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ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REJECTION SENSITIVITY AND ATTACHMENT IN ADULTS

Claudia Parás Gutiérrez

European University of the Atlantic (Spain)

clauparas@gmail.com - <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8945-441X>

Abstract: Rejection sensitivity, also called interpersonal sensitivity, is known as a cognitive-affective disposition which predisposes an individual to anxiously expect, easily perceive and intensely react to rejection. Moreover, rejection sensitivity is a great precursor of maladaptation, as it has been linked to multiple psychopathologies, such as social anxiety or personality disorders among others. Similarly, it is closely related to the four attachment styles in adults (secure, preoccupied or anxious, avoidant and fearful or disorganized). In this article an empirical study is carried out with a total of 321 subjects with a mean age of 32.28 years, of which 208 are women, 112 are men and 1 is binary. However, the latter will not be taken into account, since it is not a significant sample, to analyse the relationship between the four types of adult attachment and the level of sensitivity to rejection. As a result of the study, significance has been obtained in the correlations between secure attachment with the intensity of rejection, between preoccupied attachment with avoidant and fearful attachment, and between fearful attachment with expectations of rejection. With respect to both sexes, it was found that females showed higher scores for preoccupied attachment, expectations of rejection and intensity of rejection.

Key words: Relationships, adults, attachment, rejection sensitivity.

ANÁLISIS DE LA RELACIÓN ENTRE LA SENSIBILIDAD AL RECHAZO Y EL APEGO EN ADULTOS

Resumen: La sensibilidad al rechazo, también llamada sensibilidad interpersonal, es conocida como una disposición cognitiva-afectiva que predispone a un individuo a esperar ansiosamente, percibir fácilmente y reaccionar intensamente al rechazo. Además, la sensibilidad al rechazo es una gran precursora de la mala adaptación, pues se ha llegado a vincular con múltiples psicopatologías, como por ejemplo la ansiedad social o los trastornos de la personalidad entre otros. De igual manera, se encuentra estrechamente relacionada con los cuatro estilos de apego en los adultos (seguro, preocupado o ansioso, evitativo y temeroso o desorganizado). En este artículo se lleva a cabo un estudio empírico con un total de 321 sujetos, con una media de edad de 32.28 años, de los cuales 208 son mujeres, 112 son hombres y 1 es binario. No obstante, este último no se tendrá en cuenta, puesto

que no es una muestra significativa para analizar la relación entre los cuatro tipos de apego adulto y el nivel de sensibilidad al rechazo. Como resultado del estudio, se ha obtenido una significación en las correlaciones entre el apego seguro con la intensidad del rechazo, entre el apego preocupado con el evitativo y el temeroso, y entre el apego temeroso con las expectativas del rechazo. Respecto a ambos sexos se ha obtenido que las mujeres muestran mayor puntuación en el apego preocupado, en las expectativas de rechazo y en la intensidad del rechazo.

Palabras clave: Relaciones, adultos, apego, sensibilidad al rechazo.

Introduction

Social relationships are part of everyday life, which makes them a basic need and could even be considered something innate and essential for each individual. However, there are many differences in the types of relationships that are established, as they are mainly influenced by the attachment style of each person and their level of sensitivity to rejection. Therefore, these variables will be the main focus of this study.

We have chosen to study the construct of sensitivity to rejection since it is a major precursor of maladaptation, being so that it has been linked to multiple psychopathologies such as temperamental problems, where neuroticism (Arianza et al., 2020) and extraversion (Freedman, 2020), or as borderline personality disorder (Cain et al., 2016) and avoidant personality disorder (Khoshkam et al., 2012), or other stress-related disorders stand out. All of these can influence each person's self-concept and self-esteem (Downey & Daniels, 2020; Freedman, 2020). Thus, rejection is also associated with depression, social anxiety (Cain et al., 2016), withdrawal (Downey & Daniels, 2020), loneliness (Watson & Nesdale, 2012), aggressiveness (London et al., 2007), with impaired interpersonal functioning and even with intimate partner violence (Khoshkam et al., 2012).

Thus, rejection sensitivity or interpersonal sensitivity is conceptualized as a cognitive-affective disposition, which predisposes an individual to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection (Downey and Feldman, 1996; Cain et al., 2016). The concept of rejection sensitivity has its origins in research on childhood exposure to family violence and its subsequent impact on adult relationships, and involves attachment theory, social cognitive theory (Freedman, 2020), and interpersonal theories of personality (Ayduk et al., 2008; Khoshkam et al., 2012). Within rejection sensitivity, three different ways of assessing rejection sensitivity stand out, based on age (Chow et al., 2007; Freedman, 2020), gender (London et al., 2012; Freedman, 2020), and race (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Freedman, 2020), which each have a specific questionnaire for specific situations in their domain, but with the same format.

Several researches relate behaviors consequent to high expectancies to anxiety rejection with social anxiety and withdrawal, similarly relating high expectancies to anger rejection with increased aggressiveness and decreased social anxiety (London et al., 2007; Cain et al., 2016). Likewise, Chan and Mendoza-Denton (2008) suggest that the dynamics of race-based rejection sensitivity may be similar across groups, but the triggering nature and psychological sequelae may be specific to the discriminated group such as, for example, Asian-Americans, who cope with such rejection situations with shame, and African-Americans, who cope with anger. Other authors who focused on minority rejection found that people who expected rejection of a loved one anticipated it and acted in a hostile manner, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Downey et al., 1998; Downey and Daniels, 2020). Thus, these individuals were more likely to experience social anxiety, becoming excluded or acting hostile, both of which result in depression or other stress-related disorders (London et al., 2007; Downey and Daniels, 2020).

Araiza et al., (2020), in their longitudinal study affirm part of the rejection sensitivity model, asserting that children's indirect experiences of acceptance may contribute to their later degree of rejection sensitivity. Supporting that claim are numerous studies conducted with school students (London et al., 2007; Butler et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012; Araiza et al., 2020), which determine that rejection situations performed by classmates increase their sensitivity when evaluating the same types of situations in the future. Complementing these studies are those that suggest that perceived social support and indirect experiences of rejection by the child's close caregivers, such as a poor marital relationship between parents, influence the child's learning to expect similar experiences (Colletta, 1981; Feldman and Downey, 1994; Erel and Burman, 1995; Conger et al., 2000; Araiza et al., 2020).

Finally, DeWall et al., (2012), determine that people who enjoy opportunities to get close to others, but fear that their overtures will be rejected, may develop intense neural responses to social rejection, whereas people who are uncomfortable with the closeness of others may deactivate the attachment system, resulting in dampened neural responses to social rejection.

One of the main predictor variables of sensitivity to rejection is the attachment style of each person, which is defined as the need to engage in intense relationships with other people. This bond produces a sense of security that, depending on whether the subject has it more or less reinforced, will determine his or her response to rejection (Erozkan, 2009). In the attachment theory developed by John Bowlby (1982) cited in Fraley (2019), the various ways in which children reacted when separated from their parents are explained. While Hazan and Shaver (1987) cited by Fraley (2019), investigated the relationship of attachment in adults, and concluded that attachment received in childhood is reflected in future romantic relationships. According to these studies, it is believed that people are more malleable in childhood in defining their attachment style, whereas their stability is greater later in life (Fraley & Roisman, 2018).

Likewise, Behrens et al., (2016), by conducting a meta-analysis, study the influence of intergenerational transmission of attachment security or transmission gap, as named by van IJzendoorn (1995) cited by Behrens et al., (2016). In addition, they determine that maternal sensitivity contributes to the mediation between adult attachment security and infant attachment security. In addition to the above, Hazan and Shaver (1994) and Downey and Feldman (1996) point out that the caregiver's treatment in childhood will determine the safe or unsafe work patterns that will develop and be maintained in adulthood. Although Steele et al., (2014), and Fraley and Roisman (2018), in their longitudinal studies comment that such association between such attachments has very small magnitudes.

On the other hand, there is some research suggesting that attachments may develop depending on the environment in which they are found, i.e., a person in their family environment may have a secure attachment, but with people who are not part of their family they may have an attachment, for example, anxious, due to their lived interpersonal experiences (Collins et al., 2004; Fraley et al., 2011; Fraley and Roisman, 2018).

However, there are four types of attachments based on the four combinations obtained by dichotomizing the subject's abstract image of the self into positive (low dependence) or negative (high dependence), on one axis, and by dichotomizing the abstract image of another subject into positive (low avoidance) or negative (high avoidance), on an orthogonal axis. This yields the four categories of attachment termed *secure* (positive self, positive other), *preoccupied or anxious* (negative self, positive other), *avoidant* (positive self, negative other), and *fearful or disorganized* (negative self, negative other) (Bartholomew, 1990; Khoshkam et al., 2012). They all influence how a person interprets the behavior and intentions of others, how they regulate their affect and behavior, and, how they experience their close relationships

(Collins et al., 2006; Fraley and Roisman, 2018). For his part, Del Giudice (2018) considers that there may be differences in the type of attachment in both sexes depending on biological (sex hormones, genetics, etc.), ecological and cultural factors, in addition to early experiences with caregivers and social learning.

Objectives and hypotheses

The general objective of this study is the analysis of the relationship between the four attachment styles in adults (secure, preoccupied or anxious, avoidant and fearful or disorganized) and the level of sensitivity to rejection. The specific objectives are to detail the differences between men and women, in reference to their types of attachment and levels of sensitivity to rejection.

While the hypotheses to be confirmed are (a) whether there will be a negative correlation between secure attachment and high rejection sensitivity, (b) whether there will be a positive correlation between preoccupied attachment and high rejection sensitivity, (c) whether there will be a positive correlation between avoidant attachment and high rejection sensitivity, (d) whether there will be a positive correlation between fearful attachment and high rejection sensitivity, (e) whether females will have higher rejection sensitivity scores than males, and finally, (f) whether males will have higher secure attachment scores than females.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted with a total of 321 participants (n = 321), of whom 208 are female (64.80%), 112 are male (34.89%) and 1 is non-binary (0.31%). The latter has not been taken into account, since it is not a significant sample, since it does not reach 1%. Subjects ranged in age from 18 to 77 years old (M: 32.28, DT: 15.07). The other sociodemographic variables collected are marital status, educational level and annual income, which can be seen in detail in Table 1. In order to narrow down the sample, the inclusion criteria were those over 18 years of age, those who speak Spanish (Castilian speakers) and those who have access to the Internet.

Table 1

Sociodemographic variables (marital status, level of education and annual income)

		Men		Women	
		N	%	N	%
Marital status	Single	70	62.50	127	61.06
	Married or cohabiting	41	36.61	66	31.73
	Separated or divorced	1	0.89	9	4.33
	Widowed	0	0.00	6	2.89

Level of education	Unfinished primary education	1	0.89	1	0.48
	Primary education	2	1.79	9	4.33
	Secondary education	16	14.29	17	8.17
	Professional training	10	8.93	28	13.46
	Higher level training courses	18	16.07	20	9.62
	Special education	0	0.00	1	0.48
	University education	65	58.04	132	63.46
Annual revenues	< 5,000 euros/year	7	6.25	20	9.62
	5.000 - 10,000 euros/year	7	6.25	15	7.21
	11.000 - 15,000 euros/year	16	14.29	34	16.35
	16.000 - 20,000 euros/year	7	6.25	26	12.50
	21.000 - 30,000 euros/year	36	32.14	53	25.48
	31.000 - 40,000 euros/year	16	14.29	28	13.46
	41.000 - 50,000 euros/year	9	8.04	13	6.25
	> 50,000 euros/year	14	12.50	19	9.14

Instruments

CaMir-R. It is a shortened version of the original version of the CaMir questionnaire (Pierrehumbert et al., 1996; Balluerka et al., 2011) to assess a person's attachment style. It is composed of 32 items that are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree. This distribution is used to calculate 7 dimensions of attachment and family functioning, these being Security (7 items), Worry (6 items), Parental interference (4 items), Value of parental authority (3 items), Parental permissiveness (3 items), Self-sufficiency and resentment towards parents (4 items), and Childhood trauma (5 items). Dimension 1 refers to both the past and the present, while dimensions 2, 4 and 6 refer to the present, and dimensions 3, 5 and 7 to the past. Finally, dimension 1 is associated with secure attachment, dimensions 2 and 3 would refer to preoccupied attachment and parental interference, but the latter has not been taken into account in this study, while dimension 6 is related to avoidant attachment and dimension 7 to disorganized attachment. However, dimensions 4 and 5 refer to family structure, but these were not considered in the research either, as they do not directly refer to any of the four attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, avoidant and disorganized).

In the original CaMir, Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.54 to 0.85 (Rodríguez and Fernández, 2019), with test-retest reliability with values above 0.56, except in the Parental Permissiveness dimension where 0.45 was obtained (Balluerka et al., 2011). While in this study has obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.582, with the values of each factor of $\alpha = 0.58$ in Safety, $\alpha = 0.53$ in Concern, $\alpha = 0.58$ in Self-sufficiency and resentment towards parents, and $\alpha = 0.57$ in Childhood trauma.

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. It is a questionnaire adapted for Mexican students from the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, developed by Downey and Feldman (1996) to assess the tendency to expect anxiety, and to perceive and overreact to rejection. Thus, it is made up of 18 ambiguous social situations in which rejection could occur. For each social situation there are two questions in Likert format of 6 options, on the one hand, the level of anxiety that the person feels when the person in the situation rejects him/her (from 1: Nothing to worry about until 6: Very worried), and on the other hand, it is estimated what would be the probability that the character in the situation accepts them (from 1: Nothing available until 6: Very willing).

The Cronbach's alpha of the original scale is 0.831 (Cardenas and Loving, 2011), while in this study a Cronbach's alpha of 0.807 was obtained.

Procedure

Once the selection of the most appropriate tests to carry out the study has been completed, we proceed to pass them to the Google Forms application for subsequent dissemination through social networks (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter), using snowball sampling, also called chain sampling, to achieve greater dissemination.

However, at the beginning of the questionnaire is the information sheet and the informed consent, where it is explained that this study was approved by a psychology ethics committee, that is, that it follows the evaluation protocol, in addition to ensuring the anonymity of the responses. Likewise, it is mentioned that participation is voluntary and that in any case the individual could leave the study if he/she wished to do so. Likewise, a general description of what the study consists of is given, and at the end of the sheet several e-mails belonging to the two tutors in charge of the research have been included, for possible doubts or comments on the study that may arise for the participant.

Finally, once all the information from the subjects has been collected, the statistical relationships between the variables in this study (adult attachment and sensitivity to rejection) are analyzed.

It should be noted that this study is part of a broader investigation, in which numerous variables are evaluated, such as mindfulness, aggressive behavior, the dark triad or victimization, among others. Following the analysis carried out, this work continues.

Results

For the analysis of the quantitative scores obtained in the two tests mentioned above, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to associate the four attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, avoidant and fearful) and the sensitivity to rejection, measured according to their intensity and expectations, generated in situations in which such rejection occurs. The data for these correlations can be seen in detail in Table 2.

At the same time, the univariate differences by gender (male and female) in each attachment style and in the expectations and intensity of rejection were analyzed using Student's t-test for independent samples, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) and correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) between the variables

	M	DT	1	2	3	4	5
1. Secure attachment	29.15	5.88	-				
			-				
2. Concerned attachment	19.34	5,363	.14	-			
			<i>.014</i>	-			
3. Avoidant attachment	12.23	3.43	-.56	.06	-		
			<i>< .001</i>	<i>.265</i>	-		
4. Fearful attachment	10.25	5.28	-.62	-.03	.48	-	
			<i>< .001</i>	<i>.551</i>	<i>< .001</i>	-	
5. Sensitivity-Intensity	36.35	8.66	-.03	.43	.21	.11	-
			<i>.621</i>	<i>< .001</i>	<i>< .001</i>	<i>.044</i>	-
6. Sensitivity-Expectations	41.00	6.67	.30	.21	-.21	-.08	.29
			<i>< .001</i>	<i>< .001</i>	<i>< .001</i>	<i>.137</i>	<i>< .001</i>

Note. M: average. SD: standard deviation. The values in italics are the *p-values*, which indicate the level of significance, while the values that are not in italics represent *Pearson's r-values*.

What is most remarkable from Table 2, is that there is a positive correlation between secure attachment with preoccupied attachment and rejection expectations; between preoccupied attachment with avoidant attachment, intensity and rejection expectations; between avoidant attachment with fearful attachment and rejection intensity; between fearful attachment with rejection intensity; and, finally, between intensity with rejection expectations. While the rest have negative correlations.

On the other hand, there is a significance greater than 0.05 ($p > .05$) in the correlations of secure attachment with the intensity of rejection; of preoccupied attachment with avoidant and fearful attachment; and of fearful attachment with expectations of rejection.

Table 3

Univariate differences by gender in each type of attachment and sensitivity to rejection

	Genre				<i>T</i>	<i>d</i>
	Male		Female			
	M	DT	M	DT		

Secure attachment	29.35	5.66	29.04	6.00	0.44	0.05
Concerned attachment	18.08	4.91	20.02	5.49	- 3.14*	- 0.37
Avoidant attachment	12.30	3.21	12.18	3.55	0.30	0.04
Fearful attachment	9.91	4.67	10.43	5.59	- 0.84	- 0.10
Sensitivity-Intensity	34.99	8.39	37.08	8.74	- 2.07*	- 0.24
Sensitivity-Expectations	39.81	6.35	41.65	6.77	- 2.37*	- 0.28

Note. Values with an asterisk (*) have a significance less than 0.05 ($p < .05$).

As can be seen in Table 3, there are significant differences between the means of both sexes, with regard to preoccupied attachment, intensity and expectations of rejection, with higher scores in women than in men.

Discussion and conclusions

Recalling the aforementioned objectives, this research aims to clarify the relationship between the different types of attachment in adults and the level of sensitivity to rejection. As well as specifying the difference between men and women with respect to the variables just mentioned.

Regarding the hypothesis as to whether there will be a negative correlation between secure attachment and a high level of rejection sensitivity, this is confirmed and corroborated, both by the data in this study and by those provided by previous research (Erozkan & Komur, 2006; Erozkan, 2009; Demircioglu & Kose, 2021). This may be because securely attached people are certain that their bonds with others are good. Similarly, a positive correlation is confirmed between a high level of rejection sensitivity and preoccupied, avoidant and fearful attachments (Khoshkam et al., 2012). These correlations could be understood as an insight into the different effects that the perception of receiving rejection has on the attachment styles that have been formed and are present today in each individual.

The hypothesis that females would score higher on rejection sensitivity has been reaffirmed by the results of this study and by other previous research (Berscheid, 1994; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Ayduk et al., 2000; Purdie & Downey, 2000; Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; González et al., 2011; Angulo et al., 2019). On the other hand, this study has been able to reaffirm the hypothesis that men have higher scores in secure attachment than women. The consolidation of these last two hypotheses may be due to the more determinant personality factors of each sex, i.e., women tend to use relationships with others as a coping strategy while men use social withdrawal as a passive coping strategy.

The practical implications of this research are focused on the development of intervention programs aimed at people with insecure attachments (preoccupied, avoidant and fearful) and with high sensitivity to rejection, as these two factors are potential predictors of difficulties in future relationships, as well as of aggressiveness, social anxiety or withdrawal, and loneliness (London et al., 2007), as well as problems related to depression, stress and self-concept (Downey and Daniels, 2020).

Thus, there is research showing that mentalizing abilities, specifically Mindfulness and empathy, are negatively related to sensitivity and anxiety, so it is beneficial to encourage the individual to improve these skills in order to increase their secure attachment and decrease their interpersonal sensitivity, in addition to other symptomatologies (Shaver et al., 2007; Angulo et al., 2019).

On the other hand, psychoeducational behavioral, cognitive and interpersonal counseling programs would be created to provide interpersonal achievement, understanding of others' perspectives and unconditional acceptance of self and others (Erozkan, 2009).

A possible line of future research could be to evaluate, as protectors against interpersonal sensitivity, empathy and Mindfulness levels, which is a meditation technique based on observing reality in the present moment, with no intention to judge and with full openness and acceptance ("Focusing on the here and now"). Both empathy and Mindfulness levels are also protective of insecure or avoidant attachment, as there are multiple studies demonstrating the effectiveness of developing these techniques in reinforcing the achievement of a more secure attachment (Raski, 2015; Angulo et al., 2019).

Similarly, the relationship between the personality traits of neuroticism and narcissism with rejection sensitivity and attachment styles could be further explored (Downey and Feldman, 1996; Araiza et al., 2020; Reis et al., 2021), as these personality traits have been found to be a potential predictor of rejection sensitivity and security with attachments to others.

Likewise, another line of future research could be to investigate from a more multidimensional approach the factors involved in the transmission gap process, that is, the intergenerational transmission of attachment security (van IJzendoorn, 1995), especially because maternal sensitivity contributes in the mediation between adult and infant attachment security (Behrens et al., 2016).

On the other hand, one could focus on the addiction caused by social networks and how this affects attachment types and sensitivity to rejection, as nowadays almost everyone, directly or indirectly, is influenced by them (Demircioğlul and Köse1, 2021; Shan et al., 2021).

Among the limitations of this research is the scarcity of empirical studies that directly correlate the four adult attachment styles and sensitivity to rejection. That is, most research focuses on the correlation, for example, of attachment styles and couple relationships or, in reference to rejection sensitivity, links it to the comorbidity it has with other disorders such as social anxiety or in the establishment of couple relationships.

However, it is worth mentioning that many studies, although they do not analyze this correlation directly, it can be seen that they do, which has allowed many more articles to be used as a reference for this work than those that had been obtained in the first instance.

Another limitation that has been found is that the rejection sensitivity questionnaire is a version adapted to Mexican students and not to Spanish, although in some way, in this case, it has a low influence, since the participants in this study were Spanish speakers.

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