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## ATTACHMENT TO THE FEMALE PARTNER AND THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP – THE MEDIATING ROLE OF MALE DEPENDENCE

Przywiązanie do partnerki a jakość związku partnerskiego –  
mediacyjna rola męskiej zależności

Dorota Suwalska-Barancewicz  
Kazimierz Wielki University  
in Bydgoszcz, Poland  
e-mail: [dsbarancewicz@ukw.edu.pl](mailto:dsbarancewicz@ukw.edu.pl)  
ORCID  0000-0001-6495-9796

Hanna Liberska  
Kazimierz Wielki University  
in Bydgoszcz, Poland  
e-mail: [hanna.liberska@op.pl](mailto:hanna.liberska@op.pl)  
ORCID  0000-0003-4323-2090

### Abstract

The article presents research results on the quality of men's functioning in intimate relationships. Particular attention was paid to the level of dependence between partners and the nature of the bond between them. So far, the role of dependency as a factor mediating between men's attachment to their partner and the quality of their functioning in the dyad has not been analyzed, therefore it was included as a factor mediating between attachment and the quality of dyadic relationships.

The study involved 173 men aged 19–41. The selection of the sample was purposeful – the criterion was being in a relationship.

The research used: *Experiences in Close Relationships* adapted by Wiśniewski (2011), *the Dependence on a Spouse/Partner Scale* by Babiuch and Kriegerewicz (2010) and the *Relationship Quality Inventory* adapted by Liberska, Izdebski and Suwalska-Barancewicz (2015).

The research results indicate the mediating nature of the relationship in the group of men.

**Keywords:** attachment, male dependence, quality of intimate relationships.

### Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje wyniki badań dotyczące jakości funkcjonowania mężczyzn w relacji intymnej. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na poziom zależności między partnerami oraz charakter łączącej ich więzi. Dotychczas nie analizowano roli zależności jako czynnika pośredniczącego między przywiązaniem mężczyzn do partnerki a jakością ich funkcjonowania w diadzie, dlatego też uwzględniono ją jako czynnik pośredniczący pomiędzy przywiązaniem a jakością relacji diadycznych.

W badaniu wzięło udział 173 mężczyzn w wieku od 19–41 lat. Dobór osób badanych o próby miał charakter celowy – kryterium stanowiło trwanie w związku.

W badaniach wykorzystano: *Experiences in Close Relationships* w adaptacji Wiśniewskiego (2011), *Skalę Zależności od Małżonka/Partnera* autorstwa Babiuch i Krieglewicz (2010) oraz *Inwentarz Jakości Związku* w adaptacji Liberskiej, Izdebskiego i Suwalskiej-Barancewicz (2015).

Wyniki badań wskazują na mediujący charakter zależności w grupie mężczyzn.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przywiązanie, męska zależność, jakość związków intymnych.

## Introduction

Establishing and maintaining a satisfactory intimate relationship with a partner determines the quality of a person's life, as well as their mental and physical health (Doroszewicz, 2008; Holt-Lunstad & Birmingham, 2008). Social bonds co-determine the human condition, increasing the efficiency of the immune system and reducing the level of stress hormones. Close relationships also enable us to cope with the threat of death and loss of a loved one (Czapiński & Panek, 2007; Perlman, 2007; Uchino et al., 1996;). From an early age, a child needs contact and caregivers responsive to their signals for proper physical, mental and social development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 2007). The nature of the bonds that will form between them in this earliest period is responsible for the shape of the close relationships formed later in life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), including the sense of dependence.

## Theoretical background

The quality of bonds is explained by John Bowlby's attachment theory (2007), which provides a more complete understanding of the specifics of close relationships and their changes over time, occurring as a result of various events in the life of partners. The continuators of Bowlby's theory (2007), making a significant contribution to the development of research in this area, contributed not only to learning about the ways of functioning of people with variously shaped attachment styles, but also created research tools that made it possible to learn about the type of human bond. The types or styles of attachment and dimensions of attachment orientation identified by various researchers have found empirical confirmation. Numerous studies show that safe, trustingly attached individuals, whose level of avoidance and anxiety (attachment dimensions) is low, have the ability to function in a relationship with a partner increasing the chance of success in the relationship and the feeling of partners' satisfaction. In contrast, individuals with uncertain attachment patterns may more often experience difficulties in a close relationship. Attachment styles formed in the course of interaction with the caregiver, as well as those developed later as a result of intimate relationships with a partner, appear to be relatively constant. Their relational nature,

however, can be modified under the influence of life experiences and experiences of the couple and each of the partners.

Interpersonal dependence is also important for the quality of relations in a relationship – it is developed in the earliest years of life as a result of contacts with the closest caregivers and is a natural, innate part of human nature (Bornstein, 1992). Dependency as a universal phenomenon, occurring in the development of every individual in all cultures, arouses the constant interest of scientists for whom the aim is to learn about the correlations, dynamics, determinants and consequences of dependencies for the development of human functioning.

Robert Bornstein (1992), mentioned above repeatedly, emphasizes that the core of the motivation of dependent people is the desire and need to have relationships that will enable them to obtain approval, support and a sense of security. This type of motivation is not negative or positive, but often becomes pejorative, as it suggests that the need to rely on others and obtain help or support is inadequate to age, or even excessive, which contributes to the reduction of self-sufficiency and autonomy. This tendency is largely noticed in western cultures, where dependence is perceived as a sign of weakness and indicated as a trait that should be weakened in the course of human development (Feeney, 2009). However, Guisinger & Blatt (1994), Hogan (1983), and Buss (1991) postulate that motivation aimed at gaining care and support in a relationship is a fundamental basis of the human personality and is essential for psychological, emotional and behavioural functioning.

In recent years, researchers' interest in the construction of dependencies has increased due to its importance for the dynamics of close relationships and the individual sense of psychological well-being (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2002). For a long time, dependence has been associated with immaturity, passivity and disadaptation. It was not until the end of the 1990s that an attempt was made to “depathologize” the relationship. Modern research has provided a basis for concluding that dependence can be adaptive and mature. Such a mature, adaptive dependence consists of asking different people for help and providing help, which in turn increases the probability of receiving it (Górska, 2004). Undoubtedly, dependency plays a significant role in shaping the partnership, as it motivates individuals to obtain and maintain supporting relationships. Definitions of dependence treating it as an important component or determinant of close relationships are related to the broadly understood support and receiving help in difficult times (Birtchnell, 1988; Bornstein, 1992; Bornstein & Languirand, 2003; Faith, 2009; Fiori et al., 2008). Dependence, which is an element of partnerships, is a mature, affective form of bond that allows it to be flexible (Fiori et al., 2008).

A healthy dependency allows for the long-term nurturing of close relationships and receiving care and support from others. It is the result of a reliable, warm and available reaction of parents to the child who gains a sense of security and certainty

to be able to derive emotional satisfaction from acquired social competences in relations with others (Marshall & McCandless, 1957). It is also looking for various types of support from a partner, expecting him or her to show interest, exclusivity, care, the possibility of expressing one's own worries and fear and the conviction that the relationship with him is a condition of happiness (Babiuch & Kriegerewicz, 2000). In this paper, it was decided to choose such a relationship as the basis for further considerations on its importance for the functioning of close relationships. Seeking contact and emotional support if necessary, is not treated as an excessive, pathological dependency. On the contrary, it is an element of an adaptive and beneficial form of relationship between partners (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2002; Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Hogan, 1983; Lowyck et al., 2008; Rude & Burnham, 1995; Yarrow, 1972 as cited in: Sroufe et al., 1983,).

Research identifying the importance of attachment and dependency for relationship quality shows that securely attached people trust others and believe that they will be supportive and caring when needed. Their dependence on others results from positive expectations and motivations (Hazan, Shaver, 1987). Mental representations shaped in this way allow an individual to believe that other people are good, have good intentions, are available when needed and ready to help. They were created as a result of warm, caring and positive relationships in the family that taught the child that he or she is gifted, valued, and deserved the help and support of other people (Bornstein & Languirand, 2003). Therefore, in every period of their life they feel comfortable being dependent on others (Bowby, 2007; Feeney, 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Thus, the type of relationship between the members of the dyad has important implications for their functioning in the relationship (e.g. Bartholomew & Griffin, 1994; Cobb et al., 2001; Davila & Kashy, 2009; Feeney, 1999; Feeney et al., 2000; Fitzpatrick et al., 1993; Kerr et al., 2003; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kobak & Deumlmler, 1994; Mikulincer et al., 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson et al., 1996).

The research in the field of interpersonal dependence and its effects on the relationships of partners conducted at the beginning of the 1990s also provided important grounds for recognizing its role in the process of the functioning of close relationships (Babiuch & Kriegerewicz, 2000; Bornstein & Languirand, 2003; De Hart et al., 2004). A high level of dependence on a partner is associated with greater trust in him and the expectation of the same in return. Dependent partners seek closeness and support, they want to maintain the relationship by counteracting behaviours that could harm it (Fiori et al., 2008; Lowyck et al., 2008). Thanks to this, they gain a sense of comfort and security resulting from being in an intimate relationship. This contributes to an increase in marital satisfaction and a reduction in the number of divorces (Babiuch & Kriegerewicz, 2000; Bornstein & Languirand, 2003). The relationship of attachment and dependence on a partner confirms the importance of early childhood interactions with caring, supportive and responsive caregivers and a safe type of bond formed on

this basis for the quality of relationships between partners in adulthood. Confident attachment is connected with a high sense of comfort resulting from dependent relationships with others, relying on them in need and seeking support from them, as opposed to unsecured attachment, which may be expressed by an excessive form of dependence or by completely ignoring it and distancing oneself from it (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 2007; Feeney, 2009; Hazan & Shaver, 2007; Overall & Sibley, 2008; Suwalska-Barancewicz, 2014).

Past considerations on the essence of the relationship for the functioning of partners in a relationship suggest that it plays a significant role in determining the nature of dyadic relationships (Bornstein & Languirand, 2003). The researchers examined the relationship of anxiety, attachment avoidance and dissatisfaction with the relationship, taking into account such mediators as: conflict resolution (Sierau & Herzberg, 2012), negative affectivity (Davila et al., 1998), lack of respect for a partner (Frey & Shaver, 2002), sensitivity to the partner's needs (Feeney, 1996), and support (Cobb et al., 2001). However, there were no studies analyzing the role of dependency as an intermediary variable between the partners' attachment and the quality of their functioning in a relationship. Therefore, taking into account the mediating nature of the dependency for the relationship between attachment and the quality of functioning of partners in the relationship could prove helpful in identifying mechanisms that may harm or threaten the mutual interactions of an intimate couple (Lowyck et al., 2008). As emphasized by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), studying the mechanisms by which it will be possible to determine the role of uncertain attachment patterns in interpersonal relationships is important for theoretical and clinical reasons. The authors see a special need to carry out such research, especially in relation to men against whom there is a cultural, social stereotype of the so-called "tough man", which is reflected in the processes of socialization. In the era of contemporary changes in family life which include the growing attractiveness of alternative forms of relationships, but at the same time the increasing number of divorces and breakups of permanent relationships, understanding and defining the factors determining the properties of dyad relationships seems to be extremely important (Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 2012; Kwak, 2012; Pinsof, 2002; Slany, 2006; Suwalska-Barancewicz, 2015).

### Problem and purpose of research

The problem addressed in this article concerns the importance of male dependence on attachment to a partner and the quality of their joint relationship as perceived by a man. A general research question was formulated: does the level of a man's dependence on his partner play a mediating role in the relationship between the dimensions of a man's attachment (anxiety/avoidance) and the quality of his relationship with his partner determined by the amount of perceived support, conflict and depth of the relationship?

The research was aimed at describing and explaining the functioning of men in a relationship depending on the type of bond typical of them and the level of dependence on the partner. Partners' relationships are considered here through the category of dependency, treated as a natural element of the personality structure that determines the quality of their relationship, and not as a feature that determines pathology (Bornstein & Languirand, 2003).

## Material and methods

### Investigated variables and the measurement

To answer the research question, empirical research was carried out covering adult men in an intimate relationship. In the conducted research, attachment is the independent variable. Attachment has two dimensions, namely avoidance and anxiety. The avoidance dimension refers to the extent to which an individual tries to be autonomous from their partner in the relationship and distrust their goodwill (eg, "I rarely worry about a loved one leaving me"). It also determines to what extent people feel uncomfortable in relationships with others and to what extent they feel safe depending on them (Fraley et al., 2000). The anxiety dimension, on the other hand, is the degree to which an individual is concerned about the partner's availability and support. It also includes the extent to which people feel safe depending on their partner's availability and reaction (eg, "I'm afraid I will lose the love of someone close to me"). People who score low on both dimensions are referred to as securely attached (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). The operationalization of individual levels of the independent variable was made on the basis of the sum of points obtained for the *Anxiety Scale* and the *Avoidance Scale*, respectively, using *Experiences In Close Relationships Revised* by Chris Fraley, Kelly Brennan and Neils Waller, in the Polish version of Cezary Wiśniewski (2011). The results of the reliability analysis of the Polish version of the ECR-R were respectively: for the Cronbach's alpha scale *Anxiety* = 0.91, for the Cronbach's alpha *Avoidance* scale = 0.86, which suggests a highly satisfactory reliability of the tool.

Interpersonal dependence is an intermediary variable in the analyzed research project. The level of dependence on a partner was estimated on the basis of the sum of points obtained by the respondents on the *Scale of Dependence on a Spouse / Partner* by Babiuch & Kriegerewicz (2000). This scale is based on the *Spouse-Specific Dependency Scale* by Rathus and O'Leary (1997). The reliability of the method is 0.95, but for women it is slightly lower (0.94) than for men (0.96). The Polish version of the method consists of 28 questions to be answered on a 4-point scale: from completely agree to completely disagree, scored from 4 to 1, respectively. The minimal score is 28, maximum score – 112. The higher the result obtained by the examined person, the higher their level of dependence on the partner.

The dependent variable in the presented research is the quality of the relationship/relationship in the dimension of perceived support, the depth of the relationship and the level of interpersonal conflict. The recognition of the quality of the relationship was thus determined by the indicators: the depth of the relationship, the intensity of interpersonal conflict and the strength of the perceived support (Pierce et al., 1991). The relationship depth dimension determines the degree to which individuals are involved in the relationship and assess it positively. The dimension of the conflict is determined by the degree to which the person feels angry and ambivalent towards the partner in the relationship. On the other hand, the dimension of perceived support is understood as the degree to which a loved one can be invoked in order to receive help in various situations (Pierce et al., 1991). This method can be used in research on close relationships: romantic, marital, familial and peer relationships.

*The Quality of Relationships Inventory* (Pierce et al., 1991) (adapted by Suwalska-Barancewicz et al., 2015) is a self-reporting tool consisting of 23 statements, which are answered by the examined person on a four-point scale. The higher the score on a given scale, the higher the intensity of the properties measured by individual dimensions. The Scale of Perceived Support consists of 7 items (“To what extent can you count on this person to hear you when you are angry with someone?”), The Relationship Depth Scale consists of 6 items (“How significant is this relationship in your life?”), while the Conflict Scale includes 10 statements (“How much does this person want you to change?”). The reliability of the individual scales of the tool measured by the Cronbach’s alpha is satisfactory and is: support (.79), for conflict (.88) and the depth of the relation (.71).

### The course of the study

The conducted research was questionnaire-based. The men received a set of questionnaires with instructions and a request to complete and return them within the specified time. The respondents were assured of the anonymity and purely scientific nature of the research. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded.

### Characteristics of the group

173 men aged 19–41 (mean age: 27.77) participated in the study. The selection of the test subjects was deliberate – the criterion was duration in a relationship. The surveyed men were in various forms of relationship: in a stable relationship without living together with their partner (12.72%), engaged who did not live together (3.46%), engaged living together before the wedding, so-called premarital cohabitation (11.56%), cohabitants (18.50%), which is together 30.35%, and spouses (52.02%). The group of marriages includes married individuals with a legally sanctioned relationship. The engagement group includes people who were engaged and did not live together, while

engaged couples who lived together before the wedding were classified as cohabiting partners before the wedding (Janicka, 2006). The condition for recognizing the respondents as cohabiting units, as defined by Trost & Chechliński, was the fact of living together without legal sanctioning of the relationship (Chechliński, 1981; Janicka, 2006; Kwak, 2005; Trost, 1977).

Most of the respondents had higher education (56.65%) and secondary education (39.31%); they came from smaller towns (45.09%) and lived in medium-sized cities (40.46%). These were mainly childless people (63.01%). The exact size distribution of the study group is presented in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Characteristics of the respondents: size distribution and percentage distribution sociodemographic variables in the study sample*

Sociodemographic variables:	Men	
	N	%
<i>Education:</i>		
Primary	1	0.58
Vocational	6	3.47
Secondary	68	39.31
Higher	98	56.65
<i>Place of origin:</i>		
Village	32	18.40
Town up to 100 000 inhabitants	78	45.09
City from 100 000 to 500 000 inhabitants	49	28.32
City over 500 000 inhabitants	14	8.09
<i>Place of living:</i>		
Village	28	16.18
Town up to 100 000 inhabitants	59	34.10
City from 100 000 to 500 000 inhabitants	70	40.46
City over 500 000 inhabitants	16	9.25
<i>Children:</i>		
No	109	63.00
Yes	64	37.00
<i>Status (form) of relationship</i>		
Casual relationship	1	0.58
In a stable relationship without living together	22	12.72
Cohabitation	32	18.50
Engaged	6	3.46
Pre-marriage cohabitation	20	11.56
Married	90	52.02
Separated	2	1.16

Source: own study.



## Results

The presented analyses concern the determination of the role of dependence as a mediator in the relationship between the attachment dimensions (anxiety and avoidance) of men and the quality of their functioning in the dimension of perceived support, conflict and relationship depth. Mediation analysis was performed in accordance with the approach proposed by Baron & Kenny (1986) and supplemented with the Sobel test (1982).

Firstly, it was necessary to check the significance of the relationships between:

1. Independent variable – attachment dimensions (anxiety, avoidance) and dependent variable – relationship functioning (perceived support, conflict, depth of relationship) – **relation C**;

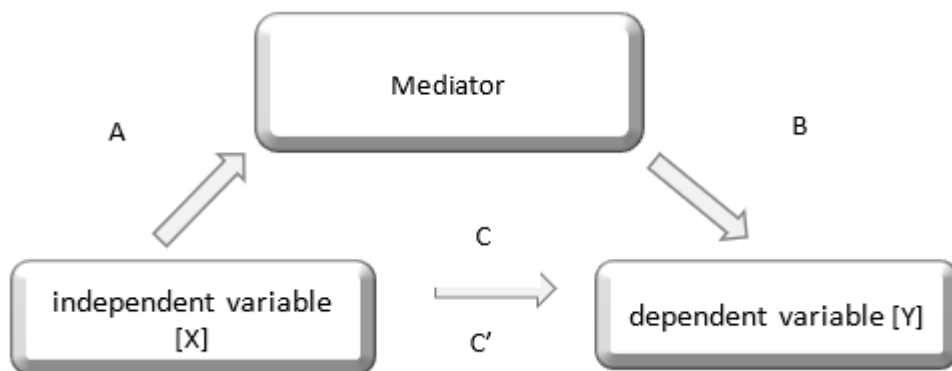
2. Independent variable (attachment dimensions) with the mediator (dependence on the female partner) – **relation A**;

3. The mediator (dependence on the female partner) and the dependent variable (quality of functioning in the relationship) – **relation B**.

Recognition of the significance of the above-mentioned relationships will allow to include dependence on a female partner in the analysis of the relationship between the dimensions of men's attachment and the quality of their functioning in the relationship. If in this system the variable *dependence on a female partner* shows a significant decrease in the *beta* index for the calculated relationship of attachment dimensions with the functioning of men in the relationship, then we can speak of its mediating character. (**relation C'**, Fig. 1).

**Figure 1.**

Diagram of the relationship between the independent variable (attachment dimensions) and the dependent variable (relationship functioning) via an intermediary variable (dependence on a female partner) – wanted mediator of the relationship between the variable X and the variable Y



Source: own study on the basis of: Baron & Kenny (1986).

### Dependency as a mediator in the relationship between a man's attachment dimensions (anxiety, avoidance) and the perceived support

The first step in the mediation analysis was to identify the direct relationship between the independent variable (male attachment dimensions) and the dependent variable (perceived support, C). It occurred that the lower the anxiety level of a man, the higher the level of perceived support from his partner. ( $\beta = -0,490$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ). Avoidance, on the other hand, is an irrelevant predictor of his perceived support ( $\beta = 0,004$ ;  $p = 0,974$ ). The tested regression model occurred to fit the data ( $F(2,170) = 26,430$   $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,237$ ).

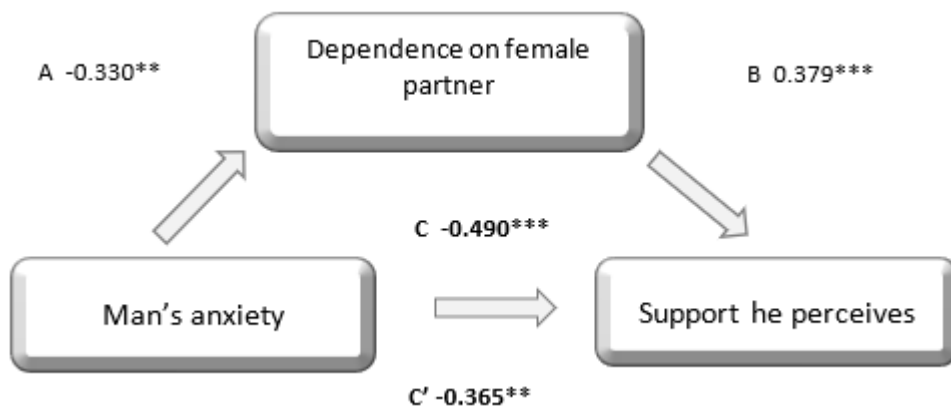
In the next step of the mediation analysis, the significance of the relationship between the independent variable – the dimensions of the man's attachment and the mediator – dependence on the female partner was checked (A). Based on the statistical analysis used, it can be concluded that the man's anxiety ( $\beta = -0.330$ ;  $p = 0.011$ ) significantly influences the level of his dependence on his partner. The level of avoidance of a man is an insignificant predictor of the level of his dependence on a female partner ( $\beta = -0.082$ ;  $p = 0.525$ ). It occurred that the lower a man's anxiety level, the higher his partner's level of dependence. The tested regression model occurred to fit the data ( $F(2,170) = 16,285$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,161$ ).

In the third step of the regression analysis, the relationship between the mediator (dependence on female partner) and the dependent variable (perceived support, B) was confirmed. Again, the relation occurred to be significant: the higher the level of dependence of the man on his partner, the higher was the level of support perceived by the man ( $\beta = 0.379$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) – the model was well fitted for the data ( $F(3,169) = 31,370$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,356$ ).

Finally, when both the independent variable and the mediator were included in the tested model, a decrease in the beta index for anxiety was observed from  $\beta = -0.490$ ;  $p < 0.001$  to  $\beta = -0.365$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), while the mediator remained in a significant relationship with the dependent variable ( $\beta = 0.379$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) ( $F(3,169) = 31.370$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.356$ ). The Sobel's test was  $z = -2.35$  ( $p < 0.018$ ). We deal here with a partial mediation of dependence, because the Sobel test is statistically significant and the value of  $\beta$  in the second regression of the independent variable on the dependent variable decreases.

**Figure 2.**

Dependence on a female partner as a mediator in the relationship between a man's anxiety level and the support he perceives



Source: own study.

Thus, it can be concluded that the level of dependence on a female partner is a mediator between the level of anxiety and the level of perceived support in the group of men: the lower the level of anxiety in a man, the higher the level of his dependence on his partner, as a result, the level of perceived support is higher (Fig. 2).

#### Dependency as a mediator in the relationship between a man's attachment dimensions (anxiety, avoidance) and functioning in the relationship in the conflict dimension

The analysis started by confirming the relationship between the independent variable (dimensions of a man's attachment) and the dependent variable (conflict, C). It occurred that the higher the man's anxiety level, the higher was the level of anger and ambivalence towards his partner ( $\beta = 0.648$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The level of man's avoidance turned out to be an insignificant predictor of the level of perceived conflict in the relationship ( $\beta = -0.081$ ;  $p = 0.478$ ). The variables included in the model significantly explain the dependent variable – the *man's level of conflict* ( $F(2,170) = 43,622$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,339$ ).

The second step of the mediation analysis consisted in determining the relationship between the independent variable-male attachment dimensions and the mediator-dependence on female partner (A). The variables included in the model significantly explain the dependent variable – the level of dependence of a man on his partner ( $F(2,170) = 16,285$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.161$ ). It occurred that the lower the anxiety level of a man, the higher the level of dependence on the female partner ( $\beta = -0.330$ ;

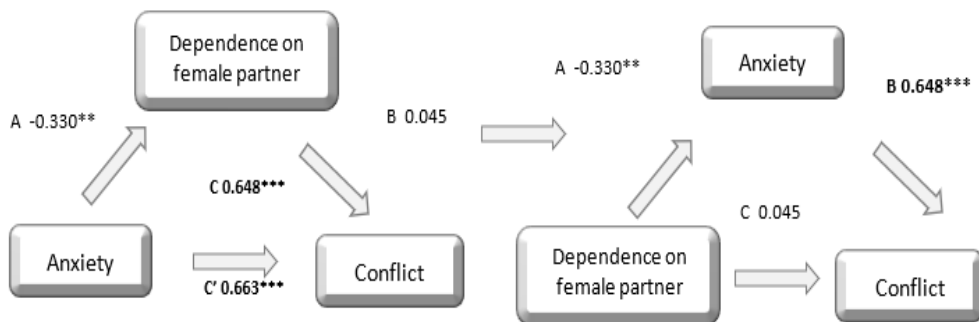
$p = 0.011$ ). On the other hand, the level of avoidance of a man is an insignificant predictor of the level of his dependence on his partner ( $\beta = -0,082$ ;  $p = 0,525$ ).

In the third step of the analysis, the significance of the relationship between the mediator (dependence on female partner) and the dependent variable (conflict, B) was checked. It occurred that the level of dependence of a man on his partner ( $\beta = 0.045$ ;  $p = 0.513$ ) is an insignificant predictor of the level of his conflict ( $F(3,169) = 29,127$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,341$ ).

Finally, when both the independent variable and the mediator were included in the tested model, it was observed that the *beta* index for anxiety changed from ( $\beta = 0.648$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) to ( $\beta = 0.663$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), so there was no decrease and the change was small. On the other hand, the change was observed in the relationship between dependence on a female partner and the functioning of a man in the conflict dimension. In the present system, it is insignificant ( $\beta = 0.045$ ;  $p = 0.513$ ). On this basis, it can be assumed that anxiety is a significant mediator (Sobel  $t. z = -2.35$ ;  $p = 0.019$ ) of the relationship between dependence and conflict in the group of men, i.e. *the lower the level of dependence on a female partner, the higher the level of man's anxiety, which effects in higher level of conflicts* (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.**

*Man's anxiety as a mediator in the relationship between the level of dependence on female partner and the man's level of conflict*



Source: own study.

### Dependency as a mediator in the relationship between a man's attachment dimensions (anxiety, avoidance) and the depth of his relationship

As in the case of the two previous dimensions of the relationship – perceived support and conflict, the multiple correlation-regression analysis was used with regard to the

depth of the relationship. In the first stage of the analysis, the direct relationship between the independent variable (attachment dimensions) and the dependent variable – relationship depth (C) was confirmed.

It occurred that the lower the man's anxiety level, the higher his perceived relationship depth with his partner ( $\beta = -0.457$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The level of partner avoidance is an insignificant predictor of the depth level of his relationship ( $\beta = -0.040$ ;  $p = 0.747$ ). The variables included in the model significantly explain the dependent variable – the level of the *depth of a man's relationship*, i.e. his involvement in the relationship ( $F(2,170) = 26,983$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,241$ ).

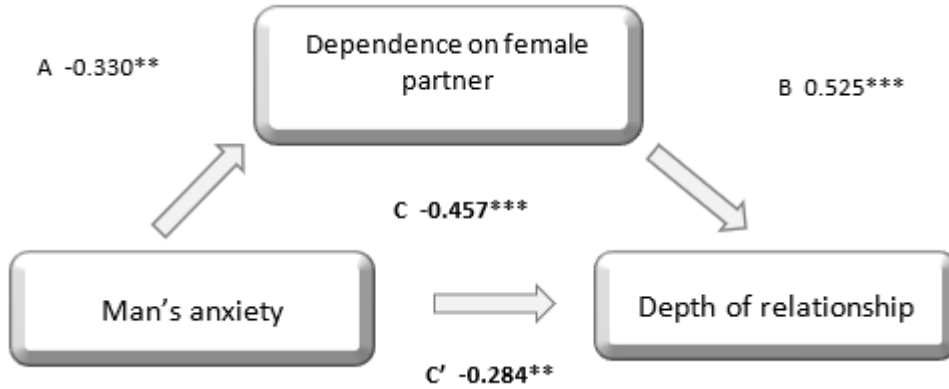
In the second regression equation, the significance of the relationship between the independent variable (attachment dimensions) and the mediator (dependence on female partner, A) was tested. An attached man's level of anxiety was negatively related to a level of dependence on a female partner: the lower a man's level of anxiety, the higher his level of dependence on female partner ( $\beta = -0.330$ ;  $p = 0.011$ ). The level of avoidance of a man is an insignificant predictor of the level of his dependence on a female partner ( $\beta = -0.082$ ;  $p = 0.525$ ). The tested regression model fit the data well ( $F(2,170)=16,285$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,161$ ).

Another regression calculation regarding the relationship between the mediator (partner relationship) and the dependent variable (relationship depth, B) showed that dependence on a female partner significantly affects the level of a partner's involvement in the relationship: the higher the level of male dependence on a female partner, the higher is the level of his involvement in the relationship ( $\beta = 0.525$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The variables included in the model significantly explain the variable-relationship depth ( $F(3,169) = 50,396$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2 = 0,472$ ).

In the last stage of the analysis, the results showed that the  $\beta$  weight of the overall attachment anxiety effect, taking into account the mediator of dependence on a female partner ( $\beta = -0.457$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) decreased to the level of  $\beta = -0.284$ ;  $p < 0.007$ . The value of the Sobel test occurred to be statistically significant ( $z = -2.50$ ;  $p < 0.014$ ). We deal with a partial mediation of dependence, because the Sobel test is statistically significant and the value of  $\beta$  in the second regression of the independent variable on the dependent variable decreases. Therefore, it can be concluded that dependence on a female partner is a significant mediator of the relationship between anxiety and the depth of relationships in men: *the lower the level of anxiety in a man, the higher the level of his dependence on his partner, and consequently the higher the level of his relationship depth* (Fig. 4).

**Figure 4.**

*Dependence on a female partner as a mediator in the relationship between anxiety levels of a man and the depth of his relationship*



*Source: own study.*

## Discussion

The conducted analysis allowed for the conclusion that dependence on a female partner plays the role of an important mediator in the relationship between a man's anxiety and the support he perceives, and in the relationship between a man's anxiety and his involvement in the relationship. The lower a man's level of anxiety, the higher his level of dependence on his partner, and as a result, the higher the level of perceived support and the depth of his relationship. The role of partner dependency as a mediator in the relationship between attachment dimensions and the level of perceived conflict by men has not been confirmed. The results of the analysis revealed a change in the beta index, suggesting a different course of mediation – it was probably anxiety that became an important mediator in the relationship between dependence on a female partner and conflict in the group of men: the lower the level of dependence on a female partner, the higher the level of anxiety for a man, and consequently the higher the level of conflict.

It has been shown that a man's dependence on his partner mediates in the relationship between his anxiety level and the level of his perceived support and commitment to the relationship. The less a man worries about the relationship with his partner and fears rejection, the higher the level of his dependence on his partner, the greater the tendency to seek help and care from her, which results in the fact that the level of perceived support and the depth of the relationship are higher. These results are consistent with the theoretical assumptions according to which a low level of anxiety is

associated with more favourable functioning of partners in the relationship on the support dimension (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Davila & Kashy, 2005; Kobak & Hazan, 1991) and commitment to the relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson, 1990;). Also, a high level of dependence on a female partner favours behaviours aimed at maintaining the relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Weigel, 2008). The more the partners are dependent on each other, they not only estimate the strength of their own involvement, but also perceive a higher level of partner's commitment (Weigel, 2008; 2010) and reveal a relatively strong drive to obtain closeness and support from them (DeHart et al., 2004).

In our cultural circle, there is a stereotype of a "real man" as a strong, independent, dominant person who does not reveal his emotions and weaknesses (Freudenreich et al., 2011). It finds its justification, among others, in the process of socialization (Bem, 2000; Brannon, 2002; Kupers, 1997). Meanwhile, the results of the research show that a man who is not worried about his own relationship is not afraid of being rejected by his partner, seeks her care, help and interest to a greater extent, and, as a result, more often perceives his partner's support available to him, and is more involved in the relationship. This would suggest a softening or blurring of the contemporary pattern of masculinity (Pleck, 1995 as cited in: Brannon, 2002) and a departure from the gender roles traditionally assigned to women and men. Bornstein (1992) emphasizes that men who deviate from stereotypically assigned roles show a higher level of dependence than men who are attached to their traditional fulfilment. Kupers (1997) also believes that the relationship with a partner is a source of a sense of security for a man and is an exception to the rigidly respected roles resulting from socialization. So it is an intimate relationship with a woman that makes a man strong. This specific relationship allows men to show dependence on their women, seeking support from them, which does not make them weak and unmanly. In turn, such an attitude towards a wider, more public environment, in accordance with the rules of socialization, would make a man less masculine. For this reason, the study of male dependence, which is a recognized predictor of some personality traits and relationship behaviour, is worth more attention than female dependence (Bornstein, 1992). It is also possible that the obtained results may be the effect of a distorting influence of the variable social approval. The respondents often try to show themselves in a better light than in reality, or in relation to the requirements of society, which is easier to do in self-report questionnaire methods than in projective studies (Bornstein, 1992). The above results require caution in making conclusions based on empirical research about differences in the level of dependence determined by the gender factor (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2002).

There is also an interesting result indicating that it is not the dependence on a female partner, but the man's anxiety level that mediates the relationship between the level of his dependence and the level of conflict in the relationship. In the case

when the partner less often looked for support, care, interest and help from his partner (he showed a lower level of dependence), he was even more worried and anxious about his own relationship (he showed a higher level of anxiety), as a result of which he experienced more anger and ambivalent feelings towards his partner (higher level of conflict). This result confirms that dependence influences not only the way of perceiving oneself and others, but also the shape of expectations, beliefs about the romantic relationship and its functioning (Bornstein & Languirand, 2003). It also emphasizes that insecure attachment determines destructive, ineffective and conflict patterns of interactions between partners (Alexandrov et al., 2005), and intensifies interpersonal problems in the relationship, which include, among others, aggression (Cummings-Roberau et al., 2009).

### **Practical implications**

The results pointing to the role of a high level of dependency for the positive functioning of men in a relationship with a partner have special practical implications. Seeking help, support and interest from a loved one in a difficult situation does not make the partners' needs immature or unhealthy (Bornstein, 1992; Haggerty et al., 2010), but on the contrary – they condition the formation of a “healthy dependence” and strengthen the relationship. The research results support the thesis about dependence as a natural component of human functioning, which co-decides about the quality of partners' relationships (Bornstein & Languirand, 2003; Feeney, 2009). Making partners, especially men, aware of their natural dependency needs may facilitate their acceptance of such behaviour, contrary to social pressure, promoting self-sufficiency and hiding emotions (Brannon, 2002; Kupers, 1997). Explaining to men that seeking help from their partner does not make them less masculine or helpless, can significantly contribute not only to improving the quality of their functioning, both in the relationship and in everyday life, but also to greater satisfaction of the partners with the intimate relationship.

### **Limitations of own research and directions for future research**

The presented research, despite its significant scientific value, also has some limitations. One of them concerns the limited possibility of generalizing research results for the whole population. The limited possibility of generalizing the results is determined, among others, by the deliberate selection of people in the study group: these were men in the period of early adulthood. Conducting research in a more structured group, taking into account a larger number of people and at different stages of development,



could provide more precise information about the nature of male dependence and the complexity of its determinants.

The presented research has been largely implemented in the correlation scheme. This allowed the detection of significant relationships between the analyzed variables and the prediction of one variable on the basis of the other. However, correlation studies make cause-and-effect inference impossible (Sierau & Herzberg, 2012). In the future, it would be very valuable to conduct research that would indicate the structure of causal relationships and the impact of certain variables on the quality of the relationship.

In future research, it would also be valuable to pay more attention to the specificity of the cultural context of the functioning of couples. This could provide important data on the relationship between partners with different socialization. It should be emphasized, that the dependence develops in the course of socialization influence, reflecting the specificity of the cultural context (Bornstein, 1992). Consequently, it can be expected that studies of couples, reflecting greater diversity in age, ethnicity, education and relationship history, may transfer new results that can be generalized (Jarnecke & South, 2013; Weigel, 2008).

In future research, it would be worthwhile to include in the area of exploration other variables that may occur to be important from the point of view of the quality of the partners' functioning. One of them may be the personality of the partners (Rostowski, 1987; Robins et al., 2000) and the similarity of partners in terms of personality. The studies conducted so far emphasize that the similarity of the partners' personality is one of the important elements determining the quality of the relationship (Rostowski, 1987). In the area of searching for determinants of the functioning of a dyad, one can additionally take into account external conditions important from the point of view of partner relations, for example: the couple's housing situation, the division of household duties and the manner of their implementation, because, as indicated in specialist literature, these are potentially conflicting factors that can modify partners' relationships and the quality of their functioning (Brannon, 2002).

## **Conclusions**

The aim of the study was to understand the quality of men's functioning in relationships in terms of their perceived support, conflict and the depth of their mutual relationships, taking into account the dimensions of attachment and the level of dependence on the partner. Particular attention was paid to the role of dependence on the partner as a mediator of the relationship between men's attachment dimensions and the quality of their functioning in the relationship.

Based on the research results, it should be assumed that:

- both the dimensions of attachment and the level of dependence on the partner have the status of equivalent independent variables, each of which is important for the quality of men's functioning in the relationship;
- a man's dependence on his partner is a mediator in the relationship between the level of his anxiety and the level of his perceived support (the lower the level of a man's anxiety, the higher his level of dependence on his partner, and as a result, the higher the level of his perceived support);
- dependence on the partner turned out to be a significant mediator of the relationship between the level of a man's anxiety and the level of his involvement in the relationship: the lower the level of a man's anxiety, the higher the level of his dependence on his partner, which increases the level of depth (commitment) of his relationship with his partner;
- the man's level of anxiety acts as a mediator in the relationship between the man's level of dependence and his perceived level of conflict with his partner. It was found that the lower the level of dependence on the partner, the higher the man's level of anxiety and, as a result, the higher the level of conflict;
- the presented research results may prove useful in understanding and solving some problems occurring in intimate relationships, enabling a more complete understanding of the specificity of adult attachment. They can also contribute to increasing the effectiveness of couples therapy and better understanding dyadic relationships;
- learning about the parameters that affect the functioning of the partners' relationship, such as anxiety and dependence, may help partners develop strategies to achieve a better quality of life together.

The presented research does not exhaust a wide range of issues related to male dependence and its importance for the quality of the relationship with a female partner, being one of the many paths of exploring this issue. The presented results can be a starting point for asking further questions and further exploration in the area of the quality of family life.

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