

An insecure base. Style of attachment and adult romantic relationships

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Abstract

In this paper, we will explore the concept of love addiction, examining its manifestations and the aspects that differentiate the phenomenon from conventional falling in love. Attachment theory is an attractive model for understanding love addiction, which can highlight the impact of emotional bonds developed during childhood on adult relationships. We will, therefore, delve deeper into how the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, which in adulthood takes on the name of the insecure, worried attachment or insecure enmeshed attachment, seems to influence the propensity to love addiction. Understanding attachment theory provides a theoretical framework in which to think about the dynamics of love suffering, thus providing the conditions to increase awareness of the phenomenon's origins and contribute to the promotion of more satisfying relationships

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Introduction. Is romantic love an addiction?

Romantic love is a complex phenomenon that involves heterogeneous brain areas. Studies carried out with fMRI highlight how romantic love is related to the neural circuits of the dopaminergic reward system, the same ones active in substance addiction and behavioral addictions. In this sense, romantic love could be defined as a "natural addiction" (Fisher et al., 2016; Frascella et al., 2010) with characteristics similar to those of any other addiction: euphoria if the love object is present, despair if it is not; intrusive and recurring thoughts towards your partner; willingness to take risky actions to come into contact with him; "craving" and withdrawal syndromes, with sleep disorders and intense mood swings (Antonelli, 2022)¹. These aspects of *romantic love* would be cross-cultural (Aron et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006). As some have claimed (Lindholm, 1998), romantic love cannot be reduced to a product of Western culture.

Studies find a clear relationship between romantic love and high dopaminergic activity in the reward systems, particularly in the ventral tegmental area and nucleus accumbens (Earp et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2016; Sussman, 2010). The role of serotonin deficiency in explaining obsessive thoughts towards the partner has also been hypothesized (Antonelli, 2022). The achievement of the sexual act releases additional neurotransmitters, such as oxytocin and endorphins, which favor the desire to maintain physical contact (Attili, 2022; Schneiderman et al., 2012). *Oxytocin* is the neurotransmitter involved in breastfeeding

and has a fundamental role in maternal care (Carcea et al., 2021), while endorphins, with their calming effect, act as a reinforcement, thus consolidating the partner's preference (Attili, 2022). Vasopressin also appears to have a specific role in developing pair bonds (Burkett & Young, 2012).

According to Attili, these biological correlates contribute to condensing the synergistic action of the three motivational systems that intervene in adult love: the sexual coupling system, the care system, and the attachment system. Sexual behavior in the human species has a reproductive function and contributes to consolidating the bond between partners to protect the offspring. In the bond between partners, caregiving behaviors and internal operating models (MOI) developed in association with the caregiver would, therefore, be co-opted (Attili, 2022).

Subjects engaged in a relationship of 8 to 17 months demonstrate, compared to others in an emotional relationship of 1 to 8 months, more significant activity in brain areas connected - in animal studies - to attachment (Fisher et al., 2006; Aron et al., 2005). A study on ten men and seven women, married for an average of 21.4 years, subjected to fMRI while viewing their partner's face, highlighted the involvement of reward systems, rich in dopamine, but also some brain regions connected to attachment with the mother: globus pallidus, substantia nigra, Raphe nucleus, thalamus, insular cortex, anterior and posterior cingulate (Acevedo et al., 2012). We can, therefore, imagine the possibility of identifying a continuity between the attachment style in childhood and that in the couple (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

¹ In his monograph on love addiction, Antonelli (2022) made a notable effort at synthesis, summarizing schematically the most significant international research directions on the topic. This article can only be

indebted to the broad bibliographical overview offered by his work.

Love addiction as a behavioral addiction

The literature does not clearly define what distinguishes love addiction from romantic love (Earp et al., 2017). The common aspects between substance addictions and behavioral addictions are explained through the altered brain functioning of addicted subjects (Cabras & Saladino, 2020). For the components model of addiction of Griffiths (2005), love addiction can be recognized as behavioral addiction if there are six specific dimensions: salience (that is, total attention towards the partner), tolerance (the desire to spend more time with the partner), mood modification (managing emotional discomfort by resorting to the presence or thought of the other), relapse (that is, the inability to decrease time in the company of the partner), withdrawal (physical and/or mental symptoms present in response to separation from partner) and conflict (so the relationship interferes with other activities, for example with work and friendships).

As a behavioral addiction, love addiction is also supposed to involve the same brain circuits as substance addiction (Aron et al., 2005; Earp et al., 2017). All this - as seen above - has already been demonstrated concerning "healthy" romantic love, even if neuroimaging tests have not yet been carried out to confirm the correspondence of the neurobiological correlates between substance dependence and love addiction (Antonelli, 2022) and also highlight the specificities of this condition compared to "normal" falling in love.

More than in the early stages of the relationship, an essential difference between

love addiction and romantic love may be found in how the relationship develops. Love addiction seems to be the expression of the inability to structure - after the first phase of falling in love - a secure attachment bond (Feldman, 2017).

There is not just one way this can happen. Love addiction has been distinguished into dependence on attraction and attachment to indicate a different condition. The "addiction to attraction" would be typical of those subjects who, seeking only the excitement of the first months, would refuse the reduction of emotional stimuli typical of an attachment bond. "Attachment addiction," on the other hand, involves an intense need to experience intimacy with someone in often dysfunctional and anxious ways (Briggie & Briggie, 2015). Attraction addiction appears, in this sense, more similar to other behavioral addictions, whereas attachment addiction can be traced back to relational modules learned in childhood (Antonelli, 2022).

The condition of love addiction (especially "attachment dependence"), therefore, seems to be related to an insecure attachment, the attachment being implicated in adult love together with sexual behavior and caregiving behavior (Attili, 2022).

From this point of view, even the tendency of emotional employees to maintain ties with abusive subjects (Borgioni, 2015) can be looked at in a more complex framework. Particular literature has indicated the origin of relationships of relational dependence in the "perversity" of the partner (Filippini, 2005; Hirigoyen, 1998; Racamier, 1992)²; this, however, appears to be a one-way explanation. Dependent individuals may be inclined to

² With "perversity" (or "moral perversion"), these authors, with psychoanalytic training, indicate the particular disposition of certain subjects associated with a

narcissistic personality organization to manipulate the partner to defend themselves from the suffering generated by the comparison with intolerable emotions.

seek distant or cold partners, which, in turn, would exacerbate the addiction.

Recognition of the relationship between insecure attachment style and love addiction also allows us to rectify the idea that it is primarily a female problem (Norwood, 1985). Love addiction can involve both women and men (Cabras & Saladino, 2020).

Love addiction and anxious-ambivalent attachment

Attachment theory, a crucial link between object relations theory and evolutionary biology, owes much to the contribution of ethology (Holmes, 2006). The groundbreaking work of Mary Ainsworth, particularly her creation of the Strange Situation, has been instrumental in our understanding of attachment styles. This research allowed us to identify three distinct patterns of response to the separation of the child from the mother: a secure attachment style, an anxious-avoidant one, and an anxious-ambivalent one (Ainsworth et al., 2014)³. It also led to the recognizing of a fourth attachment style, disorganized attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990).

Studies on adult attachment have first evaluated the adequacy of Ainsworth's classifications in examining romantic love. The evaluation of attachment in adults has also made it possible to measure its intergenerational transmission, highlighting the correspondence between the attachment style of the

parent and that of the children (Holmes, 2006). Some research has highlighted the tendency of securely attached adults to construct narratives in which one character uses the other as a secure base; anxious subjects, on the other hand, would be inclined to tell stories in which the main character does not seek help or is rejected when he asks for it (Waters & Waters, 2006). There has been less interest in the relationship between romantic love and disorganized attachment style (Holmes, 2006).

The correlation between love addiction and attachment style has been proven (Valle & de la Villa Moral, 2018). Anxious-ambivalent attachment⁴ is pivotal regarding love addiction (Cabras & Saladino, 2020; Borgioni, 2015; Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2002)⁵. Research from 2014 also confirmed the relationship between ambivalent attachment style and obsessive love (Honari & Saremi, 2015).

Subjects with ambivalent attachment exercise intense "attachment behaviors" (Bowlby, 1979) to maintain closeness to their partner, not tolerating the anxiety generated by the fact of separating. Anxiety is managed by trying to minimize the opportunities for distancing oneself from the attachment figure. Moreover, as Bowlby points out, the threat of separation creates fear and anger, which can easily express itself in a dysfunctional way (Bowlby, 1988).

³ Mary Main's now-classic studies (George et al., 1985) have extended research on attachment from the caregiver-child relationship to the adult relationship through the development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). Hazan and Shaver (1987) also developed the classification of adult attachment.

⁴ In this article, when we refer to anxious-ambivalent attachment, we also mean to talk about the adult counterpart, defined as worried or enmeshed. We choose to do so to meet the greater understanding of those who

will read and, at the same time, with the desire to take into account how, concerning love addiction, the values that in the measurement of adult attachment style appear to belong to the categories of the "entangled anger" and the "concern for the bond" that count in further defining what in this article is structured as love addiction.

⁵ Please refer again to Antonelli's monograph (2022) for the compelling bibliographic compendium regarding the correlation between love addiction and ambivalent attachment style.

Furthermore, in ambivalent subjects, constant attachment behaviors inhibit "exploratory behavior," i.e., the inclination to move away from the attachment figure once a secure base has been established (Bowlby, 1988). The fear of not being welcomed favorably by the partner leads to high levels of anxiety and a progressive reduction in the circumstances of separation. Exploratory interest is significantly diminished by the impossibility of experiencing a secure base in one's attachment figure. The "paradox of dependence" is what is presented now (Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010): a human being is all the more autonomous, the more he feels he can rely on others.

Adults with ambivalent attachment tend to describe their partner as unreliable and incapable of providing adequate support. Their relationships are characterized by significant emotional involvement, contrary to those of avoidant subjects (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), greater dependence, and a more intense desire to consolidate the relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Those with an ambivalent attachment show great sensitivity to presumed signals of disinterest or unavailability of the attachment figure, quickly becoming hyper-vigilant, distrustful, and jealous (Antonelli, 2022). A widespread trend is using the partner to regulate emotions (Barbier, 2015; Borgioni, 2015).

The origin of anxious-ambivalent attachment is traced back to the inversion of the normal attachment relationship between the caregiver and the child (Bowlby, 1988). The caregiver, anxious in turn, makes the child his attachment figure, attempting to avoid separation by exercising control, intrusiveness, coercion, and overprotection (Attili, 2022). The child sometimes receives attention and is sometimes subjected to aggressive or even abusive conduct (Borgioni, 2015).

In this way, the caregiver appears unpredictable to the child, who may respond with increased levels of anxiety and anger and coercive behaviors aimed at maintaining the adult's presence (Crittenden, 1992). As noted by Ainsworth, in fact, in the Strange Situation, children with ambivalent attachment show very intense anxiety, cry, and get angry, implementing strategies to avoid separation from the attachment figure. Once reunited with the caregiver, they cannot resume play (Ainsworth et al., 2014; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Then, taking up the studies of Hazan and Shaver (1987) and the works of Levy and Davis (1988), they showed how it is possible to highlight a more direct correlation between attachment styles and how love relationships are developed and maintained. Considering the previous works of Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) and the six love styles theorized by Lee (1973, 1977), the authors were able to highlight a correlation between some of these and attachment styles.

Lee's styles, which then laid the foundations for the development of multiple relational theories on love, are divided into:

- Eros, passionate love
- Ludus, flirtatious love
- Storge, familial love
- Pragma, practical love
- Mania, addictive love
- Agape, altruistic love

Of these six styles, Lee defines the first three (Eros, Ludus, Storge) as primary styles. At the same time, the following three (Pragma, Mania, Agape) are secondary styles, often born from combinations with the primary forms. These styles can in some way be associated with Sternberg's theorizations (1986) on the love triangle, formed by the intersection of elements of dedication, intimacy,

and passion, which then leads to structuring relationships on the preponderance of one of these elements in favor of the others.

These definitions (passionate love, intimate love, dedicated love, and others) resonate with attachment models, something that Levy and Davis have highlighted in their work. They found positive correlations for secure attachment with all three parts of Sternberg's triangle, Eros and Agape of Lee's theorization, and negative correlations with Ludus. This discovery can be read from the perspective of external and internal exploration: the child who is given the possibility of studying the geographical environment that surrounds him, what Straus defined as the landscape (2005), has in adulthood the possibility of exploring one's internal landscape, therefore one's emotional geography. This exploration allows the acquisition, consistently with Bowlby's attachment theory and psychoanalysis, of operational models and internal objects that can be reliable and safe, capable of leading to a search for relationships based on mutual trust, safety, the exploration of one's passion, and dedication.

A more avoidant attachment style, however, would seem to correlate with what is defined as Ludus, playful love or love without real relational commitment, negatively correlating with Eros: since avoidant attachment seeks exploration but does not vivify it -ca, pushing the child not to find reliability in the security of the parental figure (Hesse, 2008), there is not even the possibility for the adult to immediately come into contact with his emotional states, which are also experienced as deleterious or unreliable. The relationships that will be sought will be relationships where

the emotional depth of the engagement comes secondarily to the search for lightness and a continuous and perennial "escape route."

At the same time, an anxious-ambivalent attachment experiences the caregiver as an unreliable figure, in which it is not clear whether there will be a continuity of presence in case of danger or, even worse sometimes, who will not prove responsive in case of explicit request: children with this attachment tend to be defined as "inconsolable," having no way of finding emotional comfort in the arms of their caregiver. As adults, people with this attachment style often reveal themselves to be endowed with a certain amount of aggression and repressed anger (Hesse, 2008) such that they are unable to immediately approach otherness without seeing it as a source of risk or mistrust but unlike avoidant attachment, having not developed exploration and isolation as a defensive mode; they will therefore be people who will seek the containment given by the relationship with otherness, but at the same time without immediately finding trust in otherness.⁶

According to Sternberg and Lee's relational styles, ambivalent attachment is negatively correlated with dedication, intimacy, and passion. However, it is positively correlated with elements of mania, such as dependent and needy love.

Therefore, if the dependence on secure attachment can be considered a healthy dependence, that presents the possibility of seeing the Ego-Other separation necessary to recognize one's own needs and those of others as legitimate and, from there, to allow a healthy exploration of the same, and if in avoidant attachment there is a total rejection of any idea

⁶ A type of adult attachment, defined by the acronym E3, is called entangled-frightening. It often presents traits very similar to attachment disorganization,

showing how the possible unpredictability of the caregiver can be a more destabilizing element than a simple absence of it.

of dependence on otherness, considering relationships as a game or as an investment that must follow precise rules aimed at non-involvement, the dependence present in ambivalent attachment would seem to be prefigured in the light of these studies as a dependence given by the inability to give a precise location to one's boundaries and needs, with elements of worry and above all a cycle of continuous idealization/devaluation, based on how much the need for closeness can oscillate with the awareness that such closeness can never make up for one's internal shortcomings.

As further highlighted by Carli et al. (2009), what matters is not only the type of attachment but also the matching that is done: taking up the words of Bowlby (1980), the duration of a relationship often it is not determined by the quality of the attachment, but by the relational fit, and a relationship that lasts a long time cannot necessarily be defined as fully functional, but is often stuck in a dysfunctionality maintained for a long time.

In this also, the ambivalent attachment on the level of relational matching would be shown to be based on some specific principles: an intrusive and demanding personal style, which tends to emphasize negative emotions while at the same time distancing the request for help offered by the partner, which can lead to the belief both that the partner proves incapable of fulfilling one's own needs, and to a chronic claim of this failure to fulfill these exact needs. The ambivalent attachment, therefore, in a relational sense, would orbit around one's partner, asking for and at the same time refusing care, constantly judging it ineffective but not being able to help but have a constant need for it, establishing relationships in which the need for care is angry and vindictive, almost as if there was a need to recall through the passive-aggressive attitude all

the relational needs that were denied during the first intimacy and the first patterns of attachment with the reference caregiver.

Conclusion

If falling in love is a physiological form of dependence, in order to speak about "love addiction", two aspects must be highlighted: the presence of indices of severity in the symptomatic picture of love addiction compared to the "normal" relationship between partners and the role of endogenous variables and/or exogenous in determining this dysfunctional condition.

An insecure attachment style (specifically ambivalent), developed in the relationship with the caregiver during childhood, seems to be able to influence the stability of a relationship once it has stabilized according to patterns characterized by entangled anger and worry concerning the relationship in adult attachment, providing the key to conceptually differentiate the "normal" couple relationship from love addiction. In love addiction, the transition from romantic love to a form of secure attachment would be compromised by the use of "operational models" attributable to the family history of the addicted subject. However, it is necessary at every juncture to remember that attachment is one of the many constituents of a relationship and that the environment can constantly be considered a modulator of the same; in the case of love addiction, however, this initial level of relational insecurity and difficulty in considering the person from whom care and bonding is requested as reliable could lead to a more significant structure of this impairment.

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