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# EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF DEPENDENCE IN CLOSE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

SVETLANA N. SKVORTSOVA, VLADIMIR B. SHUMSKIY

This article presents the results of a phenomenological study of dependence in close interpersonal relationships between men and women. Interviews were conducted with participants, who experience dependence in their close interpersonal relationships. These interviews were analyzed according to A. Giorgi's phenomenological approach. From the analysis, a structural model of relationship dependence was derived, separating the stable from the variable components of dependence. Special attention was given in this study to the vicious cycle of "closeness–estrangement" which has been found to be specific to dependent relationships. The findings reveal a distinction between interpersonal dependence based on the type of deficiency that is being compensated by the partner. The pattern of these deficiencies corresponds to the content of the fundamental existential motivations, formulated by A. Laengle: lack of support, lack of feeling of life, lack of self-acceptance and self-esteem. A frustration of the meaning dimension was present in all cases of dependence.

**KEYWORDS:** dependence, existential fundamental motivation, interpersonal relationships, meaning, phenomenological analysis

EXISTENTIELL-PHÄNOMENOLOGISCHE ANALYSE DER ABHÄNGIGKEIT IN ENGEN ZWISCHENMENSCHLICHEN BEZIEHUNGEN

Dieser Artikel stellt das Ergebnis einer phänomenologischen Studie der Abhängigkeit in engen Beziehungen zwischen Männern und Frauen vor. Mit den Teilnehmern, die eine Abhängigkeit in ihrer engen Beziehung erleben, wurden Interviews geführt, die nach der phänomenologischen Methode von A. Giorgi analysiert wurden. Aus dieser Analyse wurde ein Strukturmodell von Beziehungsabhängigkeit abgeleitet, das stabile von variablen Komponenten der Abhängigkeit trennt. Dabei wurde in dieser Studie der „Teufelskreis“ von „Nähe – Entfremdung“ besonders berücksichtigt, der sich als spezifisch für abhängige Beziehungen erwies. Die Ergebnisse führen zu einer Differenzierung zwischenmenschlicher Abhängigkeit basierend auf der Art des Mangels, der durch den Partner kompensiert werden soll. Das Muster dieser Defizite entspricht dem Inhalt der vier existentiellen Grundmotivationen, wie sie A. Längle formuliert hat: der Mangel an Halt, der Mangel an Lebensgefühl, Mangel an Selbstanahme und Selbstwert. Eine Frustration der Sinn dimension war in allen Fällen von Abhängigkeit präsent.

**SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:** Abhängigkeit, Existentielle Grundmotivationen, zwischenmenschliche Beziehung, Sinn, phänomenologische Analyse

## INTRODUCTION

Although the problem of dependence in relationships is quite common it has not been adequately explored psychologically (Peele & Brodsky 1975). There is even a major disequilibrium to the amount of investigations compared with other forms of dependence, especially chemical dependence like alcohol, tobacco and drugs (World Health Organization 2004; Perkinson 2012). Lately researchers started to pay more attention to non-chemical kinds of dependence: Internet-addiction, workaholism, gambling and so on (Robinson 2007; Young & Nabuco de Abreu 2011; Reilly & Smith 2013). However theoretical and empirical investigations of close relationships still remain fragmentary (Weinhold & Weinhold 2008) and the phenomenon as far as we could find is not yet grasped fully. Moreover, this theme seems to remain closed for academic science. It suffers from a lack of attention, as well as the themes of infatuation and love.

Dependence can happen in child-parent, friend-friend, manager-subordinate, teacher-pupil relationships. The aim of this research is to elaborate a comprehensive model of the phenomenon of dependence in romantic relationships between men and women.

## DEPENDENCE IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF THREE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

What can be regarded as dependence in close interpersonal relationships? To answer this question, we will compare dependent interpersonal relationships with healthy ones.

Close interpersonal relationships always imply a certain degree of connection with the partner and therefore dependence from the partner; they are impossible without it. If we perceive the other person as close, we can't help dealing with his or her emotional state, we have to adjust in some measure to his or her character, lifestyle, habits and tastes. However this adjustment is natural as long as it allows a person to relate to himself or herself. "Healthy" dependence does not destroy the personality of any of the partners; it does not disturb the boundaries of the other; it leaves space for both and allows the partners to grow.

An attempt to establish one's boundaries and determine the degree of one's responsibility and independence, and the confidence that it is necessary for healthy relationships, is illustrated by the famous "Gestalt prayer" by F. Perls:

"I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped" (Perls 1992)

Perls's statement could be seen as radical and even somewhat egoistic. Famous family psychotherapist Carl Whitaker adds corrections to this statement, pointing out that the way to "healthy" relationships generally is not an easy one: "In fact a person should learn very long how to become 'we' without destroying himself. First you learn to love yourself, then – to love a person that is similar to you and after that courage appears to love dissimilar, wish to be touched, drive to struggle for being yourself and at the same time with the other." (Whitaker 2004, 91)

So the basis of a "healthy" close interpersonal relationship lies in a person's ability to keep their "own" in the presence of the partner, and on this basis to start a dialogue with them. In a mature relationship each partner does not lose their authenticity in the presence of the other; moreover, owing to the partner, the relationship of one with oneself becomes even stronger.

Various psychological schools suggest their own original interpretation of the phenomenon of dependence in close interpersonal relationships, in accordance with their methodological basis. Psychoanalysis considers dependent relationships to be mostly pathological and deficient. Dependence exists in narcissistic and symbiotic relationships, supported by mechanisms of projection, introjection, identification, internationalization and externalization (Horney 1991), as well as projective identification (Klein 1975). They leave for our "Self" no chance for development. The traits, feelings and characteristics, which we refuse to accept in ourselves, are projected onto the other person; while introjection includes in our inner world some elements from the outer world; and identification assimilates my "Self" to the "Self" of the other. When dependence from another person is developed, the defense mechanisms make him or her ideal, ascribing them traits and characteristics that do not exist in reality. The dialogue between two people turns out to be difficult or even impossible, as one ignores their own "Self" and the perception of the "Self" of the partner is distorted.

An important characteristic of the phenomenon is the merging of the limits between fantasy and reality (in projection and projective identification) and between two personalities (in identification and introjection). It is based on the principle: "I do not know where I start and where I end. I do not know where the other person starts and ends." This blended existence is the symbiosis, the symbiotic relationships which are natural only in a "mother-child" dyad (Leibin 2008).

The conception of confluence in dependent relationships was amplified by Gestalt therapy. There are two types of confluence: the confluence with one's own feelings, and the inability to separate oneself (one's feelings, values, wishes and needs) from the partner (his or her feelings, values, wishes and needs). The second type of confluence is included in the phenomenon of dependence, and it plays a double role. On the one hand, a certain degree of confluence is essential for empathy, for being able to understand the other without words, and experience intimacy. On the other hand, confluence threatens dependence from the partner, inability to grow, and loss of freedom (Lebedeva Ivanova 2005).

Transactional analysis also mentions the absence of individual limits. It is typical for symbiotic relationships to neglect reality and one's own ego-states: There seems to be only three ego-states in a couple instead of six. Despite the fact

that there is a close relationship between the Parent ego-state of one partner and the Child ego-state of the other, it is only an illusion of a true close relationship between people, because there is no intimacy between ego-states Adult-Adult. In everyday life such relationships may seem romantic and happy, but they represent a typical symbiotic relationship. Unhealthy symbiosis is a stable formation, which is supported by partners. They feel safe in the symbiosis. An attempt of one partner to go out of the symbiotic contact can be taken as a threat; the other partner would try to protect the relationship and prevent the destruction of the symbiosis. He is really afraid of losing his partner, as he follows the line: "Without a partner I cannot be steady on my legs independently." (Steward Joines 1996)

The theoretical models of psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy and transactional analysis allow us to point out the following characteristics of dependence in close interpersonal relationships:

- mixing and merging of personal limits;
- the loss of access to one's own personality;
- impossibility of equal partnership (in dependence, one of the partners is dominant, the other is subordinate).

## DEPENDENCE IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF DSM-V

The "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" of American Psychiatric Association DSM-V, as in earlier DSM-IV, presents the diagnostic category of "Dependent Personality Disorder" which enters the cluster "Anxious or Fearful Disorders". "The core feature of the Dependent Personality Disorder is a strong need to be taken care of by other people. This need to be taken care of, and the associated fear of losing the support of others, often leads people with Dependent Personality Disorder to behave in a „clingy“ manner; to submit to the desires of other people. In order to avoid conflict, they may have great difficulty standing up for themselves. The intense fear of losing a relationship makes them vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. They find it difficult to express disagreement or make independent decisions, and are challenged to begin a task when nobody is available to assist them. Being alone is extremely hard for them. When someone with Dependent Personality Disorder finds that a relationship they depend on has ended, they will immediately seek another source of support." (Hoermann et al. 2013)

The diagnosis "Dependent Personality Disorder" is indicated by "five (or more) of the following:

1. has difficulty making everyday decisions without an excessive amount of advice and reassurance from others;
2. needs others to assume responsibility for most major areas of his or her life;
3. has difficulty expressing disagreement with others because of fear of loss of support or approval;
4. has difficulty initiating projects or doing things on his or her own (because of a lack of self-confidence in judgment or abilities rather than a lack of motivation or energy);

5. goes to excessive lengths to obtain nurturance and support from others, to the point of volunteering to do things that are unpleasant;
6. feels uncomfortable or helpless when alone because of exaggerated fears of being unable to care for himself or herself;
7. urgently seeks another relationship as a source of care and support when a close relationship ends;
8. is unrealistically preoccupied with fears of being left to take care of himself or herself.” (DSM-IV-TR 2000)

Thus, in the diagnostic category “Dependent Personality Disorder,” emotional and behavioral features of the personality dependent on the relations are described. We can say that the main characteristics of such a personality are increased anxiety because of the lack of ability to rely on themselves and on their own to cope with the requirements life set for him. Personal immaturity and, caused by it, fear of being alone in front of the threats and dangers of this world push a person into a dependent relationship.

The DSM-V first introduced cluster “Non-Substance-Related Disorders” includes only gambling. One would expect that gambling will have a certain resemblance to the dependence from relationship, which also does not have a “substance” that causes dependence. However, when looking at the symptoms of gambling presented in DSM-5, they are similar to symptoms of the “Substance-Related Disorders”, because “brain imaging studies and neurochemical tests have made a strong case that activates the reward system in much the same way that a drug does” (Reilly & Smith 2013).

The idea that people in dependent relationships, because of their own immaturity, are looking for hold and support, as reflected in the diagnostic category of “Dependent Personality Disorder”, in our opinion, are in good agreement with the characteristic features of dependent relationships highlighted in psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy and transactional analysis. However, at the same time the question arises: Is the need to support and to be taken care of by other people the only possible basis for dependence in relationships? Is it possible that a man is pushed into a dependent relationship by the pleasure he or she experiences in the presence of another human being? Furthermore, according to S. Peele and A. Brodsky, dependence on relationships arises not only due to the requirement to achieve a certain level of security, but also because of the need to maintain self-esteem (Peele & Brodsky 1975).

In other words, the empirical descriptions and theoretical explanations of dependence in close interpersonal relationships given above, are certainly important, however, from our point of view, they don't cover this phenomenon in its completeness and integrity and can be seen as elements of a puzzle, which can be collected by generalization and meta-analysis of the data.

## RESEARCH METHOD

To develop a comprehensive model of the phenomenon of dependence in relationships between men and women we

used a phenomenological method, which allowed us to eliminate the gap between theory and practice without getting fixed on different interpretations of this phenomenon. In our research we turned to individual subjective feelings, which occur in dependent relationships. We conducted semi-structured interviews with people, *who consider themselves as being in a dependent relationship*, helping them to describe their experience openly, precisely and in detail.

Participants for research were recruited as follows. On the website containing forums on psychology an announcement was made about the study of dependence in close interpersonal relationships, with an invitation for persons wishing to take part in the interview.

The screening study involved 25 people, 8 men and 17 women aged 24 to 40 years. Screening interview questions were quite general, aimed to clarify the following:

- external frame, in which the dependent relationship was formed and continues to exist;
- feelings, connected with experiencing the dependence from the relationship;
- subjective understanding of what the dependence is based on and why it continues to exist.

The interviews were one or two hours long. With some participants there were two meetings: During the first meeting the participant described the facts of his or her relationship, and the second meeting was dedicated to clarification of feelings of dependence in relationships.

On conducting this research, we first of all had to *differentiate dependence from other phenomena of close relationships between men and women*: infatuation, love and “unrequited love”. As we have pointed out earlier, any close relationship is accompanied by a certain degree of dependence, therefore some participants, who were feeling infatuation, love or “unrequited love” also spoke of feeling dependence from the partner. The criterion of differentiation between “healthy” and “pathological” dependence (which we further mention as “dependence”) is quite simple: the presence of inner consent and decision to stay in this relationship. Infatuation and love are accompanied by the feeling of inner consent. “Unrequited love” in most cases is not accompanied by the feeling of inner consent; however there is always a personal decision to stay in this relationship. In a dependent relationship there is neither inner consent nor decision.

A screening study showed that the criterion of absence of decision and inner consent to be in a relationship may be described as a specific ambivalence: “I feel that there is something wrong in this relationship, something that does not correspond with me, I am not satisfied, something goes wrong. *I do not want to continue this relationship. But this notwithstanding I am unable to resist the impulse to stay in it*, and I hope that nevertheless the relationship would give me what I lack.”

Relying on this criterion we selected 10 participants, with whom we have conducted more detailed interviews. The sample consisted of 4 men and 6 women, unmarried and being in relationships with the representative of an opposite sex for 1,5 to 7 years. Note, that in our research, gender distinctions were not apparent in experience of dependent relations.

From the interviews we have received real descriptions

of feelings of dependence in relationships. This allowed us to examine the phenomenon as it is experienced by our participants, setting aside theoretical models and constructs. The transcriptions were analyzed using a phenomenological analysis technique offered by A. Giorgi (Giorgi 2009). This method gave an opportunity to separate the stable and variable components of dependence in close relationships between men and women.

The phenomenological analysis by Giorgi method consists of the following steps:

1. perceiving the text as an interconnected whole;
2. dividing the text into separate semantic components;
3. revealing the implicit psychological contents of the semantic components (transformation of initial semantic components, presented in common language, into psychological terms);
4. isolation of the general psychological structure of the phenomenon presented in the interview;
5. isolation of the invariable structure of the phenomenon based on the analysis of some descriptions (the number of interviews is to be limited if the analysis of further texts does not add any new information to the previous invariable structure).

To illustrate the method we present a short extract from one of the interviews and its analysis:

	Initial semantic components of the interview	Transformed semantic components
1	Interviewer: How, from your point of view, does dependence occur? Why do you consider this relationship as dependent? In all relationships people quarrel and make up, it is natural... Participant: I think so, because my whole emotional state depends on what is going on in this relationship. I cannot be happy about something, if there is something wrong in my relationship.	The participant clarifies, why she considers her relationship dependent. She speaks of great emotional involvement in this relationship. This relationship and what is going on in it forms the main content of her life.
2	It is wrong, I would not like to be absorbed in the relationship. I am the relationship and the relationship is me.	P. considers herself absorbed in the relationship and suffers discomfort. She believes that such a relationship is not normal.
3	And for this reason I believe this is dependence, because if this relationship does not exist, I kind of do not exist either.	According to P.'s subjective feeling, without this relationship she cannot imagine her existence, and therefore perceives herself as dependent.

In this extract we can see the *narrowing of values*, which is typical for dependence in a close interpersonal relationship between a man and a woman: A person's life becomes concentrated around the relationship, he or she feels absorbed, merged with the relationship. We can also notice that this relationship has an *impersonal pattern* – as if the partner

cannot be seen, the interview concerns the relationship and not the person, whom one depends on.

## VICIOUS CYCLE OF DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Generally we can say that dependent relationships are full of pain, feeling hurt, indignation, guilt, sadness, despair, restless waiting, discontent, tiredness, constant fear of losing the partner, feeling oneself as un-free, un-deciding, un-able. At the same time, in participant's words, there was also present the side of positive feelings: tenderness, passion, emotional connection, incredible happiness.

A dependent person has a clear feeling of discrepancy between the relationship and their own essence; and at the same time the person feels inability to resist the impulse to continue the relationship. A person would like to stop the relationship but his or her striving is not enough. They feel dissatisfaction with this relationship, but at the same time are not able to abandon it. As a spiritual person, one would like to refuse such a relationship, but in their actions they do not follow the value of being oneself. From existential-analytical point of view this is the main sign of dependence (Längle, Probst 1997). The specificity of dependence in interpersonal relationships is that another person takes the place of a substance (that is the object of chemical dependence).

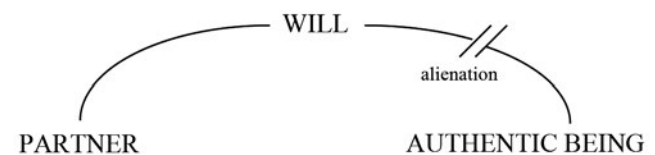


Fig. 1: Alienation of will from authentic being in dependence in close interpersonal relationships.

For a person there is no inner consent to continue a relationship. However he or she is literally drawn by something that is beyond the control of his or her will. Some participants compare the overwhelming need of the partner with the power of a drug addiction.

L., a young woman, after one of the recurrent break-ups in her relationship made a decision to not return to the partner. The partner urged her by phone and by Skype to get back together. She agreed to meet for the last time and had a firm intention to tell him once again that she would never return to him and to explain why she decided to put an end to the relationship. After more than an hour-long talk in a café, which was conducted, from L.'s point of view, "as she had planned", they went downstairs to the underground. L. was about to go home. The partner asked her to go with him, because he did not believe that it was her final decision. L. saw the metro train, which would bring her home. She imagined how she would enter the train and would leave this partner forever. She was seized by the feeling of freedom, by the feeling that she did everything right. But... she let that train pass. Another train, going in the opposite direction – in partner's direction – came. And L. felt as if her feet went into the train by themselves. She went to the partner's place. The recurrent cycle of their relationship began once again. When

L. came to a psychotherapist, she started criticizing herself severely. She said that she was unable to remain faithful to herself and her decision and betrayed herself. To the question: “So, you went to the partner again and returned to the previous relationship with him. But why do you not leave him now?” – L. answered: “Now I am not ready. Within the next few months I need to gather strength to leave him...”

As if a force exists inside a person that does not belong to them, and makes them again and again sink into a dependent relationship. At the same time a person can clearly understand what to expect: pain and suffering. Two forms of suffering are typical for dependent relationships: when you are with the partner and when you break up with them. One of the participants said that she suffered from insults, devaluation, disrespect, and unjust attitude from her partner. He always moved her to the background, reproached her, and did not accept her the way she is, constantly tried to change her. When this became excessive, she could not endure it and broke up with him. However after the break-up, without the partner, she felt emptiness, lack of vital energy, ceased to experience emotions, just functioned like a machine. Another participant described a similar experience this way: “When you enter a relationship again, when you are together with her, you understand that without her it is better. And when you are alone, without her, you feel that it is absolutely unbearable.”

Dependent relationships bring a lot of pain and suffering, however the break-up does not bring long-awaited feelings of freedom and relief to everyone or it cannot be kept for a long time: A person starts to experience even stronger suffering when he or she stops the relationship, compared to the sufferings he or she experienced while staying in the relationship. One of the participants pointed out: “Without him I can only sit and cry. And make plans for restoring the relationship.” When the break-up happens, the sufferings become stronger and this forces a person to resume the relationship.

This is how dependent relationships form a vicious cycle. Right after resuming a relationship a dependent person starts to feel good, a temporary relief occurs. The relationship carries a promise of something better. But after a while, when their hopes do not get fulfilled, everything becomes bad once again. Feelings of disappointment and discontent bordering on disgust and sickness start to appear: the feelings that are linked to the lack of fulfillment in a relationship.

After a while, the impossibility to be oneself, the humiliation, the absence of acceptance from the partner lead to a situation, in which suffering becomes unbearable. The person seeking relief terminates the relationship, saying “never again!” much like an alcoholic meaning to quit drinking. A strong wish to stop the relationship may bring feelings of relief and freedom for a while. But very soon these feelings transform into an irresistible desire to be with the partner.

One of the participants describes it this way: At the beginning there is an overwhelming wish to check the partner’s page on “Facebook”. Then the temptation becomes stronger and the following thoughts arise: “I have already managed a month without him! Well done! Now I am not afraid any more of being drawn back into this relationship. So I can

call him today, there is nothing to worry about, just a call to make small talk, to ask how he is doing. Now I can even see him. I am so strong now – I’ve managed a whole month without him!” After a meeting the next round of the relationship starts.

The impossibility to imagine one’s own existence without the partner seals a dependent relationships: “To imagine that I have lost him is as hard as to imagine the end of the world”; “I do not exist without this relationship”; “When I try to imagine that he is no longer in my life, thoughts about suicide come to me.”

## STABLE COMPONENTS OF DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Phenomenological analysis allowed us to outline some of the persistent essential components of dependence in close relationships: its stable and variant, or general and particular components. Stable components considered in this section were found in all ten interviews analyzed.

1. *Loss of freedom.* A person experiences dependence as an obsessive passion, as an irrepressible temptation. There is no place for free decision in dependence. A dependent person loses his or her autonomy; their behavior can no longer be self-defined. Dependence is accompanied by the painful feeling of not being free, of having no choice, of one’s insignificance before the attraction towards the partner, for which one does not have inner consent. The dependent person does not like this lack of freedom and the repetition of dependent behavior. They do not like their inability to definitively separate or to rebuild the relationship in a desirable way, but they understand that they cannot manage it alone.

*“...I feel badly in these relationships, and I would not go there, would not have written to him, but I catch myself for that again writing or calling him... I feel myself as tied to him – where he goes, I go... I solved nothing in these relations, he decides everything. Today he wants – we’ll be together, does not want, and that’s sad I look at him from the side, like a whipped dog.”*

*“There is always a feeling of discontent with these relationships. But, nevertheless, I still go there. This is the contradiction: you feel dissatisfaction with the relations, but is forced to go there... Like some closed system: you don’t want to go to it, you go, there you receive nothing, you leave angry, you come home and suddenly you start calling to her again and arranging a new meeting. What for? You aren’t happy...”*

2. *Impersonal behavior and attitude towards the partner.* For a dependent person the central theme or issue is not the value of the partner, but the partner’s ability to satisfy their needs and fulfill their deficiencies. In case of dependent relationships there is a paradox in the perception of a partner. It is well known that in other kinds of dependence an object can be substituted by an analogous, which would satisfy the needs of a dependent

person. For example, in case of dependence on sex there is no dependence on a particular partner: It doesn't matter with whom one has sex with. By contrast in dependent relationships the specific partner is irreplaceable. However, despite that a dependent person affirms that "everything depends on the partner", "my whole life depends on him", there is no acceptance of the partner in his or her unique individuality, with his or her peculiarities and limitations. The partner is perceived as depersonalized and functional. Only one demand exists: to satisfy the needs and deficits of the dependent person. The aspects of the partners character and behavior, which are not connected with the needs of the dependent person, are either ignored or provoke irritation or even frighten the dependent. Driven only by "deficiency motivation", as discussed previously, one loses contact with oneself, estranges oneself from one's essence. Owing to an impersonal attitude towards the partner and the dependent's loss of themselves, dependent relationships become formal, superficial; there is a lack of authentic dialogue, profound encounter does not happen.

*"It is as though the mere fact of this relationship nourishes me. It is specifically the fact of this relationship. The person with whom I am in the relationship doesn't give me anything!"*

*"My partner often tells me what I want to make him comfortable for myself. And that my life with him didn't assume that I also somehow must adapt to him. That I don't want, shouldn't want adapt to him."*

3. *Narrowing of values and loss of connection with the world.* The value of the relationship with the partner becomes dominant. At the same time the world and life's horizon seem reduced, they are narrowed down to the relationship. On a cognitive level the dependent person understands that there is a life beyond this relationship: there are professional interests and goals, there are relatives and other people with whom to communicate. But on an emotional level the relationship with the partner is seen as the core, as the main part of life, to which everything else is connected. It is as though everything in a dependent person's life exists only due to and by the means of this relationship. So all the values of the world become concentrated only around one particular man or woman and do not go beyond them. Absorbed in this relationship the dependent person starts to react excessively to every annoying detail of it. They pay too much attention to these feelings and have no time for other necessary things:

*"Any fight with him can totally unsettle me, and I will not be able to concentrate on anything, even if it is something urgent. My life have no guidelines except these relations. All the attention is completely absorbed by them. All the rest becomes too blurry, too mechanistic: as if I become the robot which should go to work, to write the thesis..."*

4. *The absence of meaning that could lead to fulfillment.* On the one hand, a dependent person may feel and tell

their partner: "You are the goal and meaning of my life!" Without the partner the direction in life could be lost. On the other hand, a dependent person has a clear feeling that this relationship has no future. The dependent repeatedly feels that they are not going to get what they want in this relationship, and consider their behavior – suffering without the partner, that leads to resuming the relationship – as being meaningless. In other words, from a close perspective, the dependent person cannot imagine his or her life without the relationship with this partner, but in the long run, this relationship is seen as having no future. Furthermore, the dependent person always feels a profound lack of fulfillment and therefore experiences meaninglessness of the whole of life; it is a feeling rooted in the absence of relationships with oneself and self-alienation.

*"There is some permanent background feeling that these relations – they are unnatural, shallow, superficial. That they are no longer what it was or what might happen. On the other hand, when I'm with her, some of the time, everything is experienced as ideal. And then again – the feeling that from the point of view of bigger context it is some kind of disaster."*

5. *Vicious cycle of "closeness-estrangement"* in a dependent relationship has been discussed earlier. The dependent person is fully involved in the vicious cycle of his relationship with the partner and cannot get out of it. As a matter of fact, a person in such a relationship also experiences a vicious cycle of suffering: suffering from the fact that this relationship will never be the way one wants it to be, and suffering of one's inability to stop the unsatisfactory relationship. While being in this vicious cycle, the dependent person also faces feelings of hopelessness and fear of remaining in it forever.

*"We regularly breaking up. We leave – and we meet again then ... about once in three months. And we are constantly in such a dance. I'm very tired of this and interested to change somehow this circle which repeats, much working on it, but so far everything remains the same..."*

6. *"Emotional swings"* that gradually provoke an *emotional exhaustion* in a dependent person. This vicious cycle that lasts for years is experienced as exhausting, distressing and hard. For a dependent person it is not only the separation that hurts, but also being with the partner. There is a chronic background of dissatisfaction with the relationship: the superficiality of contact, the absence of common future. The dependent is also dissatisfied with themselves: they feel disgust because of forgetting themselves and following the partner, it is a self-betrayal. The relationship with the partner rocks between the two poles "everything is great - everything is terrible": "I was unbelievably happy with him, but without him I fell into a horrible state." These "emotional swings" show sharp changes from euphoria to despair, from feeling oneself irreplaceable to feeling useless and abandoned. This switch may occur due to



different reasons or even spontaneously, without any cause from the partner's side: "There was no news from him during the whole day, and in the evening I started to feel that life is over." Dependent relationships are experienced as heavy, provoking anxiety and emotionally devastating. The dependent person is as though "burning in an emotional flame". After the final parting with the partner the dependent usually needs a few years to recover, to get over this cycle of suffering and subsequent emotional exhaustion.

*"I had a feeling as if I'm on the swing. When he was in a good mood and we were together, I was on top of the world and felt absolutely happy. But it is not exactly... It is impossible to call it „pleasure“, „happiness“ or something like that. I never and with anyone feel myself so good. But when he did not want to communicate – was silent, avoided me... I was sick with the same strength as well, only with a different sign. I felt very miserable, I did not want anything. Even to live. I get suicidal thoughts."*

7. *Unrealistic hopes for improvement of the relationship.* In the beginning this hope is supported by the belief of the dependent that all the difficulties in a relationship can be overcome. But as time goes by, nothing changes, the harmony in the relationship does not occur. The state of bliss, which starts to appear more rarely, can no longer compensate the negative emotions, which are also connected with the partner. Nevertheless, the hope remains, so high is the value of the relationship with the partner, in which "everything is as it should be". After fruitless attempts to harmonize the relationship this hope, without the support, turns into a hope for a miracle. Or the dependent might hope for some radical changes to happen in their partner's life, which would initiate his or her personal development, and cause positive changes in the relationship. In most cases the dependent person comes to the conclusion that they will never get what they want from this relationship, but they continue to hold on to their unrealistic expectations, moving in a vicious cycle of dependent relationships, leaving and getting back together time and again.

*"I always had the hope that he will finally appreciate me. I would now again agree to start anew, knowing that again I will go in a circle, knowing that all of this will be painful. Deep down, I have a glimmer of a thought that everything can be good with us... Nevertheless there is a foolish hope that we can be together. Again I am ready to entrust my destiny in his hands..."*

8. *Spiritual feelings.* From our point of view, the feelings, that the dependent person experiences while everything is fine in their relationship with the partner, represent something bigger than simple pleasure or reduction of tension. It is also something bigger than a feeling of lightness of being or absence of problems. Things which the dependent person experiences are similar to the feelings, which underline different kinds of adrenaline or endorphin dependences: gambling, obsessive

need of extreme sports activities and so on. These are strong emotions, which are inaccessible in everyday life: infinite boundless joy, delight, euphoria, bliss, absolute happiness. Nevertheless, in dependent relationships there are other feelings, which are difficult to put in words. There are, what Maslow called, "peak experiences"; in existential analysis they can be called "pure spiritual feelings". Trying to reveal the contents of these feelings the participants added a mystical note to them: "arrival to the Promised Land", "unearthly bliss of dissolving into something bigger than I am", "it is as though we took off and are going towards something transcendental", "like the doors to another dimension of existence are opened", "it feels like I can die peacefully now", "this experience makes my whole life meaningful". In the light of the above it becomes clear what Viktor Frankl meant when he spoke about "experiential values". We suppose that it is precisely these peak experiences that compose the value which the dependent person seeks in the relationship. Probably it is a hope to experience these feelings again that helps the dependent to bear this exhausting vicious cycle of suffering in a dependent relationship.

*"I am ready to do everything for that unearthly happiness that felt close to him. For me this is amazing state, this is the basic experience, without which I can't. It's a kind of acceptance: „I exist and I'm accepted now.“"*

## VARIABLE COMPONENTS OF DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Above we described the stable or general components of dependence in close relationships between men and women. We also considered, what is the specific deficiency that the dependent person seeks to fulfill in a relationship with a partner? It is such a deficiency that is experienced as "inner emptiness" that cannot be compensated by the person themselves and should be filled up from the outside, by another person.

In our research we found that differentiation and typology of dependence in close relationships is associated with the kind of deficit on the level of existential motivation (FM) (Laengle 2006) within the person for which one seeks fulfillment in the partner:

- 1st FM – lack of support;
- 2nd FM – lack of feeling of life;
- 3rd FM – lack of self-respect and self-acceptance.

Feeling or experiencing a lack of one of these fundamental existential motivations represents a variant component of dependence. In individual cases we can see a combination of different existential motivation deficiencies. As stated before, the deficiency of meaning (4th FM) is present in all cases of dependence.

From ten cases analyzed two were connected with deficiency in 1st FM, three – with deficiency in the 2nd FM, three – with deficiency in the 3rd FM, in two cases of dependence were caused by a combination of deficiencies of the first three fundamental existential motivations.

The participants described their feelings, associated with the 1st FM deficiency in the following way: "Life without him is unbearable and unreal"; "After a fight with her I felt as if there was a strong wind blowing, that made me fall down and I would not be able to get myself back up again"; "I call her, she hangs up. After that I immediately start to feel that something is changing inside me: it is a catastrophe. I write her a message, and she does not answer for 15 minutes. That's it... I immediately feel like falling..." Without a partner an intense lack of support appears. It is as though there are no other resources to support the dependent person in present or future apart from the partner. The dependent often experiences a severe anxiety that can be handled only with a confirmation that the partner will not leave. The presence of the partner or just a phone or internet contact with them returns the feeling of support and decrease anxiety. Moreover, the dependent person can feel support only in a joint world, which they built or are going to build with the partner. Without the partner, the world turns into ruins and the dependent falls into emptiness.

When the 2nd FM is in deficit the surge of life can be experienced only with the partner: When intense emotions arise, the world becomes brightly colored. Thus, there is an obvious dependence from constantly changing emotions, which are experienced in dependent relationships: "In this relationship I feel that something constantly happens with me, that I can always find a reason to be very happy or very angry. Well, in other words, to feel myself alive." Relationships give vital energy, and energetic nourishment: "It was enough for me to hear his voice on the phone for everything to change inside me. I got energy. I felt like I was filled with blood and life." After a break-up in the relationship, this feeling of life disappears: The person experiences inner emptiness, lack of energy and even total inability to do or to feel anything. The dependent person experiences that the emotions which make them feel alive cannot be received from any other source but the relationship with the partner: "I cannot get the same emotions from anywhere else! If he goes away, I will be empty."

In case of self-acceptance or self-value deficiency (3rd FM) the dependent person delegates to the partner the power to evaluate themselves and everything that happens to them as good or bad, right or wrong, possible or inadmissible. Without the partner they cannot evaluate the level of their own significance and the significance of what they do. When the partner gives them acceptance and acknowledgement, the dependent person feels happiness and inner harmony, without the partner they feel as a nobody. The feeling of self-value can be obtained only from the partner, only they can give this feeling and no one else: "I start to be something only when he appreciates me. When he does not, it feels like he takes away my right to be myself." When faced with rejection or humiliation from the partner, the dependent person with the deficit in the 3rd FM may experience a feeling that could be expressed as: "I have no right to be the way I am, I have no right to be at all." This way the partner becomes the one, who gives them the right to be. The dependent can experience incomprehension and fear about the fact, that the partner has such a magic power over them. They feel as a nobody in connection to the partner. But they

also experience the same feelings with themselves, because of their attraction to the partner, which they cannot stand, and it destroys them.

## CLINICAL CONTEXT OF DEPENDENCE IN CLOSE RELATIONS

Is it possible to say that dependence in close relationships is a kind of dependence in the clinical sense of the word? From our point of view it can try to be estimated having used criteria from DSM-V for the diagnostic category "Substance-Related Disorders" – if in the description of symptoms to replace the words "substance use" on "interaction with the object of dependence", meaning another person as an "object of dependence". According to DSM-V, "dependence" is diagnosed when during one year some typical characteristics occur in a person's behavior (two or three symptoms indicate a mild dependence, four or five symptoms – a moderate, and six or more symptoms indicate a severe dependence) (Hartney 2013). Without enumerating all the symptoms of dependence from DSM-V, we point out those that occur in dependent relationships and on the grounds of which, in our opinion, it is possible to diagnose this phenomenon clinically:

1. Interacts with the object of dependence in larger amounts or for longer than he/she meant to.
2. Wanting to cut down or stop interacting with the object of dependence but not managing to.
3. Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from interactions with the object.
4. Cravings and urges to interact with object.
5. Not managing to do what should be done at work, home or school, because of interactions with the object of dependence.
6. Continuing to interact with the object, even when it causes problems in relationships.
7. Giving up important social, occupational or recreational activities because of interactions with the object of dependence.
8. Continuing to interact with the object of dependence despite knowledge of a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the object.
9. Development of withdrawal symptoms, which can be relieved by making more interactions with the object of dependence.

We can see that the symptoms of dependence presented in DSM-V correspond well with the stable and variable components of dependence in close relationships outlined above.

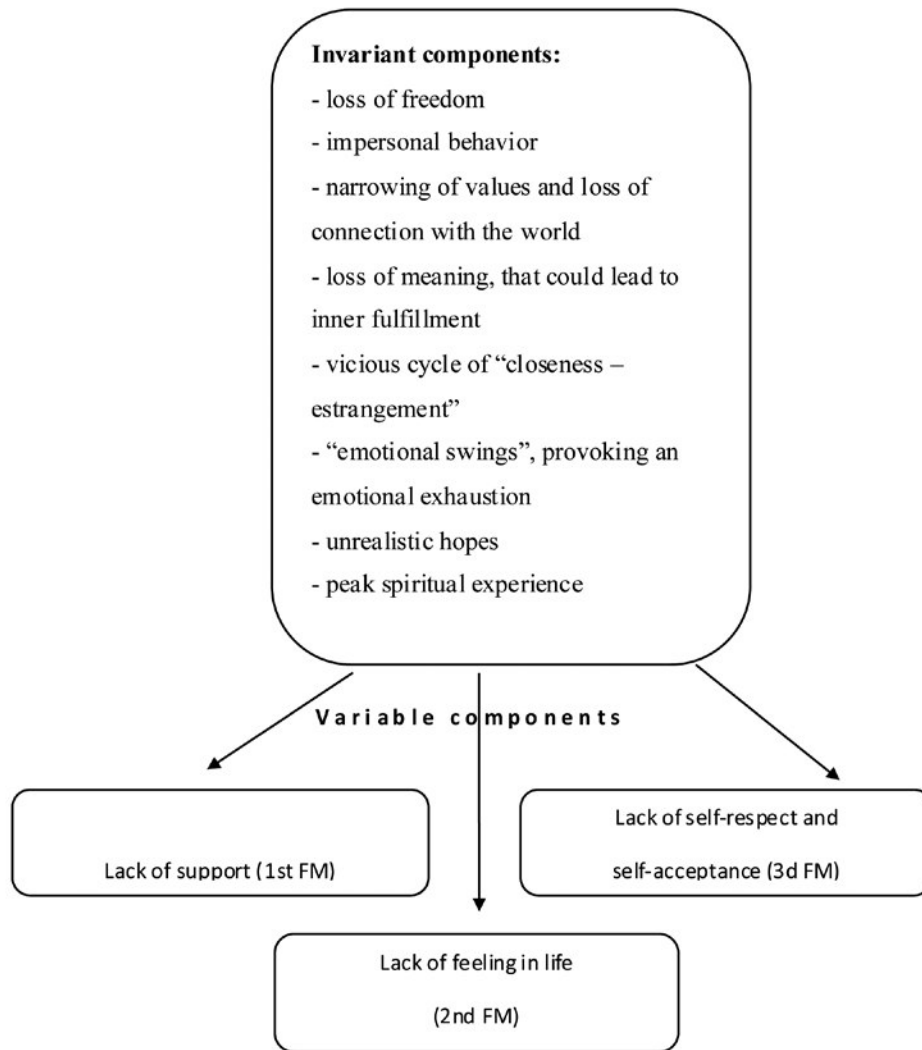


Fig. 2: Structural model of dependence in a close interpersonal relationship.

## STRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE PHENOMENON OF DEPENDENCE IN CLOSE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Based on the results of our research we can schematically present the integral structural model of dependence in close relationships between men and women. (Fig. 2)

We can say that dependent relationships are destructive, which can be experienced on an individual level as wrong and defective, but would still be maintained by the person. The dependent rushes into the relationship as if there is some kind of power which, on the one hand pushes, but on the other hand attracts them. The dynamic power that underlines dependence in close interpersonal relationships between men and women has two components:

1. An inner driving motive to eliminate the deficit on the level of one of the three fundamental existential motivations.
2. A value, which as an external imperative attracts dependent behavior; the sparks of spiritual feeling of the foundation of existence, the fundamental value of life and

the person, which come to the dependent person in rare moments of personal closeness with the partner. These feelings make a great impression on the dependent and raise passionate desire to experience them again.

## CONCLUSION

Existential-phenomenological analysis of dependence in close interpersonal relationships between men and women allowed us, on the one hand, to see the phenomenon in its totality and, on the other hand, to specify the structure of the phenomenon and distinguish its general and particular elements. It gave us a possibility to construct an integral structural model of this phenomenon, to amplify and systematize the conception of it that exists in other schools of psychology and psychotherapy.

We hope that this research will make psychological work with clients dependent on relationships more effective and accurate. As a general rule, the dependent person does not seek help until they have already suffered from a dependent relationship for a long time. They feel tiredness and emo-

tional devastation and have a sincere aspiration for getting out of these relationships, for being rescued from the vicious cycle of „getting closer – dissociation“. Psychological help in overcoming the addictions should be directed towards the recognition of general and specific components in the particular picture of dependence, and towards assisting the person in finding the opportunities to fill his existential deficiencies out of the relationship, in other areas of life and in relationships with oneself.

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