

EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCE AND NARCISSISM: RELATIONS WITH SOCIAL BEHAVIORS AND GENDER INEQUALITY

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between emotional dependence, narcissism, social behaviors, and gender inequality. By reviewing the scientific literature, we examine how these factors interrelate and impact social dynamics and individual experiences. Emotional dependence and narcissism are addressed as psychological factors that influence social behaviors and perpetuate gender inequality.

Keywords: Emotional dependence, narcissism, society, patriarchy, and gender

Introduction

Are emotional dependence and narcissism psychological aspects that significantly affect interpersonal relationships and social behaviors? Is gender inequality, in turn, a complex social phenomenon that influences and is influenced by these psychological characteristics? These are complex questions that this article aims to explore and observe, how emotional dependence and narcissism relate to social behaviors and gender inequality.

Psychological aspects are topics widely studied and discussed in the scientific literature. This literature review seeks to explore complex relationship dynamics and impact on mental health, which affects the family and social life of individuals and society as a whole.

The methodology adopted for this study is a review of the scientific literature. Relevant articles and studies published in academic and scientific journals over the years were selected. The inclusion criteria were studies that directly and indirectly addressed the relationship between the

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factors presented.

Literature Review

Emotional dependence

Pathological bonding is characterized by an excessive need for support and validation from others. Studies show that individuals with high emotional dependence tend to have low self-esteem and difficulty making independent decisions (Melero & Cantero, 2020).

According to Martínez López et al. (2016), “Emotional dependence is characterized by addictive behaviors in love relationships, where the individual needs the other to maintain their emotional balance” (p. 80). This behavior can be exacerbated in times of crisis, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Tomaz Paiva, T. et al. (2022), “women’s emotional dependence during the pandemic showed a significant increase due to social isolation and psychological abuse” (p. 2257).

Santos and Camargo (2024) explore the factors and consequences of excessive attachment in marital relationships, stating that “emotional dependence often results in a cycle of abuse and low self-esteem, perpetuating psychological suffering” (p. e220002).

According to Bution et al (2016), excessive attachment characterized by addictive behaviors in love relationships, the individual needs the other to maintain their emotional balance, therefore:

- The definition of emotional dependence is an addictive disorder, in which the individual needs the other to maintain their emotional balance.
- The etiology is related to the development of attachment in childhood, as well as cultural and phylogenetic factors.
- Symptoms include compulsive behaviors, constant need for attention and affection, and difficulty maintaining healthy relationships.



- Indicated treatments include individual therapy, group therapy, support groups, and self-help books

Emotional dependence can lead to submissive and conforming behaviors, perpetuating gender inequality and narcissistic behaviors.

Narcissism

Narcissism, on the other hand, is marked by an inflated sense of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Narcissistic individuals may exhibit manipulative and exploitative behaviors (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Thus, narcissism is another critical topic, deeply analyzed in the psychological literature. Barbosa, Campos, and Neme (2021) observe that “modern narcissism is often associated with feelings of helplessness and loneliness, resulting in superficial interpersonal relationships” (p. e190014). Boracs (2010) adds that “self-esteem and identity in narcissism are fragilely constructed, constantly depending on external validation” (p. 203).

Verde et al. (2022) highlight that “female narcissism, although less obvious than male narcissism, presents equally coercive and aggressive behaviors, especially in contexts of romantic jealousy” (p. 2833-2864). This behavior is corroborated by Ponti, Ghinassi and Tani (2020), who state: “vulnerable and grandiose narcissism plays a mediating role in psychological abuse in couple relationships” (p. 144-158).

The literature on narcissism is vast and addresses various aspects of this condition, from its theoretical origins to its clinical and social manifestations. We will then see some important points:

Theoretical Origins - Freud and Narcissism. Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of narcissism in psychoanalysis in his essay “On Narcissism” (1914)¹. He explored how narcissism manifests itself in psychological development and personality formation.



Clinical Manifestations - Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD): This disorder is characterized by a grandiose behavior pattern, need for admiration, and lack of empathy. The literature addresses neurobiological factors, diagnosis and treatment of NPD.

Interpersonal relationships are profoundly affected by narcissism. Narcissistic individuals tend to utilize others as mirrors for their own emotional needs, leading to superficial and utilitarian interactions. Reduced empathy and a lack of genuine connection make it difficult to build long-lasting, meaningful relationships.

There are several literature reviews that explore the different aspects of narcissism, including its clinical and social implications.

Social Behavior

“Narcissism and helplessness”: some considerations on interpersonal relationships today”. This article, published in the journal *Psicologia USP*, discusses how narcissism manifests itself in contemporary interpersonal relationships, highlighting helplessness and lack of social support as factors that contribute to the emergence of narcissistic behaviors.

The article addresses in detail the implications of narcissism in modern social interactions. The text discusses how narcissism, characterized by an inflated self-image and a constant need for admiration, has deep roots in experiences of helplessness and lack of social support.

Helplessness, according to the article, is a critical factor that contributes to the development of narcissism. When individuals do not find the necessary emotional support during their formation, they may develop narcissistic behaviors as defense mechanisms. The incessant search for external validation, the fear of rejection, and the difficulty in forming affective bonds are some of the consequences of this emotional helplessness.

Social Behaviors are influenced by psychological and contextual factors. Studies indicate that emotional dependence and narcissism can negatively affect the quality of interpersonal relationships,



increasing the prevalence of conflicts and abusive behaviors (Lambert et al., 2014).

In this way, emotional dependence can lead to self-censorship and sacrificial behaviors, while narcissism can result in dominance and control in relationships, which can favor stereotypical gender inequality.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is a persistent problem in many societies. It is underpinned by gender stereotypes, social norms, and structural inequalities (Connell, 2005).

The literature on emotional dependence and narcissism in relation to gender inequality addresses how these factors interact with and reinforce existing inequalities.

In Emotional Dependence, studies indicate that emotional dependence is more prevalent among women, often resulting in feelings of guilt, fear of abandonment, emotional emptiness, anxiety, and depression. Narcissism, characterized by an inflated self-image and a constant need for admiration, can negatively affect interpersonal relationships and contribute to gender inequality. Men with narcissistic characteristics may seek positions of power and control, while narcissistic women may face difficulties in recognizing and facing their own needs for validation.

Impact on Gender Inequality

- **Power Relations:** Narcissism can create unequal power dynamics in interpersonal relationships, where one partner constantly seeks validation and control, while the other is subjugated or marginalized.
- **Patriarchal Culture:** Society often reinforces narcissistic behaviors, especially in men, promoting the idea that domination and control are signs of strength and success.
- **Domestic Violence:** Emotional dependence can lead to a woman remaining in abusive relationships, contributing to the maintenance of the cycle of domestic violence.



Emotional dependence and narcissism can reinforce these stereotypes by perpetuating behaviors and attitudes that keep women in menial positions and men in positions of power.

Studies often address the intersection between emotional dependence and narcissism, exploring how these dynamics interact in relationships. Talbot et al. (2015) state that “the dimensions of narcissism and self-esteem are significant predictors of aggression in intimate partner violence” (p. 193-196).

Rinker (2009) notes that “perpetrators of intimate partner violence often exhibit narcissistic traits, utilizing the victim’s emotional dependence as a form of control and manipulation” (p. 417).

Certainly, studies on emotional dependence and narcissism are applicable to all interpersonal relationships, regardless of gender, gender identity, or type of relationship (whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.). The power dynamics, external validation, and behavioral patterns that underpin narcissism and emotional dependence can arise in any type of relationship:

MARTÍNEZ-LÓPEZ et al., 2016: “Emotional dependence can be observed in a variety of interpersonal relationships, not limited to a specific type of gender or sexual orientation.”

TOMAZ PAIVA et al., 2022: “During the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional dependence was present in relationships of different natures and configurations, including heterosexual and homosexual couples.”

Barbosa, Campos & Neme, 2021: “The characteristics of narcissism manifest themselves in a similar way in different types of relationships, regardless of the sexual orientation or gender identity of those involved.”

Boracs, 2010: “Narcissism can be perceived in a wide range of interpersonal contexts, reflecting similar dynamics of seeking validation and domination.”

“Narcissism and helplessness”: some considerations about interpersonal relationships today”
This article, published in the journal *Psicologia USP*, discusses how narcissism manifests itself in contemporary interpersonal relationships, highlighting helplessness and lack of social support as



factors that contribute to the emergence of narcissistic behaviors.

“Narcissism: self-esteem, identity, otherness” - This book by Luis Horstein, published in the Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry, delves into the issues surrounding narcissistic pathologies and limit states, addressing the metapsychology, theory and clinic of these issues.

“Why Narcissism Is Less Obvious in Women Than in Men” – This BBC article explores how narcissism manifests differently in females, revealing that narcissistic women can be just as dangerous and violent as their male counterparts.

These articles provide a comprehensive overview of narcissism in women and its implications for interpersonal relationships and mental health.

Literary studies reinforce the validity of research on emotional dependence and narcissism for all forms of interpersonal relationships, highlighting the universality of these human dynamics.

Discussion

The dynamics of psychological codependency, in power relations between individuals, brings several factors that favor the maintenance of emotional dependence and create a vicious cycle of submission and conformity, where individuals, especially women, may feel compelled to accept subservient roles and favor behaviors that perpetuate gender inequality. This behavior can be reinforced by cultural and social norms that value obedience, hierarchy, and conformity in relationships, leading to the perpetuation of patterns of inferiority, inequality, and personal and social oppression.

There are several ways to describe and perceive Emotional Dependence: Excessive Attachment; pathological link; Need for Constant Trial; Discontent in the Absence of the Other; Personal Annulment. This dependence can lead to permanence in abusive relationships, perpetuating the cycle of violence, leading the individual to submission, low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, control, isolation, insecurity, longing for affection, emotional despair, imbalance, personal sacrifice and neediness.



Emotional dependence and narcissism have a significant impact on social behaviors and the perpetuation of gender inequality. Excessive attachment can lead to submission and acceptance of traditional gender roles, while narcissism can reinforce dominant and authoritarian attitudes. Both factors contribute to the maintenance of unequal social structures.

For a narcissistic man, a marriage to an emotionally dependent woman may seem ideal, as he can exert control and get the constant validation he wants. However, this dynamic is extremely harmful to the woman, who may feel trapped, devalued, and emotionally drained.

When the situation is reversed, where a narcissistic woman is married to an emotionally dependent man, the scenario can be equally damaging, but with different dynamics. The man may feel constantly inadequate and looking for approval, while the woman utilizes her need for validation to maintain control.

Impacts on the emotionally dependent man

- **Self-esteem:** It can suffer significant wear and tear, as it is constantly looking for approval that is never enough.
- **Isolation:** May feel isolated and emotionally dependent, afraid of losing the relationship.
- **Mental Health:** The combination of emotional dependence and narcissism can lead to high levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Impacts on Narcissistic Women

- **Narcissism Reinforcement:** The dynamic can reinforce narcissistic behaviors, as it finds in the dependent partner the constant validation it wants.
- **Relational Challenges:** May have difficulty maintaining healthy and balanced relationships, perpetuating a cycle of control and manipulation.



Impacts on the couple's relationship

- **Power Inequality:** The relationship will be marked by an inequality of power, where the woman dominates emotionally, while the man submits.
- **Cycle of Abuse:** There can be a cycle of emotional abuse, where the man feels trapped and unable to get out of the relationship.

These harmful dynamics perpetuate gender inequality, regardless of who is in the narcissistic role.

There are several scientific articles that address narcissism in women. The term narcissism can conjure up images of arrogant and self-absorbed men. This personality trait—with its hallmarks of ostentatious grandiosity, assertiveness, and superiority—is indeed more often observed in males, but it has more to do with culture than with aspects of personality itself. This is because these core characteristics are very much in line with traditional masculine traits. In fact, up to 75% of people diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder are men. (Green et al, 2024)

We can classify the causes of narcissism and emotional dependence into primary, secondary, and subsequent: Primary Causes

Narcissism:

- **Genetics:** Hereditary traits that can predispose an individual to developing narcissistic traits.
- **Environment:** Childhood experiences, such as excessive dedication or excessive criticism from caregivers.



Emotional Dependence:

- Attachment Development: Unstructured or insufficient attachment relationships in childhood can lead to emotional dependence in adulthood.
- Cultural Factors: Cultural norms that promote emotional dependence, such as the idea that happiness depends on a partner. Secondary Causes

Narcissism:

- Traumatic Experiences: Traumas in childhood or adulthood that lead to a strengthening of narcissistic defense mechanisms.
- Lack of Empathy: Development of inappropriate emotional skills, leading to an inflated self-image and need for external validation.

Emotional Dependence:

- Dysfunctional Relationships: Dysfunctional interpersonal relationships that reinforce emotional dependence, such as abusive or codependent relationships.
- Low Self-Esteem: Feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem that lead to a constant search for approval and validation. Subsequent Causes

Narcissism:

- Manipulative Behaviors: Development of manipulative and controlling behaviors as a result of the need for constant validation.
- Toxic Interpersonal Relationships: Formation of toxic and unbalanced relationships that



perpetuate narcissism.

Emotional Dependence:

- **Cycle of Abuse:** Permanence in abusive relationships that perpetuate the cycle of emotional dependence and domestic violence.
- **Mental Health Problems:** Development of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and other disorders related to emotional dependence.

These classifications help to better understand the causes and consequences of narcissism and emotional dependence, making it easier to identify points of intervention for treatment and prevention.

The codependency dynamic between a narcissist and an emotional addict can have significant impacts on living and behavior in society. Let's look at some ways in which this dynamic manifests itself and affects the social environment:

Impact on Social Coexistence

- **Toxic Relationships:** These dynamics often result in toxic relationships, where the narcissist exerts control and manipulation, while the emotional addict seeks constant validation and approval. This can create an unbalanced and dysfunctional social environment.
- **Social Isolation:** The emotional dependent person may isolate himself socially, focusing exclusively on pleasing the narcissist. This can lead to the loss of other important social relationships and emotional isolation.
- **Interaction Difficulties:** The narcissist may exhibit arrogant and dismissive behaviors with others, while the emotionally dependent may show submission and conformity, making healthy and balanced interactions difficult.



Behavior in Society

- **Maintaining Gender Stereotypes:** The dynamic can reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, perpetuating the idea that men should be dominant and women submissive.
- **Perpetuation of Inequality:** These relationships reinforce and perpetuate inequalities, not only within the relationship, but also in broader societal perceptions about gender roles and power.
- **Influence on Social Norms:** Manipulative and controlling behaviors can be normalized, affecting the way other people perceive and behave in their own relationships.

Effects on Mental Health and Well-Being

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Both individuals can suffer from mental health issues. The emotional dependent may develop anxiety and depression due to the constant search for approval and fear of abandonment, while the narcissist may face issues of self-esteem and insecurity disguised by confident outward behavior.
- **Community Resilience:** The presence of these dynamics in a community can weaken social resilience, making it difficult to form support and cooperation networks.

Possible Interventions and Solutions

- **Education and Awareness:** Promoting awareness of the harms of these dynamics can help prevent their occurrence and encourage the search for healthier relationships.
- **Psychological Support:** Individual and couple therapies can help both partners understand and resolve their emotional issues, promoting a more balanced dynamic.
- **Changing Social Norms:** Working to change the social and cultural norms that perpetuate



these dynamics, promoting gender equality and mutual respect.

We have seen that these codependency dynamics not only affect the individuals directly involved, but also have broader repercussions on society. Addressing these issues is key to promoting healthy relationships and a more just and equitable society.

This type of relationship perpetuates gender inequality and can lead to a cycle of emotional and psychological abuse. It is important to recognize these patterns and seek help to create healthier and more balanced relationships, in the family nucleus and in society as a whole, thus creating a healthier socio-family environment where general well-being can become a social reality.

Addictive behaviors and the constant search for external validation result in cycles of abuse and suffering, exacerbated by crisis situations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions and promoting mental health and well-being in both social and family relationships.

All these points addressed in this discussion and in the article in general, show how emotional dependence and narcissism can contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality, affecting both interpersonal dynamics and broader social structures.

Conclusion

This article explored various facets of emotional dependence, narcissism, and gender inequality, revealing the complex interactions between these conditions and how they shape behavior and social dynamics.

We have observed that emotional dependence often arises from inappropriate attachment relationships in childhood and is reinforced by cultural norms that promote submission. On the other hand, narcissism can develop from an excess of criticism or adulation in childhood and manifests itself in behaviors of constant search for validation and control. The combination of these two states



in a relationship, whether a narcissistic man with a dependent woman or vice versa, perpetuates an unbalanced and harmful power dynamic for living in society.

Pathological attachment and narcissism reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, where one partner dominates and the other submits. This dynamic not only perpetuates gender inequality within relationships, but also influences the way society views and accepts gender roles.

Patriarchal culture and social norms often reinforce and celebrate narcissistic behaviors, especially among men, further exacerbating inequality and consequently specific violence.

In this way, it is possible to reflect that to promote gender equality, it is essential to deconstruct patterns of emotional dependence and narcissism that the culture of patriarchy insists on maintaining. Education, awareness, and psychological support play key roles in this process. Therapeutic interventions that promote self-knowledge, empathy, and healthy communication can help create more balanced relationships.

Finally, we discuss how these dynamics impact social interaction and perpetuate dysfunctional behaviors that affect mental health and social cohesion. Addressing these issues is crucial to building a fairer and more resilient society. The importance of recognizing and addressing the interactions between emotional dependency, narcissism, and gender inequality to promote more equal, healthy relationships, and a more equitable society.

The reviewed articles highlight the role of society and culture in the perpetuation of narcissism. In an era marked by individualism and the relentless search for recognition, narcissistic behaviors are often reinforced and celebrated. Social networks and digital media contribute to the exaltation of an idealized self-image, exacerbating the problem.

The implications for therapy are clear, it is essential to address helplessness and lack of emotional support in the treatment of narcissism. Therapeutic interventions should focus on developing empathy, forming healthy affective bonds, and in the construction of a more realistic and balanced self-image.

Psychoanalytic studies continue to investigate the dynamics of narcissism and its impact on



personality development and interpersonal relationships.

Literature suggests that narcissism can exacerbate gender inequality by reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes and norms.

Finally, the article highlighted the complex interrelationship between emotional dependence, narcissism, social behaviors, and gender inequality. Reinforcing that understanding these relationships is crucial for the development of interventions that promote gender equality and improve psychological and social health. Future studies should continue to explore these dynamics and seek effective strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of these factors.

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