



Love addiction, attachment styles, parental styles, parental bonding during childhood and adolescence and couple's quality which relationship? (2020)

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Abstract: The study of new addictions is increasingly pointing out that some forms of love are forms of addiction, and that these can be potentially more destructive and prevalent than classic, widely recognized drugs. For this reason, the aim of this study was to explore separately for men and women the relationship between emotional addiction, attachment styles, parental bonding that occurred during childhood and adolescence and the couple's satisfaction in a group of Italian young adults and adults. 291 women (Mage: 31.8; standard deviation: 11.4) and 104 men (Mage: 32.8; standard deviation: 11.8) participated in the study and completed the following measures: Love Attitudes Scale (LAS), Relationship Questionnaire (RQ), Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) and Quality Marriage Index (QMI). The results of the correlational analysis showed that for both women and men, fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, excessive maternal control received during childhood and adolescence were positively correlated with love addiction, while, just for women, a secure attachment style, empathic and sensitive parental care and relationship satisfaction were negatively associated with love addiction. For men, on the other hand, only secure attachment and relationship satisfaction were negatively correlated with love addiction. In line with these results, it would be recommendable to develop preventive interventions that take into account the role of early relational experiences as well as the different nature and the different weight that parental care and control received during the first 16 years of life and couple's satisfaction have for men and women in the formation and maintenance of a potential love addiction.



Introduction

Being in love with someone is one of the most common feelings that human beings can feel in their lives. Many studies have tried to understand and conceptualize the psychology of love, exploring the factors and mechanisms behind the construct of romantic love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Sternberg & Weis 2006).

Recently, scientific research has also focused on the most problematic aspects of love relationships (Fisher 2014), paying more attention to the construct of love addiction, i.e. when love is characterized by obsession, compulsive behavior, anxiety and negative consequences for social functioning (Kwee 2007; Stanbury and Griffiths 2007).

Love addiction has been defined as a compulsive need for relationships that persists despite its adverse consequences (Reynaud, Karila, Blecha and Benyamina 2010). Indeed, individuals with love addiction typically show a loss of interest in other activities not related to love relationships (e.g., close friends, hobbies, and sports) and they may present academic or work problems due to inability to focus on other areas of their lives (Earp, Wudarczyk, A., Foddy, and Savulescu 2017). Love addicted tend to experience negative moods and affections when they are away from their partners and excessive emotional closeness to their partner is experienced as a way of dealing with high stress situations (Sussman 2010). The pioneering work on love addiction was first outlined in the book "Love and Addiction" by Peele and Brodsky (1975). The book describes love addiction as a condition that occurs when individuals become addicted to those with whom they are most intimately involved. Peele and Brodsky (1975) affirm that the process of love addiction is the same as when a person becomes addicted to a drug. Subsequent studies have shown that love addiction shares many aspects and characteristics of other drug and behavioral addictions (Fisher 2014; Peele, Brodsky and Arnold 1992; Redcay and Simonetti, 2018; Sussman 2010, Wolfe 2000). Although, to date, love addiction is not yet rooted in psychiatric nosology, there is an increased recognition of behavioral addictions in the mental health literature, as demonstrated by the gradual incorporation of some behavioral addictions (e.g. pathological gambling disorder and Internet addiction) in the most recent editions of diagnostic manuals such as DSM-5 and ICD-11 (Griffiths, Kuss, Pontes and Billieux 2016).

A recent comprehensive literature review of 11 different addictions by Sussman, Lisha and Griffiths (2011) estimated the prevalence of love addiction in the general adult population at 3 to 6%, with studies reporting very different prevalence rates (3% to 26%). The main problem in estimating the prevalence of love addiction was the definition of the construct used by the researchers, who often used different constructs as synonyms of love addiction (e.g., concern about love, love insecurity, obsessive love) which do not specifically represent love addiction.

In addition, some researchers have pointed out how there is a relationship between insecure attachment styles and love addiction, underlining the role that the first relationships with caregivers play in the development and maintenance of such dependence (Ahmadi, Davoudi, Ghazaei, Mardani, Seifi, 2013; Honari and Saremi, 2015). Indeed, love addicted tend to repeat behavioral patterns learned in their early stages of lives, during interactions with their parents (Poudat 2006; Guerreschi 2011). Several authors have already pointed out that there is a close relationship between early relational trauma (such as an insecure attachment) and addictions (Caretti and La Barbera, 2009; Flores 2004; Zapf, Greiner and Carroll, 2008). Indeed, preoccupied attachment style is usually associated with love addiction (Ahmadi et al., 2013; Poudat 2006).



In this relational pattern, a mother with previous fragility will project an ambivalent state on the child; in front of the continuous requests for attention and for care of the newborn, the mother reacts with abrupt oscillations between excess and lack. Indeed, in the mother there is a fear of being dominated by the child and by his constant need for care. The child, on the contrary, learns an attitude of instability and lack that makes him feel empty and makes him experience a sense of distrust of others (Feeney and Noller, 1990). The other becomes, from a figure of reference and care, to a figure of possible lack and aggression. Moreover, self-referring to himself these oscillations, the child perceives himself from time to time, as good, when the mother is present, or bad, when the mother is absent or refusing. This unstable self-perception remains as a focal characteristic of the relationships of these subjects even in adulthood. The personality of the love addicted becomes, therefore, a place of contrast between a fusional need with the partner and the fear of being cancelled within this fusion, thus affecting the couple's quality (Poudat 2006; Sussman 2010).

A psychodynamic interpretation sees at the base of the dependent personality a subject with relational problems with the father figure: the lack of esteem and understanding with and towards the father would not allow the correct achievement of a mature emotional state. Very similar, it would be the effect of an overprotective mother that would necessarily lead the child to oppose against the father figure, opposing the good parent to the bad one (Nicholas and Bieber, 1994).

A further explanation for this process is the systemic-relational one that sees in the love addicted the result of a family triangulation in the parent-child relationship. In this case, the child, due to the emotional and psychological manipulation of the other family members, becomes a blackmail weapon to allow one parent to bond the other one or to force him/her to perform certain actions; or in other cases, it is the child himself who is charged with the emotional and intellectual responsibilities of a parent, playing a role that is not his own and ending up adulterating himself earlier than necessary (Minuchin, Rosman and Baker, 1978).

In addition, although the literature indicates that most women suffer from love addiction (Earp et al. 2017; Reynaud et al. 2010; Sussmann 2011), to date, there are not enough studies that have investigated the phenomenon in the male population. For this reason, the aim of this study was to explore, in a group of participants divided according to gender, whether there was a relationship among love addiction, attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, dismissing and fearful), perception of parental styles (both mother and father) received during childhood/adolescence and the quality of the couple relationship.

Specifically, it is hypothesized that insecure attachment, maternal and paternal parenting styles characterized by excessive control and poor care and a poor quality of the couple's relationship are related to a perception of love as dependent and obsessive in both men and women (Davis, Kirkpatrick, Levy, and O'Hearn, 2013; Feeney and Noller, 1990).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The group of participants (N = 393) who were given the questionnaires is formed by Italian young adults. The participants, who were divided according to gender, were 104 men (mean age: 32.8; standard deviation: 11.8) and 291 women (mean age: 31.8; standard deviation: 11.4). At the time of administration, most participants stated that they had been in a couple's relationship for at least one year (67.3%).



About the administration procedure of the questionnaires, an online survey was used for data collection and the administration time of the whole battery was about 15 minutes. Participants were clearly informed about the use of the collected data for research purposes and their anonymity was guaranteed. Those who participated in the research were also informed that they were free to withdraw at any time without having to give any justification and that the refusal to participate or the decision to withdraw was not prejudicial. This study was conducted in accordance with the Italian law on Privacy and informed consent (DL-196/2003) and in accordance with the ethical standards of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP).

Measures

Attachment Styles. The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ, Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991) was used to measure attachment styles. It is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 4 individual items on a 7-point Likert scale (1= "Doesn't describe me at all", 7= "Describes me accurately"), each item consists of a short description of different attachment patterns. An example of a secure attachment item is: "It is easy for me to be emotionally close to others. I am comfortable being dependent on others and knowing that others depend on me. I'm not worried about being alone or that others may not accept me.

Parenting Styles. The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI, Parker, Tupling and Brown, 1979) was used to measure parental styles received during childhood and adolescence. The PBI is a self-administered questionnaire that consists of 2 forms, one for the father and one for the mother, each of 25 items: 12 items assess the "care" dimension, which implies an affectionate and empathic attitude (e.g.: He seemed to understand my problems and concerns), while the remaining 13 items assess the "protection" dimension, which implies behaviors of control and constraint (e.g.: He tried to make me dependent on him/her). Depending on how the children remember their parents in their first 16 years of life, they will attribute some evaluation to the different statements. The score is given on a Likert scale with values from 0 to 3 for each item, so the total score will have a range of 0 - 36 for care items and 0 - 39 for protection items.

Couple's Quality. Couple's quality was measured by the Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton 1983). The QMI is a measure consisting of 6 items that assesses the quality of married life with generic definitions (e.g.: We have a good marriage). Respondents show their degree of agreement with each of the five items on a 7-step Likert scale and with a 10-step Likert scale for the sixth item. The scores can vary from 6 to 36, with higher scores representing more marital satisfaction.

Love Addiction. Love addiction was measured with the subscale Mania of the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS; Hendrick and Hendrick, 1986). This dimension consists of 7 items (e.g.: When my partner doesn't pay attention to me, I feel sick) each one measured on a 5-step Likert scale. The scores can vary from 7 to 35, with higher scores representing a higher perception of love as obsessive and dependent.

Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the study variables, divided according to the gender of the participants were initially calculated. In a second moment, it was decided to conduct two different correlational studies, one for women and one for men, to analyze whether the Mania dimension (dependent love) was related to other variables (attachment styles, parental styles and quality of the couple relationship).



Results

Table 1 shows the means and the standard deviations obtained by the male and female participants in different attachment styles, parental styles, quality of relationship and Mania dimension. The results showed that for both men and women the attachment style that obtained a higher score was the avoidant one. In terms of parenting styles, men had a higher mean than women in both dimensions of maternal care and control. The quality of the couple relationship was on average high in both groups of participants. About the Mania dimension, women scored higher than the male participants. Table 2 shows the correlations for female participants among the variables surveyed. Specifically, for women the Mania dimension was negatively correlated with a secure attachment style, with parental care (both maternal and paternal) received during childhood/adolescence and with couple satisfaction. Conversely, a concerned and fearful attachment style and excessive maternal overprotection were found to be in significant and positive association with Mania. Table 3 shows the correlations for male participants among the variables surveyed. For men, Mania was negatively correlated with a secure attachment style and couple satisfaction. On the contrary, a worried and fearful attachment style and excessive maternal overprotection were positively correlated with Mania.

	Women		Men	
	M	DS	M	DS
<i>Attachment Styles</i>				
Secure	4.04	2.07	4.00	1.97
Fearful	3.43	2.14	2.83	2.10
Preoccupied	3.02	2.09	2.95	2.10
Dismissing	4.31	2.01	4.47	1.92
<i>Parental Styles</i>				
Maternal Care	26.03	8.22	26.19	6.53
Paternal Care	24.27	7.74	23.00	7.57
Maternal Control	13.93	8.34	14.00	7.94
Paternal Control	11.93	7.44	10.81	7.05
<i>Couple's Quality</i>	35.77	9.99	35.65	8.99
<i>Mania</i>	19.63	5.24	18.25	6.02

Notes. M = mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Table 1 - Means and Standard Deviations for the Key Study Variables



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Mania	1	-,343**	-,036	,470**	,363**	-,167	-,135	,308**	,176	-,270**
2 RQ_secure		1	,050	-,357**	-,336**	,176	,168	-,071	-,061	,268**
3 RQ_dismissing			1	-,141	-,012	-,078	-,128	,087	,052	,087
4 RQ_preoccupied				1	,509**	-,159	-,130	,241*	,029	-,309**
5 RQ_fearful					1	-,138	-,238*	,125	,127	-,246*
6 Maternal Care						1	,496**	-,284**	-,204*	,146
7 Paternal Care							1	-,184	-,243*	,292**
8 Controllo materno								1	,571**	-,176
9 Controllo paterno									1	-,264**
10 Couple's Quality										1

** . p < .01
* . p < .05

Table 2 – Pearson's Correlations of the Key Study Variables for female participants

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Mania	1	-,343**	-,036	,470**	,363**	-,167	-,135	,308**	,176	-,270**
2 RQ_secure		1	,050	-,357**	-,336**	,176	,168	-,071	-,061	,268**
3 RQ_dismissing			1	-,141	-,012	-,078	-,128	,087	,052	,087
4 RQ_preoccuied				1	,509**	-,159	-,130	,241*	,029	-,309**
5 RQ_fearful					1	-,138	-,238*	,125	,127	-,246*
6 Maternal Care						1	,496**	-,284**	-,204*	,146
7 Paternal Care							1	-,184	-,243*	,292**
8 Maternal Control								1	,571**	-,176
9 Paternal Control									1	-,264**
10 Couple's Quality										1

** . p < .01
* . p < .05

Table 3 – Pearson's Correlations of the Key Study Variables for male participants

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the present study was to explore the association among attachment styles, parental styles received during childhood and adolescence, couple satisfaction and love addiction in a group of Italian young adults differentiated according to gender. Another objective of the study was to bridge the gap in the literature about love addiction in the male population, identifying potential associations with dysfunctional aspects of the self, of early life relationships and of the couple.



he results of the study, in line with previous studies, showed that fearful and preoccupied attachment styles were significantly and positively associated with a vision of love as obsessive and dependent both for women and men participants (Ahamadi et al., 2013; Honari et al., 2015). Indeed, people with a preoccupied and fearful attachment are constantly concerned about their relationships, especially intimate ones, and have an excessive fear of separation, abandonment, rejection and potential betrayal by their partner (Bartolomew and Horowitz 1991). On the contrary, our data highlighted how a secure attachment is negatively associated with love addiction, as these security feelings, which come from the first experiences with caregivers (Bartolomew and Horowitz 1991), influence their relationships and prevent the formation of atypical relational forms such as obsessive love (Susman 2010). The major characteristics of a person with a secure attachment are “self-confidence and trust in others” (Bartolomew and Horowitz 1991); for this reason, people with this style of attachment tend to be honest in their relationships and to know and to interpret their own and others’ behaviors and emotional states in an appropriate way (Feeney and Noller, 1990).

Regarding the parental styles received during childhood and adolescence, our results highlighted the differences between the two groups of participants. In the case of women, possessiveness and dependence in adult couple relationships were associated with poorly empathetic mothers and fathers during the early stages of development, while the dimension of parental control was not associated with Mania. For men, poor paternal care and an overprotective and intrusive mother were associated with love addiction (Nicholas et al., 1994). Moreover, for both genders a negative association between couple’s quality and love addiction was found. Indeed, according to previous studies, the more the individual perceives himself as dependent on the relationship the more it is experienced and evaluated negatively by him (Poudat 2006; Sussman 2010).

Our results seem, therefore, to confirm the importance of the family and the first experiences with parents, as these experiences seem to play an essential role in forming fulfilling intimate and romantic relationships and in ensuring that subjects acquire good abilities to identify and respond adequately to their own and others’ mental states (Cacioppo, Gori and Guccione, 2017).

The strong point of this study was to relate love addiction to dysfunctional aspects of the self, early life relationships and the couple in a group of adult participants divided by gender, where previous studies have investigated the phenomenon univocally in female participants.

One of the limitations of the study is to have a correlational design, for this reason it is not possible to establish cause-effect relations among the variables, but only associative links. Moreover, given the non-homogeneity of the participants with respect to gender, future studies should involve more male participants and try to investigate the phenomenon not only on an individual level, but also consider the vision of obsessive love within the couple.

In conclusion, our data seem to be useful for the implementation of clinical interventions that take into account the role of the first relational experiences as well as the different nature and the different weight that parental care and the couple’s satisfaction have in the formation of a potential love addiction both for women and men. In addition, further studies on love addiction in men and women are necessary to develop a specific and independent diagnostic process and to improve the clinical treatment of this condition.



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