

# Emotional Dependence and Personality: the Mediating Role of Locus of Control

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to understand the relationships between emotional dependence, personality traits, and locus of control, and to test the mediating role of locus of control in the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. The reason for this study is that knowledge of the aspects associated with this dependence offers the possibility of applying intervention strategies to protect the mental health and quality of life of the emotionally dependent person. Participants were 200 individuals of both sexes, aged 18 to 72, who had been in a romantic relationship (e.g., dating or married) for at least six months. A sociodemographic questionnaire and the following instruments were used for data collection: A Big Five mini-markers scale, the Emotional Dependence Questionnaire, and the Levenson's Multidimensional Locus of Control Scale. Descriptive, correlational, and mediation analyzes were conducted using SPSS software. Results showed a positive relationship between Emotional Dependence and Internal locus of control and a negative relationship with External locus of control factors (Chance and Powerful Others). Emotional Dependence also showed a positive correlation with Neuroticism and a negative correlation with Extroversion. The Powerful Others externality dimension had a significant indirect effect on the relationship between Neuroticism and Emotional Dependence mediating the relationship between these variables. The study contributes to the literature on the variables that lead to emotional dependence, which may inspire prevention strategies and new studies.

## Keywords

emotional dependence, interpersonal relationships, personality, locus of control

## RESUMEN

El presente estudio busca comprender las relaciones entre la dependencia emocional, los rasgos de personalidad y el locus de control, y probar el papel mediador del locus de control en la relación entre la personalidad y la dependencia emocional. El conocimiento de los aspectos asociados a esta dependencia ofrece la posibilidad de aplicar estrategias de intervención para proteger la salud mental y la calidad de vida de la persona emocionalmente dependiente. Los participantes fueron 200 personas de ambos sexos, de 18 a 72 años de edad, que habían estado en una relación romántica durante al menos seis meses. Para la recolección de datos se utilizó un cuestionario sociodemográfico y los siguientes instrumentos: una escala de minimarcadores de personalidad, el Cuestionario de Dependencia Emocional y la Escala Multidimensional de Locus de Control de Levenson. Se realizaron análisis descriptivos, correlacionales y de mediación utilizando el software SPSS. Los resultados mostraron una relación positiva entre la dependencia emocional y el locus de control interno y una relación negativa con los factores del locus de control externo. La dependencia emocional también mostró una correlación positiva con el neuroticismo y una correlación negativa con la Extroversión. La dimensión de externalidad de los otros poderosos tuvo un efecto indirecto significativo en la relación entre el neuroticismo y la dependencia emocional mediando la relación entre estas variables. El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre las variables que conducen a la dependencia emocional, lo que puede inspirar estrategias de prevención y nuevos estudios.

## Palabras Clave

memória coletiva dependencia emocional, relaciones interpersonales, personalidad, locus de control

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## Dependencia Emocional y Personalidad: el Papel Mediador del Locus de Control

### Introduction

A dependent relationship is defined as one in which at least one of the parties has an excessive attachment to the other that involves emotional aspects such as possessiveness, excessive jealousy, and high expectations of the other party's behavior. This dependence is associated with affective, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral components (Bution, 2016).

Excessive dependence on others is recognized as a dependent personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2014). Dependence takes on the character of a pathology when it is assessed and diagnosed as harmful to the subject (Arocena & Ceballos, 2017).

Dependent behavior can be represented by actions, signs, and symptoms, such as, a fragile sense of identity, an excessive focus on the other person's life, a lack of time for oneself, feelings of guilt imbued with the fear of losing the other person, a self-involvement in performing activities one dislikes and performs to please the other person, idealizing the inability to live well alone as a sign of self-destruction, the need to move away and distance oneself from life with family members and friends so that there are no interactions other than with the partner, and the fear of wanting to change or control the other person (Bandeira, 2015).

Emotional dependence is one of the most common reasons why women engage in abusive relationships, which are often accompanied by destructive behavior and domestic violence. A study conducted by Pazmiño (2018) found that 96% of participants had some type of pathological affective dependence, 28% with mild dependence, 36% with moderate dependence, 32% with severe dependence, and only 4% with no dependence.

In a qualitative study of women's emotional dependence, Mota (2018) found that six of the six participants reported doing everything to please their partners, two claimed to have destructive relationships, four had a negative self-image and low self-esteem because they did not take care of themselves, and three considered psychological and verbal abuse to be part of love, resulting in a high degree of emotional dependence of these women on their partners.

About gender comparison regarding emotional dependence, Mota (2018) argues that emotional dependence can affect both sexes, as it is a maladaptive emotional state. Silva and Silva (2020) point out that women are more affected by emotional dependence, and they argue that this is due to the cultural stereotypes of women's image, which classify

them as more affectionate and sentimental, with a greater responsibility in the role of affective management of the relationship with the man, so that they are loved and the relationship is maintained for a longer period of time (Peixoto & Heilborn, 2016).

An important variable that can contribute to the understanding of dependent behavior is locus of control. By definition, locus of control is the belief individuals have about the determinants of events in their lives and the control they have over them (Rotter, 1996). It is possible for people to believe that control over events is internal, when they believe they have power over events, or external, when they believe events occur through external forces such as chance, divine will, or the influence of powerful people; that is, no matter how hard individuals try, they do not have control over the events that happen to them (Lima & Irigaray, 2019).

Dela Coleta (1992) examined the relationship between locus of control beliefs and marital satisfaction. According to the results, individuals with dominant internal locus of control made more effort to solve problems in the marital relationship and consequently felt more satisfied in the relationship. In the same study, it was found that individuals with higher levels of internal locus of control tended to be more optimistic about the future of the relationship than individuals with higher levels of external locus of control.

In addition to locus of control, we can also ask whether people with certain personality traits are more likely to develop emotional dependence. Therefore, personality becomes a relevant variable in the context of this study. From a conceptual perspective, human personality consists of individual traits that indicate ways of thinking, attitudes, and feelings, and that illustrate the constancy and regularity of individuals' behaviors in everyday life (Schultz & Schultz, 2021).

The predominant theoretical model in psychology for the scientific study of human personality is the Big Five. The model adds five factors or traits that, when combined, define a person's personality: Extroversion, Openness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness (Primi et al., 2010).

Extroversion refers to the person's ability to interact interpersonally, that is, the person's ability and aptitude to socialize and communicate. Openness refers to the person's tendency to be open to new experiences and to explore new things. Neuroticism is the person's level of adjustment and emotional instability in dealing with conflict and psychological problems and describes individuals who constantly experience negative emotions. Conscientiousness represents the level of organization, perseverance, and motivation the person displays to achieve their goals. Finally, Agreeableness describes

the characteristics of the person's interpersonal relationships and refers to a friendly nature of the relationship (Kim et al., 2019).

Carvalho and Pianowski (2015) developed a study whose results showed that emotional dependence was positively correlated with neuroticism. Considering that the trait neuroticism is associated with experiencing negative emotions, it is theoretically expected to be directly related to dependency, which is also associated with such emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression, insecurity), as the person focuses not on him/herself but on the other, develops a negative view of him/herself, and constantly has dysfunctional thoughts of losing this relationship with the other.

In view of this, the present study aims to contribute to the investigation of how emotional dependence is related to the locus of control and certain personality traits, and to test a mediation model of the locus of control for the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. Based on the literature on this topic, the hypotheses described below were formulated.

Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Emotional Dependence is positively related to Internal locus of control and negatively related to External locus of control.

Hypothesis 2: Emotional Dependence is positively related to the trait Neuroticism.

Hypothesis 3: Emotional Dependence will be negatively related to the trait Openness.

Hypothesis 4: Locus of Control will play a mediating role in the relationship between Personality and Emotional Dependence.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study included a Brazilian sample of 200 individuals of both sexes with the criterion of being in a committed relationship for at least 6 months. Age ranged from 18 to 72 years ( $M = 26.52$ ,  $SD = 8.95$ ), and the majority were female (82.5%), heterosexual (89.5%), Catholic (55.5%), and middle class (45%). 47% of the sample reported being in a dating relationship and 43.5% were married.

## **Measurements**

In addition to a sociodemographic questionnaire used to characterize the sample, participants answered the following instruments:

**Emotional Dependence Questionnaire:** this instrument was originally developed by Hoyos and Arredono (2006) and has evidences of validity for the Brazilian context by Fonsêca et al. (2020). The scale consists of 23 items in a single factor. A six-point response scale is used, ranging from 1 (does not agree with me at all) to 6 (describes me perfectly). The single-factor structure showed good fit indices with the data of our study [ $\chi^2 = 324.701$ ;  $df = 230$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.411$ ; CFI = .984; TLI = .983; RMSEA (CI90%) = .045 (.033–.057)].

**Levenson's Multidimensional Locus of Control Scale:** Developed by Levenson (1973) and has evidences of validity by Dela Coleta (1987) for use in Brazil. This instrument consists of 24 items divided into three factors: Internality (belief that the individual has power over the events in his or her life), Chance externality (belief that chance or divine will are responsible for the events in the individual's life), and Powerful Others externality (belief that important or powerful people are responsible for the events in the individual's life). A five-point response scale is used, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Good fit indices for the three-factor structure were observed with our data [ $\chi^2 = 531.049$ ;  $df = 249$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.132$ ; CFI = .923; TLI = .915; RMSEA (CI90%) = .076 (.067–.085)].

Finally, a reduced marker personality assessment scale based on the Big Five model was used. The instrument in question was developed by Hauck Filho et al. (2012) and includes 25 items divided into five personality dimensions: Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness. Each item completes the statement "I consider myself to be a person...". A Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is used to indicate how much the respondent agrees that each adjective describes him or her. We observed excellent fit indices for the five-factor model for the measure's factorial structure in our data:  $\chi^2 = 314.521$ ;  $df = 265$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.186$ ; CFI = .965; TLI = .961; RMSEA (CI90%) = .031 (.013–.043).

## **Procedure**

The research project was initially reviewed and positively evaluated by a competent ethics committee. Only after this approval did the data collection begin, which

took place online through the Google Forms platform, with the link to the questionnaire shared via the authors' social networks (e.g., Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram). Participants took an average of 15 minutes to complete the survey. The research respected and followed the ethical principles pertaining to human being research, based on the Brazilian National Council of Health Resolution 510/16. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the possibility to withdraw their participation at any time. In addition, participants' free and informed consent was essential before proceeding with the responses.

### ***Data analysis***

Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 23). Descriptive statistics were performed to identify the characteristics of the sample, Spearman correlations to test how the variables of the study are related, and a simple mediation analysis to test the mediating role of the locus of control in the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. For this last analysis, the macro PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) was used. The database used for the analyzes of this study is available in the repository Open Science Framework/OSF<sup>3</sup>.

### **Results**

First, the distribution of the variables of interest in the study was checked using the Kolmogorov-Sminorv and Shapiro-Wilk normality tests. Both tests revealed that none of the variables were normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, it was decided to apply Spearman's nonparametric correlation to check how the variables of the study are correlated with each other. The correlation results are presented in Table 1.

The results showed that Emotional Dependence was positively related to the Internality dimension of the locus of control ( $\rho = .20$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and to the Neuroticism ( $\rho = .38$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and negatively with the Chance externality ( $\rho = -.27$ ;  $p < .001$ ), Powerful Others externality ( $\rho = -.36$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and Extraversion ( $\rho = -.17$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Despite the significance, it is necessary to consider the effect size of the observed results. Precisely, the shared variances ranged from 0.02 (Internality and Conscientiousness) to 0.28 (Chance externality and Powerful Others externality).

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<sup>3</sup> [https://osf.io/5sy9m/?view\\_only=1baf35ce541c47d3b347bcb4654e2d17](https://osf.io/5sy9m/?view_only=1baf35ce541c47d3b347bcb4654e2d17)

**Table 1**

*Correlations between Emotional Dependence, Locus of Control and Personality*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	2.67	.97									
2	2.37	.58	.20*								
3	3.48	.73	-.27**	.02							
4	3.53	.77	-.36**	-.07	.53**						
5	3.12	.79	-.17**	-.10	.11	.07					
6	4.04	.59	.05	-.09	.12	.11	.20**				
7	4.15	.86	.04	-.15*	.03	.16*	-.01	.44**			
8	3.04	.94	.38**	.17*	-.32**	-.36**	-.33**	-.07	-.04		
9	3.11	.78	-.13	-.19*	-.07	-.10	.26**	.18**	.10	-.05	

*Note.* 1 = Emotional Dependence; 2 = Internality; 3 = Chance externality; 4 = Powerful Others externality; 5 = Extroversion; 6 = Agreeableness; 7 = Conscientiousness; 8 = Neuroticism; 9 = Openness.

\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

A simple mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediating role of the locus of control in the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. More specifically, the model included the trait Neuroticism, the Powerful Others externality dimension of locus of control, and Emotional Dependence. For this analysis, we again used the bootstrapping technique with 5.000 repetitions. The data on total, direct, and indirect effects can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Mediation Effects*

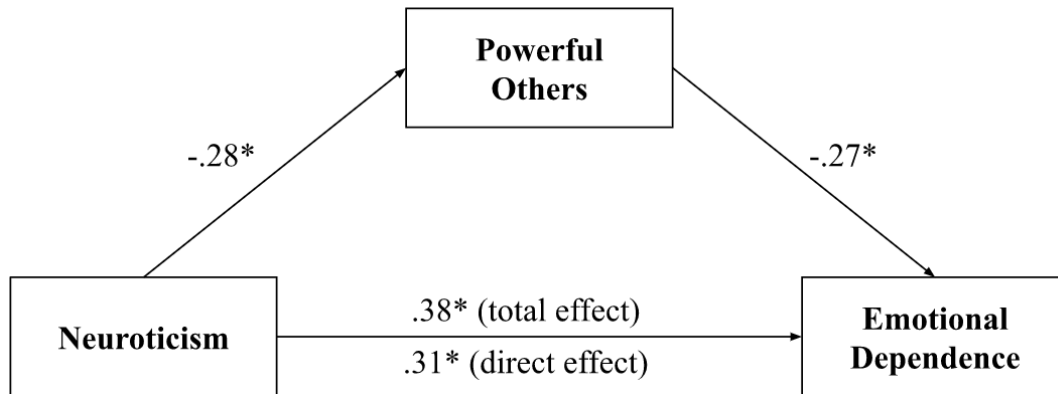
	Coefficient	$\beta$	Standard Error	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Intervals (BCa)	
	( <i>b</i> )					Lower	Upper
Total effect	.37	.38	.070	5.494	.000	.163	.632
Direct effect	.30	.31	.070	4.446	.000	.133	.538
Indirect effect	.07	.07	.027	2.793	.005	.017	.167

It should be noted that the indirect effect, i.e., the effect of the Neuroticism on the Emotional Dependence, running across the Powerful Others externality was significant ( $\beta = .07$ ; 95% CI BCa = .017; .167,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, the bootstrap confidence intervals did not include the null value. The variable Powerful Others externality mediated approximately 18% of the relationship between Neuroticism and Emotional Dependence.

Together, Neuroticism and Powerful Others externality explained 19% of the variance in Emotional Dependence ( $R^2$ ). The mediation model is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Proposed Mediation Model*



*Note.*  $*p < .05$ ., original authorship.

## Discussion

The main goal of our study was to determine the correlates of emotional dependence with locus of control and personality. In addition, we wanted to test a model of mediation of the locus of control in the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. Based on the literature on this topic, we formulated five hypotheses to be tested. Hypothesis 1 stated that Emotional Dependence is positively related to Internal locus of control and negatively related to External locus of control; Hypothesis 2 stated that Emotional Dependence is positively related to the trait Neuroticism; Hypothesis 3 stated that Emotional Dependence is negatively related to the trait Openness; Hypothesis 4 stated that the Powerful Others externality would play a mediating role in the relationship between Neuroticism and Emotional Dependence.

First, the results of our study showed that Emotional Dependence is indeed positively correlated with the Internality dimension of the locus of control and negatively correlated with the Externality dimensions (Chance and Powerful Others), confirming Hypothesis 1. In general, these results imply that emotional dependence is directly related to subjective problems of the individual, such as insecurities, which consequently generate fear of abandonment. In this direction, Beck (2017) has already warned that dependent behavior is due to internal beliefs that the individual has about himself, namely anticipatory fear of abandonment.



The emotionally dependent person is insecure, places the partner as the primary factor in their life, and is unable to live well on their own. This caring behavior and excessive and uncontrolled attention to the partner is one of the main causes of this state of dependency (Santos & Antão, 2020).

In this way, the relationship between Internality and the behaviors of the affective dependent is represented, since these behaviors are permeated by the self-commitment that the dependent subject maintains in order to sustain the relationship and to be solely responsible for the happiness of the other. Self-commitment leads one to strive to satisfy the other while it is accompanied by the suspension of one's will (Brum, 2020).

We found that the trait Neuroticism is positively and statistically significantly correlated with Emotional Dependence, leading to the confirmation of Hypothesis 2 of the study. This suggests that individuals with high levels of Neuroticism, characterized by emotional instability, unrealistic beliefs, increased anxiety, and difficulty coping with frustration, are more likely to be dependent in a romantic relationship (Morales et al., 2019).

Neurotic people tend to be pessimistic and insecure (Dias, 2016), and this insecurity is certainly the strongest link to the emotional dependence they develop. Montesinos Araújo (2018) presents data consistent with these findings. The author concludes that individuals who have higher levels of emotional dependence tend to be unstable in their relationships and in response to life events, while individuals with lower levels of neuroticism or emotional instability tend to be stable and less dependent.

Hypothesis 3 of the study predicted that Emotional Dependence would be negatively related to trait Openness. Although the results indicated a correlation in the expected direction, the hypothesis was not supported because statistical significance was not reached. It is believed that with an increase in the sample of the study, it will be possible to achieve the aforementioned significance for the relationship between these variables. Machado (2020) explains that emotionally dependent people have a predictable pattern of behavior characterized by a certain rigidity and aversion to new experiences because they are used to daily life with their partner and fear changes in the relationship routine because they fear being constantly exchanged for other people.

Openness describes a person's ability to make decisions that involve stepping out of their comfort zone in search of innovation. Given this concept, people with a low expression of this trait have difficulty when it comes to solving problems with which they are not familiar. Regarding the issue of dependency, these people find it difficult to stand

by their own opinions and desires. They consider themselves incapable of changing and experiencing new possibilities without their partner (Freitas, 2017). Consequently, affectively dependent individuals are not very open to change because they are completely devoted to their spouse and do not show other interests due to their obsession with the other (Paiva et al., 2017).

In the fourth hypothesis of the study, we hypothesize that the locus of control acts as a mediator in the relationship between personality and emotional dependence. Given the correlations between variables observed in the study, we tested a model that included the trait Neuroticism as a predictor variable, the dimension Powerful Others externality as a mediator variable, and Emotional Dependence as an outcome. After we observed a statistically significant indirect effect as well as a decrease in the magnitude of the direct effect compared to the total effect, Hypothesis 4 was confirmed.

More specifically, the influence of the Powerful Others externality occurs inversely proportionally, that is, people are less likely to attribute the events in their lives to other influential people if they are affectively dependent and exhibit higher levels of Neuroticism, because their dependence on another is much more due to internal and subjective problems than to external factors (Esteves, 2017). It is important to highlight that the other dimensions of locus of control (Chance and Internality) were not statistically significant in the model, which led us to include only the Powerful Others dimension, as this was the locus of control factor that showed the greatest magnitude with emotional dependence, and to aim for greater parsimony.

As mentioned earlier, emotional dependence is closely related to the internal aspects of the individual. These include insecurity, excessive jealousy, fear of abandonment, and craving for attention. The emotionally dependent person's distrust of their spouse causes them to have dysfunctional automatic thoughts that trigger feelings of insecurity and cause emotional exhaustion (Campos, 2020). Likewise, neuroticism is related to the internal state of the individual, as it is related to feelings of worry, anxiety, and nervousness that characterize emotional instability (Pinheiro, 2019). These aspects support the mediated role of the locus of control in the model, especially the inversely proportional influence of the Powerful Others externality.

It is important to point out that it is common in a relationship to depend on the other in a given situation, and that giving in on certain issues is part of any social interaction. The main issue is to assess the extent to which dependency becomes excessive and has a negative impact on the individual and the relationship itself, and thus to try to

appreciate the well-being of the individuals involved. This topic is relevant to the field of mental health because it contributes with data that solidify the relationship between emotional dependence and aspects of personality and locus of control and expands research interests in the field of intimate relationships.

Despite the contribution of the study, it is important to point out some limitations. The first is that a convenience sample was used that is not representative of the general population and has low diversity. Another limitation concerns the nature of the data collection instruments, which were based on self-report and subject to the influence of social desirability. Finally, the correlational nature of the study is highlighted, which prevents the inference of cause-effect relationships between variables. Future studies can be developed to overcome such limitations. New research can be developed with probabilistic and diversified samples that use other designs, such as experimental studies, and employ implicit measures. It is also possible to include other variables in the study to gain a better understanding of the aspects associated with emotional dependence, such as self-esteem, attachment dimensions (secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant), and others.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the role of psychologists in the clinical assessment of dependence and in the development of a therapeutic process to accompany the emotionally dependent person and enables them to better adapt to the different contexts in which they operate, such as the context of work, education and the social environment in general. Considering that emotional dependence has a negative impact on social relationships in these contexts, mental health and the individual's quality of life, such interventions can be developed to solve these problems, promote better mental health so that these people can have healthier and happier relationships and value themselves and others.

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