

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA YAZISI

The Mediation Model of Actual-Ought Self-Discrepancy between Attachment Anxiety and Codependence

Cem MALAKÇIOĞLU¹

Abstract: In this study, it was aimed to investigate the mediating role of actual-ought self-discrepancy between attachment anxiety and codependence among a group of international university students in Turkey who are fluent in English. Considering the high intensity of agitation-related emotions in individuals with codependence, it is hypothesized that discrepancies between actual and ought to self-states scores are mediating the relationship between preoccupied-anxious attachment style and codependence scores. Data was collected between March and May 2016 from 67 (34 females, 33 males) university students with at least one dysfunctional significant other. They were recruited via e-mails and web-based online survey applications. The age range of the participants is between 18 and 25 ($M=21$, $SD=2.074$). In addition to a short socio-demographic information form, three self-report instruments were administered to participants: The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), the Self Concept Questionnaire – Conventional Constructs (SCQ-CC), and the Codependent Questionnaire (CdQ). Regression and mediation analyses were utilized, and it was found that actual-ought self-discrepancies scores to mediate the relationship between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence scores. The results of the study are expected to have important implications for clinical interventions and prevention programs in addressing the attachment insecurities and emotion regulation difficulties of the individuals with codependence.

Key Words: Attachment, Self-Discrepancy, Codependence, Emotion Regulation, Intimate Relationships

Bağlanma Kaygısı ile Eş Bağımlılık Arasındaki İlişkide Gerçeklik-Gereklik Benlik Farklılığı Aracı Modeli

Özet: Bu çalışmada, Türkiye’de öğrenim gören ve İngilizcesi akıcı olan bir grup uluslararası yabancı öğrenci arasında gerçeklik-gereklik benlik farklılığının bağlanma kaygısı ile eş-bağımlılık arasındaki ilişkide oynadığı aracı rolü araştırılmıştır. Gerginlik içeren duyguların, eş-bağımlılığa sahip bireylerde yoğun yaşanmasını dikkate alarak, gerçeklik-gereklik benlik farklılığı puanlarının bağlanma kaygısı ile eş-bağımlılık puanları arasındaki ilişkide aracı rolü oynadığı hipotezi ortaya koyulmuştur. Araştırmanın verileri 2016 yılı Mart ve Mayıs ayları arasında, hayatlarında en az bir yeterince işlevsel olmayan kişi bulunan 67 (34 kadın, 33 erkek) üniversite öğrencisinden İnternet uygulamaları ve e-posta aracılığıyla elde edilmiştir. Katılımcıların yaşları 18 ile 25 arasındadır ($Ort.=21$, $SS=2.074$). Kısa bir sosyo-demografik bilgi formuna ek olarak, katılımcılar üç ölçme aracını doldurmuşlardır: The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), the Self Concept Questionnaire – Conventional Constructs (SCQ-CC), ve the Codependent Questionnaire (CdQ). Verilerin incelenmesinde, regresyon ve aracı değişken analizleri kullanılmıştır ve sonuç olarak gerçeklik-gereklik benlik farklılığı puanlarının kaygılı bağlanma ve eş-bağımlılık puanları arasındaki ilişkide aracı rolü oynadığı bulunmuştur. Bu araştırmanın sonuçlarının, bağlanma ve duygu düzenleme sorunları olan karşılıklı bağımlılık ilişkisine sahip kişilere yardım etmek için klinik uygulamalarda ve önleme çalışmaları geliştirme ve uygulama açısından faydalı olacağı umulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağlanma, Benlik Farklılığı, Eş Bağımlılık, Duygu Düzenleme, Yakın İlişkiler

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Introduction

The term “codependence” has been commonly used in various contexts in psychopathology from substance abuse to abusive relationships since the early 1980s. It is originated from “co-alcoholic” (Doweiko, 2009), and has been used to make reference to particular behavioral patterns and attitudes, such as enabling and over-enthusiastic assisting to dependence behavior, that are typically found in significant others of alcoholics (Cermak, 1986; Wegscheider-Cruse, 1985). The term “codependent” literally assumes that both parties in the relationship are dependent: The substance-dependent partner is obviously dependent on the substances of choice and the codependent individual is dependent on the need to take care of the substance-dependent person. Codependency can be applied to all types of close relationships (Calderwood & Rajesparam, 2014), emphasizing the strong emotional bonds between individuals.

Attachment behaviors are motivated by strong emotional needs to form, strengthen and maintain the attachment bonds that connect individuals to their attachment figures; and attachment styles refer to relatively stable and universal individual differences in seeking protection, compassion, comfort, and relief from attachment figures (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). Attachment figures can either ignore or invest on these needs (Daire, Jacobson & Carlson, 2012). Based on three main attachment styles (secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent; Ainsworth, 1982), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed a four-group model of attachment styles in adulthood. They named the individual’s model of self as dependence, and the model of other as avoidance dimensions; and dichotomized each dimension as positive (Low) and negative (High). High dependence with low avoidance is named as preoccupied-anxious adult attachment, which implies preoccupation with relationships.

Preoccupied-anxious attachment involves the appraisal of proximity seeking behaviors that direct the individual toward struggling to reach closeness to the attachment figure by persistently expressing anxiety, suffering, and neediness (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004). The main mechanism activated by the preoccupied-anxiously attached individual to ensure the protection and comfort by the attachment figure is the hyperactivating strategies. Some of these strategies include: hypervigilant monitoring of potential dangers, intense protest behaviors (exaggerated crying, throwing objects, shouting with anger) regarding real or perceived threats, physical and psychological proximity seeking (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004), which are commonly present in codependence.

In 1987, Tory Higgins developed a theory that explains how different types of discrepancies between mental representations of the self are related to

different types of emotional vulnerabilities. The main purpose of the self-discrepancy theory is to predict what kinds of incompatible beliefs about the self and others will induce what kinds of negative emotional reactions (Higgins, 1987). According to the self-discrepancy theory, there are two-dimensional domains of self-state representations: Domain of the self (Actual, Ideal, Ought), and domain of the standpoint on the self (Own, Significant Other) (Higgins, 1987). Within each domain of the self, there can be many different and continuous perspectives on the self. These perspectives can be grouped into two main categories: “own” personal standpoint and “significant other” standpoint (mother, father, sibling, intimate partner). Also, individuals may have many other standpoints for each significant other at the same time.

Actual self-states are representations of what the individual or others believe who the individual actually is. Ideal self-states are defined as representations of the individual’s beliefs about his or her own or a significant other’s hopes, wishes, or aspirations for the individual, whereas ought self-states are defined as representations of an individual’s beliefs about his or her own or a significant other’s beliefs about the individual’s duties, responsibilities, or obligations (Higgins, 1987). All these types of self-states – actual, ideal, ought – exist simultaneously, however in different forms and contents.

According to the self-discrepancy theory, different types of self-discrepancies represent different kinds of negative experiences that are typically linked to different types of psychological distress (see Figure 1). Particularly, discrepancies between the actual/own self-state (self-concept) and the ideal self-states (ideal self-guides) indicate the lacking of positive consequences, which are linked to dejection-related emotions, such as sadness and disappointment; on the contrary, discrepancies between the actual/own self-state (self-concept) and ought self-states (ought self-guides) indicate the presence of negative consequences, which are linked to agitation-related emotions, such as fear, worry and restlessness (Higgins, 1987). In addition, discrepancies between self-guides (ideal and ought to self-states) are associated with confusion-related emotions (e.g., confused about identity, unsure of self, muddled) (Higgins, 1987). For instance, individuals with narcissistic personality may have more ideal self-guides than ought to self-guides (Barnett & Womack, 2015) that means they may have some problematic issues related to their self-esteem. In other words, they may experience more disappointment since they either over-idealize or over-devalue their self-guides. Therefore, different personality structures seem to exhibit distinct self-discrepancies.

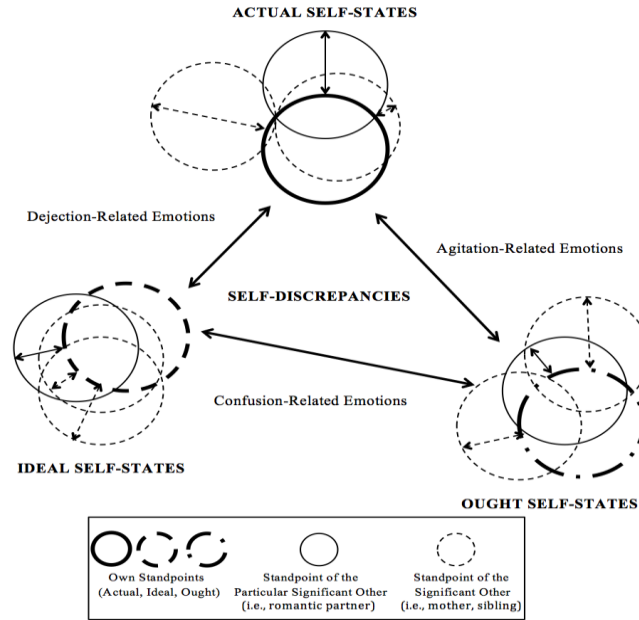


Figure 1. Self-state representations, self-discrepancies, and associated negative emotions.

Among all, discrepancies between an individual's self-concept (actual/own) and his or her self-guides (ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, ought/other) are defined as the most important set of self-discrepancies, mainly because they place the self-concept at the center (Higgins, 1987). Also, it seems that the self-discrepancy theory becomes especially useful when looking into a relationship with a particular significant other. As the individual grows, the regulatory impact of internalized mental representations of security (internal working models of attachment) becomes more important (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Therefore, self-state representations of Higgins (1987) resemble (Bowlby's, 1980) internal working models of attachment.

It seems that Tory Higgins artfully differentiated the internal working models of attachment security by categorizing the self-states and linking them to the particular affective outcomes. Indeed, security-based self-representations are products of the internalization of security-enhancing interactions with attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004). Thus, a securely attached individual would not have any significant self-discrepancies. That is, his or her actual, ideal, ought self-states are expected to overlap to the most part, as opposed to highly discrepant self-states of an insecurely attached individual, such as an individual with codependence (see Figure 1). However, there is no research available that shows the important links between these concepts.

All in all, the framework provided by the attachment theory and the self-discrepancy theory together may help us to understand how individuals with codependence get strongly attached to their dysfunctional partners or significant others. For

example, since individuals with codependence experience intense agitation-related emotions more than other negative emotions, it appears that they have significantly high actual-ought self-discrepancies. From the attachment theory perspective, a statistically significant positive correlation between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence was hypothesized in this study. Furthermore, it was predicted that this relationship is mediated by high actual-ought self-discrepancies, from the self-discrepancy theory perspective.

Method

Participants and Procedure

In this study, 67 university students (34 females, 33 males) with at least one dysfunctional significant other were recruited via e-mails and web-based online survey applications. The age range of the participants is between 18 and 25 ($M=21, SD=2.074$) in the current study. All participants included in the study are older than 18 years old. Two selection rules applied were their ages and being university students. Since all participants are older than 18 years old, informed consents were obtained from them. Participants have filled out a short socio-demographic information form and three instruments during a single session via their e-mails and the Internet applications that took approximately 15 minutes in total.

They have not been required to state their names or any other identification data on the forms and instruments. There was a consent statement before they began answering similar to: "This study is about... (Explanations of the study)... If you do not want to volunteer in participation to this study, please do not answer any item of the psychological

instruments included in the following pages. Please do not write your name, initials or any other identification anywhere. It is important to truthfully answer all questions being asked. Please try to do not skip or leave any questions unanswered. When you finish, send it over to the researcher. Thanks for your time and attention.” No deception was used in the study.

Instruments

Three self-report instruments were administered to participants in the current study: the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), the Self Concept Questionnaire – Conventional Constructs (SCQ-CC), and the Codependent Questionnaire (CdQ).

The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS): The RAAS (Collins, 1996) is an 18-item self-report instrument used to assess three attachment styles in adults: Preoccupied-Anxious, Fearful-Avoidant, and Dismissing-Avoidant Attachments. The number of items in both original scale (AAS, Collins & Read, 1990) and the revised scale (Collins, 1996) are the same. There are three subscales: Preoccupied-Anxious Attachment (6 items), Fearful-Avoidant Attachment (6 items), Dismissing-Avoidant Attachment (6 items). Participants are asked to rate items such as “I find it relatively easy to get close to others” on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=*not at all characteristic of me*, to 5=*very characteristic of me*. Each subscale score ranges from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance. In the current study, only preoccupied-anxious attachment subscale total scores are used. Preliminary results suggest that the RAAS has good internal consistency for each subscale: Preoccupied-Anxious ($\alpha=.85$), Fearful-Avoidant ($\alpha=.78$), Dismissing-Avoidant ($\alpha=.77$); and moderate to good test-retest reliability (.52, .71, .68, consecutively) (Collins, 1996). Attachment styles are constructed as relatively stable constructs (Bowlby, 1982), but they tend to change depending on the working models of attachment (Bowlby, 1988). Some significant life events or interactions between personality factors may result in significant changes in attachment styles. Therefore, moderate levels of test-retest reliability are expected to occur.

The Self Concept Questionnaire – Conventional Constructs (SCQ-CC): The SCQ-CC (Watson & Watts, 2001) is a 28 item self-report instrument used to measure the discrepancies between the actual, ought, and ideal self-states (Higgins, 1987). The participants rate the same 28 personality characteristics (i.e., cheerful, organized) on a 7-point Likert scale from 1=*never*, to 7=*always* for the three different self-states. Therefore, they rate $28 \times 3 = 81$ items in total. The discrepancy scores are calculated by taking the mean of the 28 absolute difference scores based on each self-state ratings. The mean discrepancy scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating the higher self-state discrepancies (Actual-Ought, Actual-Ideal, and Ought-Ideal self-

discrepancies). Each self-discrepancy domain is a subscale, and corresponding mean scores are considered as subscale scores. In the current study, only the actual-ought self-discrepancy to mean scores are used. Preliminary results suggest that the SCQ-CC has good internal consistency for Real (Actual)-Ideal (RI) self-discrepancy subscale ($\alpha=.82$), and RO=Real (Actual)-Ought (RO) subscale ($\alpha=.90$), but reliability and validity data of Ideal-Ought subscale (IO) is not reported (Watson, Bryan, & Thrash, 2010). Test-retest reliability data are also good and above .70 both for RI (.77), and RO (.72) (Watson, Bryan, & Thrash, 2010). Convergent and discriminant evidence was found that the RI and RO constructs are distinct constructs. Using many clinical anxiety and depression scales, such as the STAI (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory), the BDI (Beck Depression Inventory) as reference criteria, test-criterion evidences for validity of the SCQ-CC are obtained (Watson, Bryan, & Thrash, 2010). Although the face and construct validity seem to be good, the content validity of the SCQ-CC should be studied. In other words, it should be evidenced that the 28 characteristics included in the SCQ-CC are significantly representing every aspect of all three self-states of an individual.

The Codependent Questionnaire (CdQ): The CdQ (Roehling & Gaumont, 1996) is a 36 item self-report instrument used to measure four different aspects of the codependence construct: Intimacy (10 items), Responsibility (9 items), Control (10 items), and Enmeshment (7 items). Participants are asked to rate items such as: “I tend to place the needs of others ahead of my own” on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=*I never feel this way* to 5=*I always feel this way*. Therefore, the CdQ total score ranges from 36 to 180, with higher scores indicating greater codependence. Although it is possible to calculate four subscale scores (I=Intimacy, R=Responsibility, C=Control, E=Enmeshment), only the total score was used in the current study. Preliminary results suggest that the CdQ has good overall internal consistency ($\alpha=.86$). However, the internal consistency alphas for subscales range moderately from $\alpha=.62$ to $\alpha=.77$ [$\alpha=.67$ (I), $\alpha=.77$ (R), $\alpha=.65$ (C), $\alpha=.62$ (E)] (Roehling & Gaumont, 1996). Similarly, 3-week test-retest reliability of the total scale is high enough (.80), as well as the two subscales .85 (R) and .79 (E), whereas 3-week test-retest reliability of the other two subscales are lower: .68 (I) and .46 (C). Good criterion validity of the CdQ total scale and subscales were reported, correlating with the codependence ratings of the therapists (.52) (Roehling & Gaumont, 1996). That is, the CdQ total scale measures a construct that therapists define codependence. In addition, the concurrent validity with the MCMI (Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory) was reported as high enough. Thus, the CdQ can be used as a reliable and valid clinical measure.

Socio-Demographic Information Form: It was developed by the researcher to collect some socio-demographic data about participants of the study, such

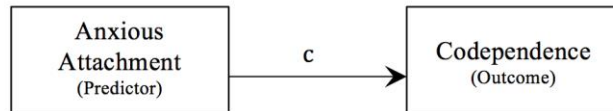
as their ages and gender. This very short information form was given with other data collection instruments. All participants were required to fill out this form.

Data Analysis

The current study utilized linear simple regression to examine the relationship between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence, and linear multiple regression was utilized to examine the mediation of actual-ought self-discrepancy on this relationship, as shown in the Figure 2. The predictor variable is the

RAAS preoccupied-anxious attachment subscale score, the mediating variable is the SCQ-CC actual-ought self-discrepancy subscale mean score, and the outcome variable is the CdQ codependence total score. Since all variables of the study are continuous, a parametric approach was used to analyze the data in the current study. SPSS 24.0 was used to analyze the data. Results of the linear and multiple regression analyses are compared in order to determine the mediating effect of the actual-ought self-discrepancy scores between anxious attachment and codependence scores of the participants in this study.

a) Direct Pathway



b) Indirect or Mediated Pathway

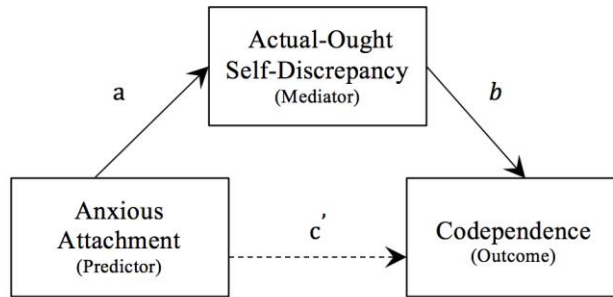


Figure 2. Direct pathway (a) and mediation model of actual-ought self-discrepancy between anxious attachment style and codependence (b).

Results

Results of the tests obtained with the data collection instruments are shown in Table 1. KMO and Bartlett tests indicated that data is suitable for the regression analyses. Along with the analysis, all three scales used

to collect data in this study show good total variance explanation approximately between 50% and 60%. Finally, internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach α) of all scales are high enough, ranging between .85 and .91; that means data collected with these instruments has yielded reliable results.

Table 1. Analyses results for the Instruments

Tests	RAAS	SCQ-CC	CdQ
KMO and Bartlett	0.902 ($p < .001$)	0.852 ($p < .001$)	0.901 ($p < .001$)
Total Variance Explained	59.96%	50.16%	54.75%
Internal Consistency Reliability	$\alpha = .85$	$\alpha = .91$	$\alpha = .86$

Pearson’s correlation analyses are also applied in order to evaluate the relationship between variables of the study. As a result of correlation analyses,

statistically significant ($p < .001$) positive correlations between them are found (Table 2). Among all, the correlation between actual-ought self-discrepancy and codependence scores be the highest (.701).

Table 2. Correlations between variables

	Attachment Anxiety	Actual-ought Self-discrepancy
Attachment Anxiety		.511*
Codependence	.475*	.701*

* $p < .001$

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant ($p < .001$) positive relationship occurs between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence

($r = .475$). Furthermore, as a result of multiple regression analysis, it was found that this relationship

is mediated by the actual-ought self-discrepancy variable (see Figure 3).

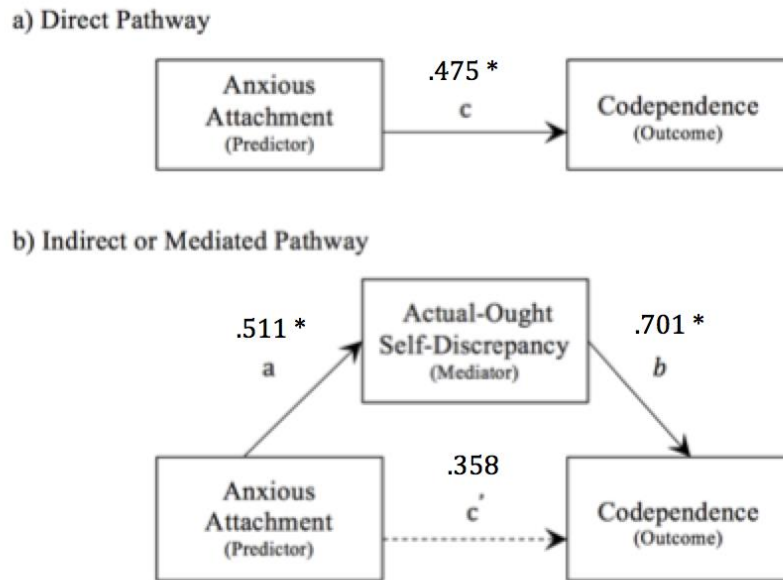


Figure 3. Correlations between variables according to regression analyses (* $p < .001$).

As can be seen in Figure 3, to show the statistical significance of the mediation of actual-ought self-discrepancy (the multiple regression, $R^2 = .614$) in comparison to the direct pathway between predictor variable and outcome variable (the linear regression, $R^2 = .472$), the RAAS preoccupied-anxious attachment subscale total score and the SCQ-CC actual-ought self-discrepancy mean score are added to form a linear multiple regression. In other words, addition of the actual-ought self-discrepancy variable to the regression model increased the explained variance percentage from 47.2% to 61.4%; that is a 14.2% difference, and it can be accepted as a significant change.

In the first step, linear regression analyses show that every one-unit increase in codependence (outcome variable) is associated with a 0.46-unit increase in attachment anxiety (predictor variable) ($\beta = 0.459$; $p < 0.001$). In the second step, actual-ought self-discrepancy is added to the regression as a second predictor variable; accordingly, this change has caused a decrease in the effect of attachment anxiety to codependence ($\beta_1 = 0.353$; $p < 0.005$). In this instance, every one-unit increase in codependence (outcome variable) is associated with a 0.35-unit increase in attachment anxiety (predictor variable), and a 0.59-unit increase in actual-ought self-discrepancy ($\beta_2 = 0.592$; $p < 0.001$); that is to say, actual-ought self-discrepancy mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and codependence. Therefore, hypothesis of the study was accepted to be valid.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between preoccupied-anxious attachment style, actual-ought self-discrepancies, and codependence. The results of the study show that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence. This finding is parallel to some other recent studies (Knudson & Terrell, 2012; Lampis, Cataudella, Busonera, & Skowron, 2017). In addition, actual-ought self-discrepancies tend to be greater in individuals with higher codependence. There are also other research mentioning such a discrepancy between real and ought standpoints of the selves (Gan & Chen, 2017; Winter, 2018). Therefore, it can be concluded that actual-ought self-discrepancies strengthen the relationship between preoccupied-anxious attachment and codependence.

Based on a comprehensive literature review, this study is the first one that aims to examine the relationships between preoccupied-anxious attachment styles, actual-ought self-discrepancies, and codependence. Although it is well known that individuals with codependence are strongly attached to their dysfunctional significant others and they are suffering from agitation-related emotions (e.g., separation anxiety and fear of losing their partners), there is a lack of research to study codependent relationships from the attachment theory and the self-discrepancy theory perspectives. As the results of this study indicate, high actual-ought self-discrepancies seem to explain the high levels of agitation-related emotions (Higgins, 1987) in individuals with codependence.

Additionally, the statistically significant positive correlation between codependence and preoccupied-anxious attachment style shows the lack of internalized working models of attachment (e.g., Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002) in individuals with codependence. That is, since their primary goal is to minimize the risk of separation and guarantee the external source of attachment, individuals with codependence allow their partners to do whatever they want as long as the partners are around. In addition, individuals with codependence may believe that it will be easier to control the situation by letting it to occur in their proximity. However, this seems far from solving their insecurity problems. For one thing, although the dysfunctional partner is controlled on one occasion, the worries about the future of the relationship are always present in their minds. In fact, the attachment system hyper activation of preoccupied-anxiously attached individuals' results in extreme negative emotionality during the times of separation distress (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004). Likewise, it seems that hyper activating strategies result in agitation in individuals with codependence, mainly because of the lack of an effective regulation of emotions with the dysfunctional partner. Thus, each partner in a codependent relationship re-enables each other's problematic behavior patterns.

However, although this study emphasizes all these significant explanations to the codependent relationships for the first time, the mediation model of actual-ought self-discrepancies between attachment anxiety and codependence focuses on only one dimension of the codependent relationships. That is, there can be many other mediators and moderators (internal and external factors) to be included in a more comprehensive model of codependence. Therefore, further studies of codependence should include more predictor variables to increase the internal validity. Furthermore, larger samples from populations with various demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, SES) should be recruited to increase the external validity of further studies. Moreover, this study was carried out with a relatively small group of young people ($n=67$) who were in available access to the researcher.

In addition, it is important to note here that the predominance of actual-ought self-discrepancies does

not rule out the presence of other kinds of self-discrepancies and other types of negative emotions in individuals with codependence. Additionally, in order to better understand the dynamics of codependence, the attachment styles and self-discrepancies of dysfunctional significant others should also be studied in the future. However, the dysfunctional behavior patterns of the significant others can be domestic violence, abusive sexual behaviors, gambling, substance abuse, etc. Thus, variety of dysfunctional behaviors seems to make the study of dysfunctional significant others more complicated. Last but not least, different methods of the variables – other than self-report measures – should be used in further research to diminish errors of measurement.

Conclusion

Findings of this study will provide mental health professionals with useful information to design and implement better prevention and treatment programs in order to help individuals with codependence. Codependence is evidently a very complex psychological construct, but it is definitely worth studying because there are so many people who are suffering from codependent relationships in different parts of the world. Therefore, future researchers are seriously encouraged to carry out research on codependence and related constructs. For example, one commonly proposed similarity among individuals with codependence is that they are all raised in dysfunctional families. If so, why these individuals continue to form and maintain relationships with dysfunctional others in their adulthood? In this context, examining the past and current family dynamics of the individuals with codependence in addition to the early formative relationships with their primary caregivers can give us significant hints in understanding the underlying developmental mechanisms to eventually develop better treatment methods of codependence. All in all, both the attachment theory and the self-discrepancy theory can have many implications in clinical practice and research including individuals with codependence, as well as individuals with other types of dysfunctional behaviors that involve problems in attachment securities and emotion regulation.

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