processes responsible for evaluating and modifying emotions, especially the intensity, latency, moment of onset, magnitude and duration of both behavioural and psychological response. Gratz and Roemer in 2004 developed the instrument *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS) to measure emotional dysregulation (emotional dyscontrol, daily interference, emotional neglect, emotional confusion, and emotional rejection). Currently, authors such as Garrido-Rojas (2006) reported that people with high levels of anxiety in their attachment relationships experience negative emotions exaggeratedly and have difficulties to regulate or control them. While authors such as Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) suggested that people with high avoidance of intimacy styles of attachment suppress negative emotions and present a distancing and emotional inhibition style. The objective of this study is to explore the difficulties of emotional regulation and its relationship with the dimensions: anxiety for abandonment and avoidance of the intimacy in the couple. We consider the following hypothesis based on the literature: People with higher levels of anxiety during separation will present emotional rejection, emotional dyscontrol and daily interference: while people with higher levels of privacy avoidance will tend to experience greater confusion and emotional neglect.

METHODOLOGY

The sample included 50 participants from 17 to 62 years old, with an average of 38.6 years (DT = 15.43). Among them, 18 people were men (36%) and 32 women (64%). The majority of the sample worked (60%), has university studies (38%), was married (51%) and was heterosexual (96%). All participants had a partner when the questionnaires were provided. The average duration of the current couple was about 14.8 years (DT = 13.7) and the average number of previous couples was 1.

Concerning the instruments, a personal data sheet was used for the study, where the participant had to fill in demographic data (age, sex, occupation and education) and data on the sentimental relationship (marital status, sexual orientation, current couple duration and number of previous couples). The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) (Fraley et al. 2000) was also employed to evaluate the dimensions of attachment and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) was used to measure emotion dysregulation.

The sample was selected in the nearby environment of the investigator. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, which was performed on paper and pencil, they were given information about the study through a written document remarking that the participation was totally anonymous and voluntary. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using the statistical program SPSS. Firstly, the sample was divided according to the median to divide the sample regarding high and low anxiety (median = 35,5) and high and low avoidance (median 53.5). Subsequently, the average for both groups was compared using the Student T for independent samples for each subscale of the DERS in order to see if there were significant differences between the two groups. And finally, we calculate the Cohen d as a measure of the effect size to quantify the relevance of the differences obtained between both groups (high and low anxiety and avoidance).

RESULTS

First, using the median resulted in dividing the total sample for both independent variables: anxiety for abandonment and avoidance of intimacy. In this way, each independent variable was divided into two groups: the sample with high values on one side and the sample with low values for another.

We used the Student T for independent samples to evaluate the significant differences between the means of the two groups within each subscale of the DERS. The results showed that there were significant differences between the means of anxiety for abandonment in emotional confusion, $t(48) = -2.465$; $p = 0,017$; and daily interference $t(48) = -2,285$; $p = 0,027$. The effect size in emotional confusion ($d = -0.69$) and in daily interference ($d = -0.64$) was moderate, while in the rest of subscales it was low.

As for intimacy avoidance, the results indicated that there were significant differences between the averages in emotional neglect, $t(48) = -2.688$; $p = 0,010$, daily interference, $t(68) = -3.460$; $p = 0.001$, and emotional dyscontrol, $t(48) = -2.533$; $p = 0,015$. The effect size for emotional neglect ($d = -0.75$) and emotional dyscontrol ($d = -0.71$) was moderate (close to large), while in daily interference ($d = -0.96$) the effect size was large.

Participants who scored high in separation anxiety showed greater emotional confusion and daily interference. While participants who scored high in intimacy avoidance showed greater emotional inattention, daily interference and emotional dyscontrol.

CONCLUSION

This study is based on previous researche such as Hazan and Shaver's (1998) and Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) on adult attachment. It includes the variable of emotional regulation since it was aimed to study the relationship between the dimensions of adult attachment (abandonment anxiety and avoidance of intimacy in the couple) and the difficulties of emotional regulation (using the model proposed by Gratz and Roemer in 2004 as a basis).

The results indicate that both the hypothesis of anxiety about separation of the couple and the hypothesis of avoidance of intimacy are partially fulfilled. Therefore, it can be concluded that people who experience attachment with high anxiety or high avoidance have more emotional regulation difficulties, compared to people who have low anxiety and low avoidance in the attachment to their partner. This should be taken into account in clinical practice as well as in couples' therapy since these emotional regulation difficulties in the couple should also be treated.

REFERENCES

- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L. y Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. En J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46-76). New York, NY: Guilford Press
- Garrido-Rojas, L. (2006). Apego, emoción y regulación emocional. Implicaciones para la salud. *Revista latinoamericana de psicología*, 38(3)
- Hazan, C.y Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511-524. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511
- Hervás, G., y Jódar, R. (2008). Adaptación al castellano de la Escala de Dificultades en la Regulación Emocional. *Clínica y Salud*, 19(2), 139-156
- Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., y Pereg, D. (2003). Attachment theory and affect regulation: The dynamics, development, and cognitive consequences of attachment-related strategies. *Motivation and emotion*, 27(2), 77-102.
- Zambrano, R., et al. (2009). Propiedades psicométricas de la prueba de apego adulto. *Pensando Psicología*, 5(8), 6-14